



Solutions to the Problem

Following the Word of God in
Solving Problems in the
Function of the Body of Christ

DICKSON

SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM

Roger E. Dickson

CONTENTS

Preface – 3

Introduction – 4

1 – *Dysfunctional Challenges* – 7

2 – *Urban Dysfunctions* – 9

3 – *Wrong Rights* – 21

4 – *Function Of The Organic Body* – 24

5 – *Selecting The Qualified* – 29

6 – *Incohesive Cultures* – 33

7 – *Lords Of Authority* – 39

8 – *Endangered Identity* – 42

9 – *Contact Problems* – 54

10 – *Isolationists* – 56

11 – *Stingy Giving* – 58

12 – *Money Problems* – 62

13 – *Profiteering Prophets* – 67

14 – *Ministry Thieves* – 71

15 – *Idle Sponges* – 79

16 – *Challenged Leadership* – 85

17 – *Water Shortages* – 89

rdickson@mweb.co.za

www.africainternational.org

www.blog.africainternational.org

Facebook: Africa International.org

Philadelphia, Western Cape, South Africa

Copyright 2019, Africa International Missions

Scripture quotations from *International King James Version*

Cover by Triston Jacobsohn (newheartandmind.com)

Preface

The Holy Spirit knew that we needed a record of how the gospel affects our lives in any environment of the world. As with those recorded examples where Israel failed in her obedience to the will of God, the Spirit knew that we also needed a record of those in the early church who were struggling to grow spiritually in response to the gospel. We have in the New Testament, therefore, examples of gospel-changed lives, as well as those who struggled in their spiritual transformation.

If one has been the product of a legal restoration, or reformation, then he or she may have difficulty in initiating the power of the gospel in his or her life. If we approach the New Testament only as a legal book on doctrine, then we may struggle to move past legalities in order to experience the transforming power the gospel can have on our lives. The problem with approaching the New Testament only as a catechism of doctrine is that we cheat ourselves of understanding the impact that the gospel of grace can have on our lives. We also fail to understand why there were problems with some in the early church who did not respond to the power of the gospel in their lives.

The gospel is about how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, affects people. The gospel affects people both salvationally and behaviorally. Therefore, we find in the gospel not only how one comes into Christ, but also how one walks in Christ. We must approach our studies of the New Testament in the context of both areas. God seeks through the power of the gospel to establish a lasting covenant relationship with us, and then grow us into heavenly dwelling.

I grew up on a farm in the central American state of Kansas. My life after leaving the farm, and residing in many

large metropolitan cities of the world, has offered me the opportunity to have a reality check in reference to the function of a Christian in the midst of millions. For example, this farm boy had great difficulty understanding contexts in Scriptures that were set in the urban environment of the first century. Most of the problems of the disciples that are recorded in the New Testament were problems that arose in the struggles of the early Christians to function as the body of Christ in urban centers. In fact, except in those encounters that Jesus had with people in a rural setting, most of the epistles deal with dysfunctions of the church in the city. When I moved to the city, it was then that I realized that much of the difficulties that the early Christians experienced were often unique to urban centers.

The city has a tendency to dent our personalities. We are around so many people that we often build emotional mechanisms to survive in the midst of so many people. This may be why we have a record of urban problems in the early church. The Holy Spirit wanted us to have a road map of spiritual growth in order to deal with any dysfunctional attitudes and behavior that the city produces in our personality.

The purpose of this book is to offer an aid in how to deal with church problems that may develop in any environment. We may have obeyed the one gospel, but implementing that gospel in our lives can be quite difficult in an urban setting. It is my prayer that this special focus on the dysfunctional behavior of the early disciples will help everyone to better understand that the gospel is so powerful that it will bring peace of mind and transformation even in the most difficult circumstances.

Introduction

Sometimes we spend so much time in the New Testament discussing or debating matters of opinion that we fail to investigate the function of the early disciples as the organic body of Christ. In our quest to discover and implement doctrinal purity, we often overlook those areas of behavior where some early disciples dysfunctionally lived contrary to the gospel they had obeyed. More important, we minimized the example of those early disciples as they lived the incarnate mind of Christ (See Ph 2:5-8).

Even more striking in our dichotomous religiosity in these matters, we are zealous to bring an individual to the point of salvation in obedience to the gospel, but while he is still dripping wet, we fail to encourage the baptized believer to die daily while he or she lives the gospel they obeyed. The Holy Spirit wanted to exhort some in the Philippian church in this matter by reminding them that their behavior as disciples must always reflect the gospel they obeyed: ***“Only let your behavior be worthy of the gospel of Christ”*** (Ph 1:27). When we later refer to the example of the Philippian disciples, we will discover that they took seriously to heart what Paul wrote in these words.

Since our behavior as Christians must reflect the incarnate Son of God whom we have obeyed, then it is imperative that we study in the New Testament those examples where the Holy Spirit recorded dysfunctions in the organic body as new Christians sought to live the incarnate Jesus in their own lives. We must turn to what was recorded with the same zeal by which the Holy Spirit encouraged the early disciples to consider the Old Testament examples. ***“For whatever things were written before [in the Old Testament] were written for our learning”*** (Rm 15:4). The same exhortation was written to the disciples in Achaia: ***“Now these things happened to them [the Israelites] as an example, and they were written [in the Old Testament] for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come”*** (1 Co 10:11).

Organic dysfunctions of the body of Christ in the first century were not recorded by the Holy Spirit for the simple purpose of filling in historical material for us to read. The record of these dysfunctions in the body is in our hands today for a purpose. Since all Scripture is ***“profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and instruction in righteousness”*** (2 Tm 3:16), then we would correctly as-

sume that the Holy Spirit would record examples in the New Testament that we could examine, which examples illustrate dysfunctional behavior on the part of some early disciples. We must assume, therefore, that these recorded examples of dysfunctional behavior on the part of some were recorded for our correction and instruction in righteousness.

We must never allow all the noise that hovers around debates over matters of opinion to draw our attention away from organic dysfunctions that possibly reveal that we may not be worthy of the gospel. For example, we have found that we are quite hypocritical in this matter in reference to the Lord's Supper. We will strive over incidental matters that surround the Lord's Supper, when the Holy Spirit says at the same time, "*Do not strive about words to no profit*" (2 Tm 2:14). We divide over the Lord's Supper that was instituted to remind us that we are to be one united body because of our common obedience to the gospel (1 Co 10:16,17). We sometimes become hypocritical humbugs in these matters.

The Holy Spirit wanted us to understand that when He recorded dysfunctional behavior on the part of the early disciples, **He wanted us to be reproved by the examples of bad behavior.** And in being reproved, He

wanted us to refrain from such dysfunctional organic behavior that does not reflect the full power of the gospel in our lives.

The Spirit said this clearly through the pen of Paul: "*If you then were raised with Christ* [through obedience to the gospel], *seek those things that are above*" (Cl 3:1). The word "seek" in this statement goes far beyond mental assent. Reference is to letting our behavior "*be worthy of the gospel of Christ*" (Ph 1:27). When our minds are focused on the resurrected and reigning Son of God, then we are encouraged to behave in a manner that is worthy of the gospel. We will thus "*put to death ... fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire,*" etc. (Cl 3:5). In contrast to such dysfunctional behavior, we will put on "*a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another and forgiving one another*" (Cl 3:12,13).

It is through the power of the gospel that our lives are transformed from worldly behavior that is dysfunctional according to the gospel. The organic body of Christ functions at her best when all the members put away the dysfunctional behavior that is typical of worldly behavior. Paul's exhortation to the members of the body in Rome was not without his initial reminder that he was not ashamed of

the power of the gospel that would not only save, but would also transform behavior (Rm 1:16). We must allow this power to transform our own lives.

Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind [that is focused on things above], so that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Rm 12:2).

With the preceding thoughts in mind, we must establish a very important foundation upon which to interpret the historical statements concerning the function of the early organic body of Christ. We must not assume that the recorded historical accounts of the function of the body were arbitrarily placed in the New Testament by the Holy Spirit simply as statements of history. To do such would be assuming that the Holy Spirit simply wanted to give us a historical record of the early church. In this history, there were dysfunctions of the organic body. We would assume correctly, therefore, that all historical statements that are recorded in the New Testament are there for the purpose of teaching something greater than the historical record itself. Since the early gospel-obedient believers sought to live a life that was worthy of the gospel of Christ, then we must seek to understand where they failed

in those areas of function that were not according to the gospel.

Since an encyclopedia of history could have been written by the Holy Spirit to give accounts of all the activities of the early church, we must conclude, therefore, that those cases that are given were recorded to teach specific lessons. This was the Holy Spirit's approach in recording key miracles in the life of Jesus.

*Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples that are not written in this book. **But these are written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God ...** (Jn 20:30,31).*

When we come to the book of Acts, we must assume “that many other things happened in the early function of the church that were not recorded, **but these events were recorded to teach how we should live according to the gospel.**” We therefore come to the record of the dysfunctions of the organic body of Christ that are recorded in the New Testament—specifically the book of Acts—in order to solve problems we encounter in reference to the function of the body of Christ. We thus consider the examples of dysfunction to have been recorded in order that we guard ourselves against doing the same.

Chapter 1

DYSFUNCTIONAL CHALLENGES

From the beginning in Acts 2, the number of saints in Jerusalem grew from an initial infusion of about 3,000 gospel obedient members, some of whom were traveling visitors from throughout the Roman Empire for the Passover/Pentecost feast who later went home. The number of members grew to well over five thousand men a few years later (See At 4:4). These members were meeting in homes throughout the metropolitan area of Jerusalem at the time Luke inscribed the historical statement of Acts 4:4. If the 5,000 men of Acts 4:4 could be doubled to include the same number of women, and then conservatively add about two children per family, then by the time Luke made the statement there could have been well over 20,000 Christians in Jerusalem within a few years after the events of Acts 2.

Since there were no church buildings, civic halls, or public schools in which these Christians could meet on Sunday morning, of necessity they met in their homes. (The meetings outside in the temple courtyard of Acts 5:42 were evangelistic, not worship assemblies of the saints). The point is that the saints were meeting in homes throughout the city by the time the dysfunctional dis-

tribution to widows occurred that is recorded in Acts 6:1-6.

If we would suppose that there were an average of about twenty-five people who could meet in any particular home in Jerusalem, then this would be an approximate number of 800 assemblies of the disciples in different homes throughout the city. Because of our experience with the disciples meeting in homes, people of like-mind often gravitate to those with whom they feel comfortable. For example, those who speak a common language naturally gravitate to those house fellowships where a common language is spoken. The same would be true in reference to cultural similarities.

This would only be natural. In a small social environment, the most inner feelings of one's heart can be expressed only in one's native language or culture. And when there is a possible average of about twenty-five people in each group meeting in Jerusalem, then it was simply a natural thing that there be a common language that was spoken in each assembly.

We have found that most Bible interpreters forget this very important historical context of the early church

in all the cities throughout the Roman Empire where there were Christians. Because Bible interpreters have ignored the house assembly and function of the early disciples, they often do not understand completely contexts as Acts 6 in the historical setting of the times. This has led to an inability on the part of some to establish an objective historical foundation upon which to understand the context of events that transpired. In other words, if one approaches the context from a large institutional church group as is common today, then he will have difficulty understanding what was happening in the context of Acts 6.

When we step into the historical context of Acts 6, the Grecian Jews who spoke Koine Greek were meeting in homes that spoke primarily the Greek language. These were Jews who evidently grew up in Greek-speaking areas of the Roman Empire, but later migrated to the metropolitan area of Jerusalem. And since they were probably migrants to the area, then they were possibly living in the lower economic suburbs of the city because they were not connected to the established financial heritage of the local resident Jews, which Jews spoke Hebrew, or Aramaic.

Those local resident Jews who spoke Hebrew, or Aramaic, were meeting in homes that spoke the common local language, possibly homes

that were in the upper economic or established suburbs of the city. Because the approximate 800 assemblies were conducted throughout different suburbs of the city, we would certainly assume that none of the 20,000 members of the 800 assemblies knew all those who met in all the assemblies. This would especially be true if the house groups were located in different economic suburbs of the city. It would simply be unreasonable to think that all the members knew the approximate 20,000 plus individuals of the church of Jerusalem within the few years since the beginning in Acts 2. This would particularly be true because of the rapid growth of the church in Jerusalem, especially since Luke makes the point of growth when he introduced the problem of the neglected widows (At 6:1).

In small groups people naturally have a tendency to bond closely with one another. Those of a common language and culture simply gravitate to one another, and subsequently bond around their common means of communication. There is nothing abnormal about this. It is simply the way God made us. We can imagine, therefore, how difficult it would have been for many of the disciples in Jerusalem, who did not share a common language or culture, to know those of different languages or cultures. This would especially be true if there were

new converts in many different suburbs of the city, and thus, many new assemblies since the initial Pentecost a few years before.

This would be a particular challenge for those groups in the upper economic, or locally cultured suburbs of the city. It would be difficult for them to know those of the lower economic suburbs. There were simply too many groups and too many differences for all the saints to know all the saints. This seems to be the historical setting that led to the dysfunction that is recorded in Acts 6. The Grecian Jewish widows were being “*neglected in the daily distribution of food*” because they were not known by the groups who were taking care of their own widows (At 6:1).

We do not know all the reasons for this neglect, but for some reason the lack of fair distribution was occurring among the disciples in Jerusalem after three or four years from the beginning of the church in Acts 2. Understanding how the early church solved the problem does give us a great deal of information concerning how the early disciples allowed the

gospel to move them as an organic body.

The occasion of the problem also provides us with a “mission textbook” on urban evangelism. Jerusalem was a typical multiple-cultural city of the ancient world. The organic function of the church in such a city, therefore, provides a great deal of information on how the organic body of Christ should function in similar urban centers today.

Almost all cities of the world today are as the urban area of Jerusalem in the first century. If we can view the church as one throughout the city of Jerusalem—and we should—then we can begin to understand how the organic function of the body of Christ occurs in a multi-cultural environment wherein many languages are spoken. We simply need to keep in mind that people then are as people today. We should not think that because there is a two thousand year gap between them and us that we are different than they were in a cultural environment wherein many languages were spoken.

Chapter 2

URBAN DYSFUNCTIONS

The function of the church in large urban centers is different than the social environment of rural areas.

Since the members of the body in urban centers are faced with special problems in reference to remaining in

contact with one another, we believe the Holy Spirit recorded for us a situation of organic dysfunction in the historical context of the early church in order to help us learn some basic principles in reference to the function of the urban church.

The “neglect of widows” in Acts 6 was the ideal example to illustrate some of the obstacles the members of the body in urban centers must overcome. Specifically in this example, the church was challenged with fulfilling the mandate that widows are to be a part of the contribution of the church in any particular city (See Js 1:27). We are sure that the Jerusalem disciples fell short in other areas of function. However, this particular dysfunction in the area of the fellowship of the one body was revealing.

The care for widows and orphans defined the church as an organic body that revealed the heart of God (See 1 Jn 3:10-24). For this reason, the Holy Spirit moved the mind of Luke to record this historical case of dysfunction in order to give us solutions on how to function as the organic body, even in the complexities and complications of large urban centers.

A. Identifying dysfunctions:

The first lesson we learn from this historical incident is a dysfunction in the organic body in reference

to the disciples’ responsibility to care for widows. Because the members in Jerusalem were meeting in different homes throughout the city did not justify this dysfunction.

It seems that some Hebraic groups had become so autonomous from one another that the Grecian widows actually became anonymous from them. Regardless of the cause, the dysfunction had to be corrected. Solutions had to be made in order to correct this problem in the function of the entire body in Jerusalem.

Keep in mind that the dysfunction in distribution to the Grecian widows was realized because there were those who saw it as dysfunctional behavior among all the members of the body. They realized that the organic function of the body among all the members who were assembling in the approximate 800 groups throughout the city was actually behavior that was not worthy of the gospel. It revealed that some were not living in a manner that was worthy of the gospel that brought all of them together into one organic body in Christ.

Great shepherds among us will always know their Bibles well enough to identify areas where we are not functioning according to the gospel. And when they speak out with Scripture concerning dysfunctional problems in the behavior of the body, the body must respond. This is the focus

of Paul's instructions to the elders of the body. In listing qualities that the shepherds must have before they are designated shepherds, Paul wrote that *"an elder must" hold "fast the faithful word as he has been taught, so that he may be able by sound teaching both to exhort and refute those who contradict"* (Ti 1:9). In the context of the Acts 6 dysfunction, though not mentioned in the text, there may have been elders who initially brought the matter before the apostles.

We must not be surprised with the suggestion that there were designated elders among the disciples at this time in the history of the church in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas designated elders in the cities of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch when the older Jewish men in these cities were only about six months in the faith (At 14:23). Simply because Luke does not mention elders in the historical narrative of Acts before Acts 11:30 is not proof that there were no elders in the early church of Jerusalem before Acts 6.

The matter of dysfunction in distribution was brought before the apostles only because the apostles—the source of all truth for the church—were still in the city at the time. The disciples, including possibly the elders, wanted to bring the "neglect problem" before the apostles in order to determine if there was any further

revelation from the Holy Spirit on the subject of caring for widows in the urban setting in which everyone lived (See At 2:42).

We must consider this point in view of the promises that Jesus made to the apostles in John 14:26 and 16:13. During His ministry, Jesus promised the apostles, *"The Holy Spirit ... will teach you all things [in reference to the gospel behavior of the church]"* (Jn 14:26). The Holy Spirit *"will guide you into all the truth"* (Jn 16:13). So we would ask, Who gave the early church instructions to take care of the widows? In view of what Jesus promised the apostles in order that they teach the early church (At 2:42), we would conclude that it was the Holy Spirit through the apostles who informed the disciples that they had the responsibility of taking care of their widows as the church of Christ. In the case of neglect in Acts 6:1-6 we would correctly assume that the disciples came to the apostles in an attempt to receive more revelation on the subject of how the distribution must be conducted.

Since the church was in existence from four to five years by the time we get to Acts 6, it would be reasonable to conclude that some Jewish elders had been converted and designated elders in the Jerusalem church. This would be a valid assumption, especially in view of the fact of what was

stated in Acts 6:7, that a great number of the priests were obedient to the faith. It would be logical to believe that there were designated elders among the several thousand Christians in Jerusalem at the time someone came across the neglect of Grecian widows. Either these elders, or some other concerned members, identified the “neglect problem” to be a flaw in the organic function of the body that was initially taught by the apostles. They knew the truth of God on this matter well enough to know that the “neglect problem” had to be corrected if they were to continue in the truth of the gospel.

B. Financial dysfunctions:

From the time of the initial zeal of the early disciples to have all things in common, something went wrong in reference to the common needs of the Grecian widows we read about in Acts 6. In the early days of the disciples, Luke historically recorded in Acts 2,

Now all who believed were together [as one body], and had all things in common. And they sold their possessions and goods and divided them to all [in the church], as everyone had need (At 2:44,45).

And then again this same financial

function of the body was carried on by the time we come to the events of Acts 4. Luke again historically recorded, “*Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul*” (At 4:32). Luke continued, “*Nor was there any among them who lacked*” (At 4:34).

However, by the time we come to Acts 6, we discover among the disciples in Jerusalem those who lacked. The widows lacked because they were being neglected.

From the days of the early birth of the church in Acts 2, and its continued obedience unto Acts 4, something went wrong by the time we come to Acts 6. It seems that for some reason some widows became lost in the massive growth of the early church. We might conclude that the lesson we learn from the development of the problem originated because of the extensive growth of the Jerusalem church. There was thus a breakdown in communication among the thousands of disciples in the city of Jerusalem.

C. Function of the one body:

Another lesson we learn from the “neglect problem” in Jerusalem was that **there was no such thing as “church autonomy” among all the members of the church in Jerusalem.** All the Christians in Jerusalem

functioned as one organic body of Christ from the very beginning (See At 2:44; 15:4,22). They were one church regardless of whose house in which the members sat on Sunday morning. Their Sunday assembly at different locations did not divide them from one another as autonomous churches. The members remained as the one body in the city throughout the history of the church in Jerusalem (See At 15:4,22).

However, efforts on the part of the Hebraic groups to be independent from the Grecian groups may have been the source of the problem. And since the neglect was a problem, then any autonomous behavior on the part of the Hebraic groups was wrong. **A natural result of autonomy is that groups often develop a sectarian spirit that keeps groups separated from one another.** In the case of some groups in Jerusalem, their autonomy may have led some groups to be negligent in their responsibilities toward the whole body of disciples throughout the city who were meeting in other homes.

The fact that there were complaints, and subsequently a solution for the problem, **clearly teaches that where the disciples sat on Sunday morning did not make them autonomous from one another.** Neither did sitting in a separate assembly relieve them of their responsibility to

minister to the Grecian widows of other groups.

If the possible 800 assemblies were indeed rightly autonomous from one another, then we should be complaining about their complaining. We would assume that each autonomous group should take care of their own widows, and thus, not make the “neglect” a “brotherhood issue.” If all the members in Jerusalem were intentionally behaving independently as autonomous groups, then the solution that the apostles later suggested would have been contrary to church autonomy.

We say the preceding because we ourselves live in a large metropolitan area that represents many different language and cultural groups. In a city area of over four million people, there are at least ten different language/cultural groups represented among the churches throughout the metropolitan area. Unfortunately, some church groups have little contact, and sometimes concern, for those groups that are linguistically and culturally separated from them. It is simply the way people begin to function when they are separated from one another in a large metropolitan area and without any means of transportation.

But because the world functions in this manner, does not mean that Christians can separate themselves from one another because of either

language or culture. Since we have a tendency to separate ourselves from one another, then we need to heed the exhortation of the Holy Spirit that we should be *“eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (Ep 4:3).

Understanding linguistic/cultural differences helps us develop a practical appreciation of what exists in most large urban centers in the world today. The Holy Spirit gave us some insight into this common challenge that we have when working in urban centers. He inspired Paul to reveal that God *“has made of one man all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth [or city], and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation* (At 17:26).

These are not “boundaries” that are drawn on a map. These are cultural boundaries that are often identified by linguistic differences. It is the way God naturally separated people from one another after the attempted efforts on the part of man to build a tower whose top would possibly reach unto heaven (See Gn 11).

If one has not experienced living in a metropolitan area wherein several languages are spoken among those who are of different cultural backgrounds, then it may be challenging to understand the natural human instinct of people to assemble under

their own cultural or linguistic flag.

Throughout the world today there are thousands of cultural and linguistic “boundaries” that separate people from one another. These “boundaries” exist within the limits of most international urban areas of the world. It is simply a reality with which the church within these cultural centers must deal in order to be the one body of Christ. It is possible, therefore, that the Holy Spirit recorded for us the “neglect problem” in Jerusalem in order to help us understand means and ways by which we can evangelize and function as the one body of Christ in urban centers.

In Jerusalem in the first century, there existed at least two linguistic/cultural groups, specifically the Grecian and Hebraic Jews. The two groups had a common father in Abraham, but this did not mean that they were common in their culture or language. The fact that the Hebraic Jews seemed to have ignored the Grecian Jews suggests that they allowed their culture and language “boundaries” to be an excuse to ignore their responsibilities to function as the one universal body of Christ. They were at the time a dysfunctional organic body because some had forgotten the oneness that is produced by our common obedience to the gospel. They had forgotten what the Holy Spirit said to some Jewish brethren in Galatians 3:26-28:

*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. **There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither bond-servant nor free. There is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.***

D. Unity dysfunction:

We mentioned the numerous assemblies in Jerusalem at the time the “neglect problem” occurred because of the unfortunate organic dysfunctions that resulted from the behavioral dysfunction of autonomy. This problem may possibly have crept in among the disciples in Jerusalem. Some of the groups in Jerusalem may have intentionally declared their autonomy because of their cultural identity and language similarity. Because of the extensive growth of the church, and in their efforts to be culturally identified, the Grecian groups may have naturally drifted away from the Hebraic groups. Autonomy, therefore, may have been the problem that led to the neglect of widows for whom the whole church was responsible.

The only time we read about autonomy among Christians in reference to widows is a statement made by Paul in his instructions concerning the widows of an immediate family. He began his instructions concerning wid-

ows with the commanding statement,

*But if any widow has **children or grandchildren**, let them first learn to practice piety at home and to repay their parents, for this is good and acceptable before God (1 Tm 5:4).*

If there are children or grandchildren, then the care of widows must be autonomous from the responsibility of the church. The physical family of children or grandchildren must assume the care of their own aged parents. If the children or grandchildren do not care for their widowed mother or grandmother, then Paul adds, “**But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever**” (1 Tm 5:8).

Paul then extended instructions to the whole church in reference to the care of qualified widows. Those widows who have no children or grandchildren to care for them must be provided for by the church. However, widows must not be enrolled by the church for support if they are under sixty years of age (1 Tm 5:9).

Including other points of qualification, the widows over sixty become the responsibility of the whole church if they have no believing children or grandchildren to care for them (See 1 Tm 5:1-16). Regardless of

where qualified widows assembled on Sunday morning, it is the responsibility of the whole church to enroll these widows for the distribution of care that is to be administered to the widows. These widows are the collective responsibility of the collective body.

It may help to apply this collective responsibility by understanding that when we are discussing the subject of widows, we are speaking of individuals. When groups become autonomous from one another there is the tendency to assign the care of widows to the particular autonomous group with whom the widow assembles on Sunday morning. But such a belief and behavior is contrary to the function of the one universal body of Christ.

In the context of Acts 6, individual widows of the entire city are under consideration. Neglect of individuals, not individual assemblies, was the problem. In other words, every individual Christian in every region where the body of Christ exists, has a responsibility to care for the individual widows of the church who have no children or grandchildren to care for them. If we need proof for this concept, we must read again the mandate of James in James 1:27. James wrote *“to the twelve tribes who are in the Dispersion”* (Js 1:1). But in verse 27 of the same chapter, he

instructed, *“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this, to take care of the orphans and widows in their affliction.”* There is no “church autonomy” inferred in this mandate. Individual widows and orphans are the responsibility of every member of the worldwide body of Christ.

It is indeed the responsibility of the local disciples to care for the widows and orphans in their area. This was the case in Jerusalem. The disciples in Jerusalem cared for the individual widows in Jerusalem. It would have been likewise true that the disciples in Antioch were to assume their responsibility for the widows in Antioch. We would assume that the disciples in Antioch would not be responsible for the widows in Jerusalem, since the disciples in Jerusalem had the responsibility to care for the widows in their city. If the Jerusalem disciples did not care for the widows in their own city, then they would be dysfunctional in reference to the care of their own widows.

We say the preceding because of one statement that was made by the apostles in Acts 6:3: *“Look out from among you.”* There was dysfunction in Jerusalem, and thus those who were involved in the dysfunction in the immediate area had the responsibility to correct their own dysfunction. The disciples in Antioch could not

look out from among the disciples in Jerusalem in order to solve a dysfunctional problem in Jerusalem. It was not the responsibility of the Antioch disciples to assume responsibility over those whom they could not function in a personal manner in the distribution of food. The seven had to be chosen from the disciples of Jerusalem in order that the church in Jerusalem could assume their responsibility of the widows in Jerusalem. This “neglect problem” was not the problem of the disciples in Antioch.

If we would apply the same principle to the care of orphans we would assume that it is the responsibility of the church in any specific area of the world to “look out from among themselves” those who would administer the distribution to those orphans who are in their area. However, we would also assume that those who were chosen by the church in a particular area could ask the universal body for help. But we must not forget that those who would ask for help in the care of orphans and widows in a particular region **must have been selected by the church in the area where there was a need.**

This must not be a case where an individual takes it upon himself to care for widows and orphans, and then makes an appeal to the universal body. If the universal body is to come to the aid of widows and orphans in other

regions (nations) of the world where the contributors do not live, then the contributors must be assured that a “committee,” not an individual, has been selected by the whole church in the region where there is a need.

E. Work of the collective body:

We need to glean another lesson from the Acts 6 dysfunction by going one step further in understanding the organic function of the body. This point was emphasized when Paul wrote to all the Christians of all Achaia who occasionally met in Corinth for a united love feast. During the occasion, it was revealed that some were quite inconsiderate and sectarian. Paul rebuked the dysfunctional members for their competitive practices in reference to ministry. After reminding them of the diversity of ministry by which God ordained that the organic body function, he wrote, “*But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing [gifts/ministries] to every one individually as He wills*” (1 Co 12:11).

The church in all Achaia was a body of individuals who exercised their Spirit-given individual gifts in ministry. These individuals worked in their individual ministries as the one universal body of Christ. Paul therefore instructed, “*For as the body is one and has many members [with*

different gifts], *and all the members of the one body, though they are many, are one body* [universally], *so also is Christ* [universally]" (1 Co 12:12).

We must not forget that "*the body is not one member, but many*" (1 Co 12:14). Though we as the one body "*are many members,*" we function as the one universal body of Christ (1 Co 12:20). It is erroneous to think that the church can be united only when all the members of the one universal body are sitting in the same assembly on Sunday morning. In fact, cultural and linguistic divisions (boundaries) are revealed when there must be three or four interpreters to interpret the message of the hour into all the languages of those who would be represented.

There is nothing wrong with the translation of the lesson into the language of all those present, but to force such in weekly house assemblies seems to be an effort of forced unity beyond common sense. (In another book we have dealt with the occasion in Corinth when translators—interpreters—were needed in the occasional assembly of all the Achaia house fellowships that is discussed in the context of 1 Corinthians 11-14. See Book 39, *Fellowship at the Table*, africainternational.org.)

We would conclude that each of the house assemblies throughout Achaia used one common language

in each assembly on Sunday morning to accommodate everyone who was present. Those who spoke the language of a particular house assembly went to the house that spoke their language.

Common sense dictates that each language group has the freedom to meet when speakers of the assembly all speak the common language of the group. We have found throughout the years that it is quite naive to think that unity can prevail among individual members only when everyone sits at the same location on Sunday morning. **Unity is not based on proximity in assembly, but common obedience to the gospel.** If we would judge that unity among the members in a city must be based on close proximity in the same assembly, then we have developed a forced man-made unity that is simply superficial. It is an empirical unity that is not necessarily based on a unity of the spirit. Two people can be just as divided from one another whether they are sitting in one assembly or two different assemblies.

Now locally apply this function to the church in Jerusalem. Luke recorded that the number of the disciples in Jerusalem had increased to about 5,000 men. We have added wives and children, estimating that there could have been over 20,000 members who made up the church in

Jerusalem by the time of the events in Acts 6. Now must all these 20,000 be assembled together at the same place in order to be the one united church in Jerusalem? Must they all be at the same place on Sunday in order to preserve unity?

Sometimes common sense should be used when understanding the historical function of the one united body of Christ in any particular area or city. Common sense dictates that the 20,000 **did not** meet at the same place on Sunday morning in order to sustain unity. Common Sense dictates that the 20,000 met in various homes throughout the city because there were no publicly-owned buildings in Jerusalem that would house this number of people.

The local Christians' meeting in approximately 800 homes led to the problem of the neglected widows, **not a problem of disunity**. The solution for the "neglect problem" **was not** to assemble everyone together under one roof. The solution involved everyone looking out for everyone, regardless of whose house in which everyone sat on Sunday.

There were certainly challenges that faced the church in Jerusalem because of the necessity of the members' meeting in so many different homes throughout the city. Because the Grecian Jews were meeting in their own assemblies—some would

supposedly say autonomously—the Hebraic Jews possibly assumed that they were not responsible for the Grecian widows. It could have been as it is often said, "Out of sight, out of mind." And since the Grecian Jews were out of sight of the Hebraic Jews, then the Hebraic Jews in their autonomous behavior possibly thought that they had no responsibility to share their contributions with the widows of other groups, especially if they were of another culture/language group, or possibly economic status.

If the Grecian Jews were primarily immigrant Jews to Jerusalem, then they may have been the lower income citizenship of the city. If they were, then it could have been that they could not financially care for some of their own widows. Since they were out of contact with the financially established Hebraic Jews, then we can understand how the "neglect problem" arose. The Grecian Jews may have been embarrassed to ask for help. But someone did ask, for such neglect was contrary to the spirit of the gospel where members bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2).

In their neglect, at least the Hebraic Jews revealed their dysfunctional autonomous fellowship, if indeed they believed themselves to be autonomous from the Grecian house assemblies. However, we are giving them the benefit of the doubt that the

Hebraic Jews did not know that the Grecian Jews were being neglected. At least we assume that Luke alerts us to this possibility when he introduced the dysfunction by saying, “*Now in those days when the number of the disciples was multiplying*” (At 6:1). The neglect may have been unintentional because of the great number of assemblies that were being established throughout the city because of the phenomenal growth of the church.

Luke does not record in the Acts 6 account that any racism was involved, for everyone involved was a Jew, except for a few proselyte immigrants. And since he did not mention racism as the problem, we must stay with the former conclusion that the Hebraic Jews were unaware of the situation.

There was a vast number of assemblies in the city. The natural thing is that house assemblies often become so bonded with one another in the commonality of their language and culture that they have a tendency to drift away from one another. They subsequently become anonymous from one another. At least the house assemblies in Jerusalem lost contact with one another when there were

hundreds of house assemblies being established throughout the city as the number of disciples multiplied.

In the historical situation of Acts 6, it seems that the word “neglect” should be understood in the context that at least the distribution among the Hebraic widows was taking place. However, some house assemblies were simply bypassed by the Hebrew speaking groups and administrators because of an unintentional oversight. The Hebraic groups did not know the language of the Greeks, and thus, they naturally did not make an effort to go to those house assemblies that spoke Greek.

Whatever the real situation that caused the problem, the church in Jerusalem was dysfunctional in this matter as the one organic body of Christ. A solution had to be found to correct the disorder because their common obedience to the gospel brought all of them into one body of Christ whose members must care for one another. The exciting result of recognizing the problem was that the whole church worked together in order to solve the problem. The problem was solved because the members had the heart of God to work as one body in the city.

Chapter 3

WRONG RIGHTS

Sometimes it is wrong to do right. When speaking of living the incarnate gospel of Jesus, this statement may seem quite odd. Nevertheless, in the organic function of the body of Christ, it is sometimes wrong for those who are gifted with special ministries to work in an area where they may not be gifted, or in reference to a need that should be passed on to others. This was the case in reference to the disciples in Jerusalem who sought to find a solution for the dysfunction concerning the neglected widows in Acts 6.

Since the apostles were still in Jerusalem at the time the “neglected widows” problem developed, they, as the accepted leaders—or at least the source of truth from the Holy Spirit—were faced with a functional problem among the disciples. There is a great lesson to be learned from how the apostles personally handled this problem concerning the care that the whole church in Jerusalem should render to the widows.

We are not told by Luke who brought the problem of the neglected widows before the apostles. We assume that the apostles were busy with their primary work of prayer and ministry of the word of God (At 6:4).

Since prayer should be a ministry of all the disciples, in this case the apostles did not want their prayers to be marginalized by administrative duties that others could do. But specifically, it was their Christ-ordained ministry to deliver the inspired word of truth to the early church (See Jn 14:26; 16:13). This was especially important because of those who continued to come and stay in Jerusalem for the Passover/Pentecost feast. The apostles continued to teach those who journeyed to Jerusalem, for they were the only “Bibles” in town (At 2:42).

The last Passover/Pentecost feast that Luke mentioned was in Acts 2. However, before the event of Acts 6 took place a few years after the Passover/Pentecost of Acts 2, we must assume that the apostles were diligently receiving and teaching many others who continually came for the Passover/Pentecost feasts that followed the feast of Acts 2 (See Is 2:2,3; At 2:42).

It was the apostles’ mission to go into all the world and preach the gospel (Mt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15,16). They were accomplishing this mission through those who were baptized during the Passover/Pentecost feasts that followed the Acts 2 event. There-

fore, when the dysfunctional organic problem of feeding the widows in Jerusalem was made known to them, they replied, ***“It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables”*** (At 6:2). In other words, they deemed it unwise to shut down their Bible classes in order to do the good work of administering to widows. This one statement opens a great door for understanding the ministry of the apostles in reference to the organic function of the early church. But it also leaves us a Spirit-inspired lesson to keep our priorities right.

In view of the necessity that the apostles not be diverted from their ministry of the inspired instruction of the church and world evangelism, it would not have been right for them to forsake these Christ-ordained ministries in order to serve tables. In this case, it would have been wrong for them to do a good thing. The apostles simply stated, ***“But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word”*** (At 6:4). In reference to the ministry of prayer, we would assume that these were special prayer sessions for those who were returning home to other lands after being taught by the apostles. But for sure their ministry of the word of truth to those who had come from great distances to the Passover/Pentecost feast must under no circumstances be interrupted. If they allowed their min-

istry to be interrupted by serving tables, then souls would have been lost.

We are sure that the apostles were confident that they should fulfill their destiny as Christ-sent apostles. They felt no guilt about saying “no” to a good work of serving tables. Neither did they allow others to make them feel guilty about not caring for the widows (See Js 1:27). When one is focused on doing what he or she believes is his or her God-given ministry, others should not make them feel guilty if they do not participate in another ministry. After all, in another context and situation, Paul wrote,

“Now there are many kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are many kinds of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are many kinds of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all” (1 Co 12:4-6).

Paul concluded 1 Corinthians 12 with the admonition that the organic function of the body of Christ is based on the fact that gifted individuals work together as one body, regardless of the diversity of their gifts (1 Co 12:28). They do not work in completion with one another, or in conflict with one another, as did some in Corinth. In fact, the church can be an organic body only when all the parts function

according to their purpose.

In the list of different ministries that God has designated in the body, “administrations” was one of those gifts. On the occasion of Acts 6, the apostles helped the early disciples to understand that “administration” was a special gift that was necessary to be recognized in order that the organic body function properly. So for this reason the apostles said, “**Look out from among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, who we may designate over this business**” (At 6:3).

In other words, it was not the business of the apostles to leave their gifted ministry of special prayers and teaching in order to administer the distribution of food to the widows. It was not according to the God-defined function of the body that they leave their ministry in order to do the ministry of someone who was specifically gifted in administration. The gifted—which everyone is—must remember this point. This is especially true of those who are gifted in many areas.

Someone once said that if you want something done, then ask the busiest person to get the job done. This may be a true principle in the business world, but when considering ministries of the body of Christ, it is not necessarily true. In fact, doing such sometimes works against the function of the organic body of Christ.

In the case of the busy apostles, such would have led to the loss of souls.

If the multi-talented person who is busy is asked to take on the task of another person, as was asked of the apostles, then the apostles would be diverted from their busy schedule of ministry in prayer and teaching. People who are very busy in the function of their gift must not allow others to divert their busy schedule to the point that they must forsake their own ministry in order to be involved in the ministry of another person. If they do leave their ministry, then the work will suffer for which they were gifted to do.

Those who are zealous in their particular ministry must not make others feel guilty if they are not likewise involved in their own ministry. The light of the gospel shines differently through different members of the body. A healthy body is the result of all the organs of the body functioning according to their purpose in order to maintain the function of the whole body.

Body parts must function together as one body. When any one part of the body says that he has no need of any other part of the body, then that part of the body that wants to stand alone becomes dysfunctional in reference to the function of the whole body. Therefore, “*the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need*

of you, nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" (1 Co 12:21). Every part of the body must function in order that the body be organic. Each body part has no right to go idle by asking another body part to do its ministry.

Neither should one's ministry be exalted above the ministry of another member. *"On the contrary, more indeed, those members of the body who seem to be more feeble are necessary"* (1 Co 12:22). Exaltation of one ministry over another is detrimental to the organic function of the whole body. Minimizing the "less honorable" members in their function is senseless.

And those members of the body whom we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable parts have more abundant presentation" (1 Co 12:23).

Paul's point to the Corinthians was in the fact that *"if one member suffers [in his or her ministry], all the members suffer with it. Or, if one*

member is honored [in his or her ministry], all the members rejoice with it" (1 Co 12:26). Members in their ministries must function in cohesion with one another. Parts functioning in cohesion with one another simply means that each part must function in cooperation with all other parts of the body. The body is a team, and thus isolationists and loners must bring their spirits into cohesion with the rest of the body parts.

This is exactly what the apostles taught on the occasion of the function of the body in Acts 6. There was a dysfunction in the distribution of food to the Grecian widows, for only the Hebraic widows were benefitting from the existing distribution. The solution was not that the apostles leave their ministry in order to assume the task of others who had the gift of administration. The solution was in the fact that the members should look out among themselves in order to identify those who were gifted with administration in order to correct the organic dysfunction of the church at the time.

Chapter 4

FUNCTION OF THE ORGANIC BODY

When a dysfunction of the body is identified, leaders who are both equipped in creating solutions for the function of body life, as well as tak-

ing the initiative to do what is right, will move into action. In the case of the Acts 6 problem that was presented to the apostles, the apostles and

church leaders moved into action with solutions that revealed great wisdom on their part.

A. Consider the whole:

This was not a situation where mandates were made behind closed doors and handed down a chain of command to the church. We see no boards of authority in the early church. The apostles did not behave in this manner, and neither should we. As the accepted leaders at the time, and source of all truth, the first thing the apostles did was to call together “*the multitude of the disciples*” (At 6:2). This move on the part of the apostles called on the entire church to get involved in the solution.

Boards of authority seek to steal away from the whole church the opportunity of the church to find solutions for dysfunctions that affect the whole church. The actions of the apostles teach that it is always the responsibility of the whole church to identify and solve those problems that are in the realm of opinion. Even when the problem involves a doctrinal point, the entire body must go to the word of God in order to study those scriptures that give answers for the problem that has presented itself.

As previously noted, the apostles were the “Bibles” for the church. Jesus had promised that through them

“all truth” would be delivered to the early disciples (See Jn 14:26; 16:13). Since the church had received from the apostles the responsibility to care for widows, then we assume that the church brought the “neglect problem” before the apostles in order to receive more revelation of truth on the matter. However, since the method of how the church would carry out the function of the distribution was a matter of discretion on the part of the church, the apostles’ wisdom on this occasion revealed that in the area of opinions, there was no revelation. It was an opportunity for wisdom and common sense to prevail.

The initial command to take care of widows was revealed by the Holy Spirit through the apostles. But the system, or method by which the command was to be carried out was a matter of opinion. Therefore, the “neglect problem” was not a problem that should be solved by the Holy Spirit through the apostles. It was a problem with which the disciples had to deal. The “neglect problem” revealed dysfunctional behavior on the part of the members, not a flaw in the initial truth that was revealed through the apostles to care for the widows.

The lesson here is that when a problem in reference to how a command of the Lord is dysfunctionally obeyed, the whole church must be involved in finding a solution for the

problem. All leadership does in such matters is to identify the dysfunction, and then present the opportunity for all the members to work together as one united body in order to find solutions for the problem. Therefore, the church cannot give over to any board of authority that which the whole church should do in living the gospel. Living the gospel is an individual matter as a functioning part of the collective body of Christ.

When the church does find a solution, the solution must not be considered the law of the church. “Law” (truth) was the responsibility of the Holy Spirit through the apostles. If our solutions to problem solving are considered inspired by the Holy Spirit, then we have set aside the function of the apostles to deliver to the church “all truth” (Jn 14:26; 16:13). We must keep in mind that implementation of the law is the responsibility of the recipients of the law.

The fact that the apostles delivered to the church the responsibility to solve the problem, did not mean that the churches’ solution become the law of the church in distributing food to widows. We must keep in mind that this is often a temptation. And for this reason, the Holy Spirit did not allow Luke to write one word that described the means or methods by which the distribution was carried out. The Spirit did not want the example

of how the Jerusalem church solved the problem to become a “law” for distribution among the disciples from that time on.

B. Function of the organic body:

In the case of distribution to the widows, the apostles threw the responsibility for solving the problem back to all the members of the body in Jerusalem. They said, “*Look out from among you seven men*” who will take care of this business (At 6:3). There seems to be no significance to the number “seven” other than the fact that to the Jews the number seven was symbolic of perfection. In the selection process, this is the only decision we see the apostles making.

When the seven were eventually selected by the church, all the apostles did was announce the selection. Nothing was said about the apostles giving their approval of the seven. In other words, we see no effort by the apostles to disqualify any church-selected individual of the seven. When the church put their stamp of approval on the seven men, even the apostles submitted to the decision of the church. Outside the revelation of “all truth” for the church, there was no such thing as “apostolic authority” that was practiced by the Christ-sent apostles of the first century.

What is significant is the fact that

the 20,000 plus members of the body that we suppose were in Jerusalem at this time had to work together as one body in order to find and set forth the seven men. Boards of authority seek to usurp the opportunity of all the members to work together as the organic body of Christ. The members of boards assume that they must guarantee the function of the church by handing down dictates to the church. On this occasion, all the apostles did was give three points of qualification, and then allow the church to take it from there. The apostles did not function as a board of authority, for they did not allow the church to detour them from their ministry of prayer and teaching.

In this case, the common behavior of boards of authority was reversed. The church (the “selection board”) handed to the apostles their decision. The apostles suggested the simple guidelines of selecting seven men. But it was the church that made the final decision as to who would serve in the ministry. It was the committee of seven who decided how to solve the problem.

We assume that more than seven men fulfilled the spiritual guidelines set forth by the apostles. But it was the final decision of the church to make the selection of just seven men. After the church made the selection of seven men, the whole church then

presented these men to the apostles for the simple task of making a public designation of who would be the seven servants of the church in order to solve the problem.

C. **Qualified administrators:**

The apostles gave some general spiritual qualifications that should be characteristic of those who would be chosen. The chosen should be men who would work among all the house fellowships. They would take the lead in making decisions concerning the distribution to the widows (At 6:3). The very nature of the ministry of distribution would assume the responsibility of making decisions concerning distribution. Such would conform to the Spirit’s instructions through Paul who wrote, “*I do not allow a woman ... to be dominant over a man*” (1 Tm 2:12). This would not restrict women from working with their husbands in the ministry, but the principle of male leadership should not be violated in reference to the leadership of the men in the distribution.

1. *Honest report:* Those who were to be chosen should be of “honest report” (At 6:3). Since the men would be handling a great deal of money, this was a practical qualification in reference to the character of the men. It was also a qualification

that guaranteed that the men were known among most of the saints in Jerusalem. And because they were known, they were those who felt comfortable working among people, for that is what they were doing in order to have a good reputation.

2. Full of the Spirit: Men “full of the Holy Spirit” would suggest that they could formerly have had hands laid on them by the apostles to receive one of the miraculous gifts of the time (See At 8:18,19). We could assume that one of these gifts was the gift of administration (See 1 Co 12:28). However, in the selection process we assume that the church would recognize those who had a natural gift of administration. Being full of the Spirit certainly meant that they were Spirit-directed, not worldly minded, and thus tempted to pilfer that which was contributed specifically for the widows. They would be Spirit-guided not to misappropriate the funds designated for the widows to some other ministry.

3. Full of wisdom: The “full of wisdom” qualification would be the foundation upon which decisions were made in the distribution. This qualification would suggest that these men not be novice Christians, neither those who were young. Since the men would be working among all cultural

groups in Jerusalem, they needed to be men who were known for their integrity and ability to make the right decisions.

They should be known for their wisdom, for they would be working among the wisest Christians of the church, and thus they should not be immature people. They would need to exercise great wisdom in their distribution of food to the aged Christian widows.

The church initially went to the apostles for a possible revelation from the Holy Spirit on this matter. But this was a matter that needed no revelation from God. It was a function of the body that required only wisdom to solve. Wise Christians who are moved by the gospel can use wisdom in order to carry out the mandate of James 1:27, that the church is responsible for the widows and orphans among them. The Spirit did later give information concerning the care of widows (See 1 Tm 5:1-16). However, in this case of distribution to widows in a large metropolitan area, only wisdom was needed in order to solve the problem. God does not do for us those things we can do for ourselves if we would just use some common sense (wisdom).

Chapter 5

SELECTING THE QUALIFIED

Unless one sets his or her mind on Jesus in order to be motivated by the gospel of His incarnational journey into this world, he or she will not go to work for Jesus. Only by their fruits can we know that the gospel is in the heart of those who seek to serve.

When Jesus said, “*You will know them by their fruits*” (Mt 7:16), He meant more than just identifying the ulterior motives of evil men. He was also referring to what Paul would later refer as to why we are created in Christ Jesus. We are created in Christ through our obedience to the gospel in order to go to work for Jesus (See Ep 2:10). If there are no good works in the life of one who has obeyed the gospel, then one has “just been baptized.” The gospel had no affect on his or her heart.

It is upon the foundation of this principle that the seven men of Acts 6 were selected by the church. The church knew them and their fruits in serving the church. Paul was specific in reference to this principle: “*But let these [bondservants] also **first be tested**, then let them serve, being found blameless*” (1 Tm 3:10).

A. **Selecting servants:**

The seven men of necessity al-

ready had a good reputation of having dedicated themselves to the ministry of the saints. This is the character of leaders as described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:15,16:

***You know** [in all Achaia] the household of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and **that they have dedicated themselves to the ministry of the saints**, that you submit yourselves to such, and to everyone who works with us and labors.*

This is the commentary passage on the men who were chosen in Jerusalem in Acts 6. Achaia was a Roman province. Because of the dedication of brother and sister Stephanas and their household, they had a great reputation for ministry among all the disciples throughout the province of Achaia.

Because the seven men who were to be selected in Jerusalem were already involved in ministry throughout the city, it would be easy for the church to identify them because they already knew of their ministry. The whole church of Jerusalem, therefore, simply had to select which seven ministering saints of the city they wanted to be designated by the apostles to focus on the administration of food to the widows.

The men had to first agree to con-

tinue their work of ministry until the problem was solved. The point is that the seven were already in the work of ministry to the saints **before they were selected by the church**. Once they were selected by the church, they were then designated by the apostles. This was done in order to make sure that the whole church knew those to whom to go in reference to distribution needs.

The reason they were brought before the apostles was because the apostles were at this time in the infancy of the church still functioning as the center of reference for instruction in the truth. After this public designation by the apostles, however, everyone in the future who complained about this particular problem could redirect their inquiries. The apostles could after the selection and designation reaffirm the decision of the church concerning the seven men. The apostles could themselves direct all inquiries to the specific seven administrators. The apostles could thus deflect all inquiries to the seven. By doing so they could remain in their ministry of prayer and teaching.

God opens doors of ministry for those who are already in ministry. Therefore, instead of praying to find a ministry, one should get busy on his own initiative and start ministering. Once God sees that one is dedicated to the ministry of the saints, then He will open doors for greater ministry for

that person. The one who sits idly by waiting for a ministry will see no open doors for ministry. Because he is not able to find something to do is an indication that he will do nothing though a ministry is staring him in the face.

What is also significant about the apostles' suggestion is that it "*pleased the whole multitude*" (At 6:5). All the saints in Jerusalem were on board for a solution because the apostles did not form a board of authority to run the show. There were no power struggles and debates. We see no business meetings or ambitious populous candidates stepping forward to be voted into office. The church went forth to make their own selection. Candidates did not come forward for a populous vote in order to be voted into an office of authority.

The names of those who were chosen indicate that there were both Greeks and Jews in the group of seven, for the list of names included both Grecian names and Hebrew names (At 6:5). Nicolas was a Gentile proselyte who had migrated from Antioch to Jerusalem. In order to culturally reach all the widows of all the language/cultural groups, those who were chosen represented men from all linguistic and cultural house groups of Jerusalem. The whole church thus revealed great wisdom in choosing the men for this work of ministering to the widows.

B. Generating growth:

It is interesting to note that the Holy Spirit began the historical section of the neglect of the Grecian widows with the statement, “*When the number of the disciples was multiplying*” (At 6:1). When the solution was implemented by the church, the Holy Spirit concluded with the statement, “*So the word of God increased. And the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly*” (At 6:7).

When the church does that which is right according to gospel motivation, then growth happens. Whenever there is a dysfunction in the body of Christ, growth is always hindered. When the members’ minds are so focused on the problems that disrupt the body, they cannot focus totally on the preaching of the gospel to the lost. For this reason, Satan seeks to disrupt the body, and by so disrupting the body he disrupts the preaching of the gospel. It is for this reason that gospel-obedient disciples must always keep their minds focused on those things that are above (Cl 3:1). They must be alert to areas of function in the body wherein problems may develop.

C. Dissolving committees:

It seems that in the three to four years of growth since the Pentecost of Acts 2, the church in Jerusalem was

functioning without any “committee” to feed the widows. The committee of seven was designated only when a dysfunctional problem arose. Committees, therefore, were not a common organizational structure of the early church, even among the possibly 20,000 members of the church of Jerusalem who were meeting in possibly 800 homes throughout the city. Therefore, when a committee was formed to solve a problem, **it was not permanent**. This does not mean that perpetual committees are wrong. It only means that when gospel-obedient people are motivated in their daily living by the gospel, there is little need for cooperate organizational structures in the function of the organic body.

This point is brought out in reference to the lives of two of those who were on the committee of seven. One of the committee members, Stephen, was full of grace and power of the Holy Spirit (At 6:8). However, his total commitment to preach the gospel eventually led to his death (At 7:54-60).

It is significant to note that though Stephen was part of the committee of seven to serve tables, he still reached out in preaching the gospel. It may be worth noting, therefore, that the church knew him as a leading person among the disciples because he was formerly preaching the gospel in

Jerusalem prior to his selection by the church to be on the committee of seven (Compare At 15:22). It may be that by the time of his death, the problem of neglecting the widows had been solved and the committee terminated. At least Stephen's part on the committee was terminated when he went on to glory.

Philip, another person of the committee, was a married man with possibly four young children at the time. Many years later we find Philip as an evangelist. When the great persecution eventually arose in Jerusalem, "*Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them*" (At 8:5). He then was led to the desert to preach the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch (At 8:26). And then he and his family moved on to Caesarea (At 21:8,9).

The problem of the neglect of the widows had long been solved by the time of the death of Stephen and Philip's move to Caesarea. Committees are intended to solve dysfunctions in the organic function of the body. But when the problem is solved, there should be no need for gospel living people to be organized into committees to do good to all men, "*especially to those who are of the household of the faith*" (Gl 6:10). Those who are living the incarnate life of Christ fulfill the needs that arise among those of the family of God as soon as they

encounter needs (At 4:34,35). This is the meaning of being "organic" as the body of Christ. When disciples are meeting in their homes, it is difficult to ignore a need that is sitting across the living room table.

Nevertheless, all the house fellowships of an urban center must be in contact with one another lest the needs of one group is too much for the group to handle. Other groups must come to the aid of those groups who are in need as in the case of the Grecian widows.

D. A culture of sharing:

It is as John exhorted, "*Whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?*" (1 Jn 3:17). If one needs a committee person to come by and remind him of his responsibility to care for his brother, then his relationship with the brethren as a whole is not close enough to discover the needs of his brethren. If he knows legitimate needs, but does not respond, then the heart of God does not dwell in him through the gospel. Therefore, "*let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth*" (1 Jn 3:18).

We see in the dissolving of the "widow committee" a point of wisdom on the part of the early church.

Unlike many corporate churches today, the early disciples were driven individually by the gospel to function as the organic body of Christ. There was no need for a corporate “non-profit” committee to steal their involvement away from them as disciples. Paul certainly had this in mind when he wrote to Timothy to “*charge those who are rich ... that they be rich in good works*” (1 Tm 6:17,18). The rich have a tendency to relieve themselves of hands-on involvement by hiring someone else to do the work for them. They can stand at a distance while others do the work. However, when the rich become disciples of Jesus, their standard of living comes down as they live the incarnate Son

of God who came down out of heaven for them (Jn 1:1,2,14).

The corporate nonprofit religious organization seeks to do the work that individual Christians should be doing personally. The corporate committee often steals the opportunity away from individual members to become personally involved in ministry. Therefore, we see wisdom on the part of the early church to dissolve the committee, if indeed this wisdom truly originated from them (See Js 3:13,17,18). The benevolent committee for the widows was dissolved as soon as the disciples began distributing to all the saints who were widows. When the problem was solved, the committee was dissolved.

Chapter 6 INCOHESIVE CULTURES

A few years ago we were somewhat shocked as we looked upon a picture of the attendees of a particular lectureship of church leaders in America. There were over one hundred individuals in the picture of this particular annual lectureship. We looked closely at the picture. We looked at every face. What we noticed about the picture took our minds back to the Jewish apartheid years in Jerusalem, and the years in South Africa before everything came right. Everyone who was pictured in the news-

paper were African-American preachers and church leaders. No other cultural group was represented.

“Apartheid” is an Afrikaans word—one of the dominant languages of South Africa—that means “separateness.” The practice of racial and cultural apartheid found its legal roots in South Africa when a system of institutionalized racial segregation was introduced within society following 1948. From that date the system was maintained by the authoritarian political power of one group of citizens

over the citizenship of the rest of the country.

The practice of apartheid within South Africa resulted in a system of dysfunctional social stratification, which social system legally prevailed until the early 1990s. However, even after the writing of a new constitution that did away with all the apartheid laws, the embedded social behavior of apartheid continues to this day among all social groups of the country. It is a system of dysfunctional social behavior much like the caste system of India that lingers on today, though the legal restrictions are long gone. Social changes continue long after the demise of legal statutes that seek to regulate society contrary to the principles of the word of God.

We live with the legacy of the dysfunctional social injustice of apartheid even to this day in South Africa. But before we target and criticize South Africa for her brief history of apartheid, we must remember that apartheid has always existed throughout the world. The experts use the word “ethnocentrism” to identify the foundation upon which separateness within societies often prevails. Without the principle of “love-your-neighbor-as-yourself,” apartheid is simply the legalization of ethnocentrism. If we take away legalized apartheid, we still behave as segregated citizens within a society because of different

cultures and languages.

We originally began the writing of this book in order to deal with dysfunctional behavior systems among the early disciples. But the more we focused on the dysfunctional behavior patterns of the early disciples, the more we began to realize that apartheid was strong in the first century, and subsequently found its way into the organic function of the early church. When it came into the fellowship of the church, organic dysfunction resulted because apartheid is against the very core of the unity that the gospel brings between all men.

Apartheid among Christians is contrary to the spirit of the gospel. When Paul wrote to the Philippians, “*Have this mind in you,*” he took the Philippians, and us, on a journey of the Son of God across cultural boundaries (Ph 2:5). Through His incarnation, Jesus illustrated in His gospel mission that unless He transitioned through the separateness that existed between God and man, which separation would eventually lead to the total annihilation of humanity for eternity, He had to destroy the “apartheid” between God and man (See Is 59:2). He had to set an example of a cross-cultural journey that would bring all men of society together into the fellowship of one body. This is what the gospel does among all people of the world.

Therefore, for those who have obeyed the gospel of the Son of God, there can be no apartheid between those who have come into the fold of God's gospel-obedient people. Because He so loved the world, the Son of God left the culture of heaven in order to cross over into our culture. He did so in order to reconcile all of us together into the united family of God. We must never forget that only in Christ can the following social order prevail over our natural instincts of ethnocentrism:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither bondservant nor free. There is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise (Gl 3:26-29).

After the apparent apartheid function among the Christians in Jerusalem was revealed through the lack of administration of food to the Grecian widows, we might assume that the problem of discrimination among the Christians that was based on cultural barriers was overcome. In reference to the distribution among the Grecian Jewish Christians, the

problem was immediately solved. However, this was not the end of discrimination among the members of the body. When Jewish Christians started to reach out evangelistically to non-Jewish cultures beyond Jerusalem, there were still some cultural "apartheid" behavior that lingered among Christians. Jesus' mandate that the gospel go beyond the city limits of Jerusalem ran into some cultural obstacles as evangelists left the city in order to go into all the world.

When Peter went to Caesarea to the house of a Gentile, Cornelius, the persistent cultural barriers that existed between Jews and Gentiles were revealed in the actions of those to whom he returned when he came home to Jerusalem.

A. Apartheid in Jerusalem:

It took a special vision from God to convince Peter, an ardent Jew by culture, to get out of his cultural cocoon (At 10). In the special vision that was sent to him by God about ten years after the establishment of the church in Jerusalem, he even complained when asked in the vision to eat those foods that Jews were not allowed to eat according to the Sinai law. So he complained, "*Not so, Lord, for I have never eaten anything common or unclean*" (At 10:14).

Peter was an obedient Jew in ref-

erence to the food restrictions of the Sinai law. Though that law was dead, and God had subsequently declared all meats to be clean, Peter still refrained from eating certain meats. What Peter and other Jews had difficulty practicing was the fact that what was unlawful to eat under the Sinai law had now become only the customs of the Jews under the gospel law of liberty. Therefore, with the following statement, Paul excused himself and all Christians from any Jewish food restrictions: *“I [Paul] know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself. But to him [Peter] who regards anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean”* (Rm 14:14).

So we will excuse Peter for the moment for not considering all foods clean. But he and all Jews had to understand that what was once law when they were under the Sinai law, was no longer law in reference to foods. They could now prepare foods from a Gentile cook book, and enjoy a good pork chop. Eating of all meats was simply determined by the custom one might feel in reference to eating certain foods, but not in reference to any scriptural prohibitions.

Now when the Holy Spirit eventually came upon the household of Cornelius, God signalled to Peter and the Jews who had accompanied Peter to the house of Cornelius, that the

gospel must go to the Gentiles. When the household of Cornelius was empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak in other languages during the meeting, the attending Jews realized that God was signaling that the Gentiles must hear the gospel, and subsequently come into the fellowship of the disciples (At 10:44-48). And if the gospel must be preached to the Gentiles in order that they obey the gospel, then the unity of the gospel must do away with any cultural barriers between Jews and Gentiles that would separate the two cultural groups.

Because of his experience with the Holy Spirit coming upon the household of Cornelius, Peter finally understood the teaching of the vision. He thus stated to Cornelius and all the Jews who were present, *“Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons. But in every nation he who fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him”* (At 10:34,35). (Hold this thought.)

After Cornelius and his household obeyed the gospel, Peter and company returned to Jerusalem. But when they reached the city limits, *“those who were of the circumcision [Jews] disputed with him, saying, ‘You went in to uncircumcised [Gentiles] men and ate with them’”* (At 11:2,3). We would correctly assume that those of the “circumcision” were

fellow Jewish brethren. If they were fellow Christians, then the cultural barrier between Jews and Gentiles in the city of Jerusalem reached into the fellowship of the church. This was probably the case since the culture of Jerusalem was strictly Jewish. This “separateness” (apartheid) was later revealed when Paul came to the city many years later and the Jewish elders of the church encouraged him to observe some Jewish customs in reference to the temple (See At 21:17-25).

If indeed these were fellow Jews and fellow Christians who came out to contend with Peter, then the Christians in Jerusalem continued to be intimidated by the apartheid of the Jews in Jerusalem in reference to the Gentiles. The cultural separation between Jews and Gentiles greatly influenced the behavior of Jewish Christians in the early years of the church. This may have been the source of the “neglect problem” that led to the oversight of the Grecian widows.

Even though a special vision of God was revealed to one of the Christ-sent apostles (Peter), cultural barriers continued to hinder the missions of the Jerusalem church for at least ten years after the beginning of the church in Acts 2. (We assume that Peter’s trip to the house of Cornelius was approximately ten years after the Pentecost of Acts 2.) But the cultural bar-

rier of race continued on north of Jerusalem to the city of Antioch a few years after Peter went into the house of Cornelius.

B. Apartheid in Antioch:

There were two occasions when Jewish culture affected those of the Gentile church in Antioch. Both cases reveal that some Jews had by this time in the growth of the church moved Jewish customs beyond cultural behavior. Specifically, circumcision was made a matter of salvation by some Jewish brethren (At 15:1).

1. *Circumcision salvation:*
“After fourteen years [from Paul’s first visit to Jerusalem when he returned from Arabia], I [Paul] went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus also with me” (Gl 2:1). This visit to Jerusalem was Paul’s visit to the city for the meeting of Acts 15.

Titus was a Greek. This presented a problem. When the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem confronted Titus about not being circumcised, Paul identified those who confronted him as “false brethren” (Gl 2:4). From this identification, therefore, we would assume that if someone would make a cultural practice a matter of salvation, then he is a false brother (See At 15:1). But this was not the end of the story in reference to apart-

heid in the church of Jerusalem. These false brethren sought to take their “Jewish cultural Christianity” far beyond the city limits of Jerusalem.

2. *Apartheid condemnation:* Several years later Paul wrote of an apartheid incident in Antioch. In the letter he stated, “*But when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned*” (Gl 2:11). After reading this statement, we wonder what Peter, the apostle, whom God sent to the house of Cornelius, did to bring himself into a state of condemnation. This was the same Peter to whom were given the “keys of the kingdom” (Mt 16:18,19). Peter certainly preached the truth according to the Holy Spirit, **but the Holy Spirit did not force him to conform to the truth of the gospel that he preached.** And because any direct control of his behavior was not a work of the Spirit, Peter stood condemned because he was responsible for his behavior on this occasion.

While in Antioch, and before the arrival of the Jewish delegation from Jerusalem, Peter “*ate with the Gentiles*” just as he had done with the household of Cornelius (Gl 2:12). However, when “certain men” came from Jerusalem, “*he withdrew and separated [apartheid] himself [from the Gentile brethren]*” (Gl 2:12). But it was not Peter alone who practiced this apartheid behavior in the fellow-

ship of the disciples. Barnabas and the other Jewish Christians in Antioch also withdrew themselves from the Gentile brethren (Gl 2:12,13). If a picture of the church were taken after the arrival of the Jerusalem brethren, it would probably have been a picture of Jews only.

What Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish Christians in Antioch did was place themselves in a state of condemnation because “*they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel*” (Gl 2:14). Their behavior was contrary to the gospel of Jesus who gave up His cultural environment of heaven with God in order to be transformed into the flesh of man (See Ph 2:5-8). It is often difficult for people to understand that they must never allow any cultural barriers to stand between them and the preaching of the gospel. If we live the incarnational example of Jesus, then there will be no cultural barriers that will hinder us from going unto every creature with the message of the gospel (Mk 16:15).

Many suggestions have been made as to why Peter allowed himself to be intimidated into living contrary to the incarnational Son of God in Antioch. We would assume that the Jewish culture was still so strong in him and in the Jerusalem church, that it continued to hinder the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles. In

this case, the cultural bondage of the Jews made its way even to the church in the Gentile city of Antioch.

We should probably give Peter some grace on this matter. At least this is what the brethren did in Jerusalem on the occasion of the Acts 15 meeting. On that occasion Paul reviewed for everyone that “*God shows no partiality to man*” (Gl 2:6). Everyone understood that God worked “*in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcision,*” while at the same time He “*effectively worked also in me toward the Gentiles*” (Gl 2:8). So James, Peter and John “*gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship so that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcision*” (Gl 2:9).

We must never underestimate, therefore, the influence of culture on the behavior of our faith. When Christians believe that certain rites of their culture are necessary in order to

be saved, then they inevitably seek to bring the brethren under the bondage of such cultural behavior. Sometimes the intimidation of those who taught “cultural Christianity” was so strong in the first century that even a Christ-sent apostle succumbed to those who preached such bondage. We must never forget what Paul wrote in order to encourage the Galatian Christians never to succumb to “cultural Christianity: “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage*” (Gl 5:1).

And just in case his readers did not understand the seriousness of this matter, in the context of the “circumcision Christianity” that some Jewish brethren were teaching, Paul wrote, “*Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you are circumcised [in order to be saved], Christ will profit you nothing*” (Gl 5:2; see At 15:1).

Chapter 7

LORDS OF AUTHORITY

In the early 1970s we were with other students sitting in a philosophy class at a university in southern Mississippi. At one time, we were all studying the French philosopher and skeptic Rene Descartes of the 17th century. As students with religious backgrounds, we were all held in wonder

as the professor lectured as to why Descartes was so philosophically skeptical of that in which we all believed ... faith and God.

When the professor took us deeper into the society and mind of Descartes, we began to understand the religious world in which Descartes

lived. Descartes dealt with the same religious environment as the modern-day fictional English writer, Philip Pullman. Descartes' time was an era of misguided institutional religion that was revealed in the religiosity of the Roman Catholic Church.

During a recent British Broadcasting Cooperation interview with Pullman, Pullman said, “**Institutional religion is the real evil**” (BCC, Sept. 22, 2018). Descartes was confronted with institutional Roman Catholicism and Pullman with the institutional Church of England today (the Anglican Church).

Pullman questioned the religion with which he was acquainted. Descartes was agnostic in reference to the god that was presented to the world by the Roman Catholic Church. However, both were referring to an institutional religious world where religionists had established authority structures and theologies of men within religion. Both saw the evils of institutional religion that is founded on the authority of men, and is upheld by innocent followers who know only the heritage of their respective religious institution.

The followers often promote their dysfunctional religions, regardless of any scandal within the leadership of their religion. Unfortunately, dysfunctional religion leads to a dysfunctional faith. Descartes was a phi-

losopher, and thus, he saw the hypocrisy of the leadership of the Roman Catholic religion. Pullman simply wrote that if institutional religion could not be elevated above human behavior, then it is flawed with all sorts of evils.

The apostle Peter was faced with dysfunctional religious institutionalism that was creeping in among the disciples even before the close of the first century. His first letter was written to the elders in five Roman provinces: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (1 Pt 1:1). These were provinces of the Roman Empire, not cities. The first epistle of Peter was written in the early or middle 60s. By the time Peter arrived at the exhortations of chapter 5, he identified a dysfunctional leadership problem among the leaders of the Christians in the provinces he identified at the beginning of the letter.

Peter addressed the rise of the core of institutional religion. As a fellow elder, he exhorted those elders to whom he wrote, “*Shepherd the flock of God that is among you ... not under compulsion ... not as being lords*” (1 Pt 5:2,3). “**Compulsion**” and “**lordship**” exist only when men assume authority. There is no such thing as a lord who has no authority. One cannot function with compulsion as a lord unless he has assumed some authority over those whom he seeks

to compel. (More on this in a later chapter.)

Institutional religion is defined by organized structures that are sustained by men of authority who assume authority as lords. They function as lords in order to perpetuate the existence of the religion.

The pope is the “head” of the Catholic Church. He is the pope because he is a highly respected person who functions as the center of reference of the Catholic Church on earth. He functions as a head because the religion of Catholicism invests within him the authority that is necessary to perpetuate the religion of Catholicism. Likewise, the Queen of England is the head of the Church of England. Though she may not exercise the authority that is invested in her as the head of the Church of England, the authority is still there, which authority is exercised by designated officials of the church.

This is institutional religion at its best. And this is the institutional religion that had gone wrong by the time of Descartes. Descartes was agnostic in reference to such religion. Pullman simply called it evil. These men were not necessarily anti-faith. They were anti-institutional religion. They were so because they saw the evils of authorities in religion who had gone wrong in their assumption of being lords over the flock of God.

When Paul revealed to the Ephesian elders that eventually some among them would draw away disciples after themselves, he saw the dysfunction of an institutional religion that was coming (See At 20:30). Paul spoke to the elders of cities, whereas Peter wrote to the elders throughout the provinces. What Paul saw coming in the cities, Peter identified as already in existence among some elders throughout the provinces at the time he wrote in the middle 60s. An authoritative hierarchy had developed among the disciples within only two decades after the beginning of the church in Acts 2. The only stage yet to develop in the apostasy would be an internationally designated head of the church on earth, which thing eventually transpired in a couple centuries later with the development of the Roman Catholic Church.

There is always the possibility that lords of authority will rise up among the disciples. The question in reference to dealing with this dysfunction in the leadership is not to allow lordship leadership to develop in the first place. This is why we have a New Testament in our hands to guide us in these matters.

The twelve disciples offered the first indication that men will dispute among themselves as to who is in control (See Lk 22:24). In dealing with the struggle among the disciples for

prominence, Jesus gave instructions and mandates in reference to the leadership that would exist among His disciples, which leadership would reflect His incarnational leadership among them. After the apostles were transformed into the behavior of their incarnate Savior, the Holy Spirit added to Jesus' instructions on leadership as He continued to work through the apostles and early writers of inspired Scripture. The following is a brief list of key points that must be taught among us, beginning with each disciple who comes forth from the waters of baptism:

1. There are to be no rulers among the disciples who rule by lordship (Mk 10:42,43; Lk 22:25,26).
2. There are to be no leaders who exercise authority over the church (Mk 10:42,43; Lk 22:25,26).
3. All leaders will function as slaves to the needs of the church (Mk 10:44; Lk 22:26; Jn 13:1-20; 1 Pt 5:2).
4. Leaders will not compel other members of the body (1 Pt 5:2).
5. Leaders will lead by the gospel example of their own lives (1 Co 16:15,16; 1 Pt 5:3).
6. Leaders will study and teach the word of God (1 Tm 3:2; 2 Tm 2:15,24; Ti 1:9).
7. Leaders will live the incarnational example of Jesus by making His mind their mind (Ph 2:5-8).

Inherent in leaders who are not living the gospel example of Jesus is the desire to lord over the flock of God. Such leaders see the church as an opportunity to exercise their desire to rule. However, such leaders forget that our Lord lowered Himself, giving up the form of God. He humbled Himself to the flesh of man (Jn 1:1,2,14; Ph 2:5-8). If a leader among the sheep of God is not willing to behave in this manner, then he has no right to be considered a leader of God's sheep.

Chapter 8

ENDANGERED IDENTITY

3 John is one of those brief New Testament letters that is often ignored by Bible students. However, it is one that is directly focused on dysfunctional relationships that often occurs among leaders of the body. In fact,

the dysfunction about which John wrote was so great in this particular situation that it endangered the organic function of the body to evangelize the world. Souls were or would be lost if the dysfunction in relation-

ships continued. For this reason, the Holy Spirit deemed it necessary to write a specific document (letter) to correct the problem. If necessary, the Spirit sought to send a Christ-sent apostle to the location of the dysfunction in order to sort out the individual who was the source of the trouble.

There were four personalities (disciples) involved in the dysfunctional scenario that is addressed in 3 John. There was the Christ-sent apostle, John, who wrote the letter. There was Gaius, the informant, to whom the letter was written. There was Diotrephes, the instigator of the problem. And then there was on the sidelines a disciple name Demetrius. All four individuals played a significant role in the problem and solution.

The letter does not deal specifically with the church as a whole, but with individuals. In this case, the focus of the letter was directed to a businessman for whom John prayed would become more successful in his prosperity and health, just as he was spiritually prospering (3 Jn 2). Gaius had assumed the responsibility of living the gospel, and in living the gospel, he took personal ownership of making sure the gospel was preached through his support of traveling evangelists. He did not shun his personal responsibility to preach the gospel. He did not off-load his responsibility on a “church budget.” He was directly

involved in mission support.

The Holy Spirit, therefore, urged John to write of his personal prayers for this individual: “*I pray that in all things you may prosper*” (3 Jn 2). Nowhere else in the New Testament is there such a prayer offered for the material prosperity of an individual. We must conclude that if such a prayer were offered for ourselves, then certainly we should be doing with our material prosperity that which Gaius was doing with his. In his case, the more Gaius prospered, the more money he had at his disposal to support those evangelists who were passing through his house on their way to preach the gospel to unevangelized regions.

But there was a serious problem. The problem was so troubling that Gaius was moved to inform John, and then ask for help from the aged apostle. John’s instructions in the letter, therefore, are significant in reference to our personal responsibility to preach the gospel through others. When the preaching of the gospel to the lost is threatened, then it is time to take action. We can be patient with personality disputes among brothers and sisters. However, when the disputes endanger the preaching of the gospel to the lost, then we are in danger of forgetting who we are as disciples of Jesus. If the church does not step up and sort out any problem that

causes any member to be discouraged from supporting the preaching of the gospel, then we individually lose our purpose for being disciples of Jesus.

A. Endangered relationships:

The historical scenario upon which the problem developed was centered around the common social relationships that the disciples had with one another as members of the universal body of Christ. Though the problem certainly spilled over into the assemblies of the disciples, we must not assume that the problem was specifically centered around the church as a whole.

This was a problem in the organic body in a particular region that resulted from the dysfunctional relationships that certain individuals had with one another. It was a problem that originated from the influence of one particular leader who affected the evangelistic function of another member of the body.

In reference to the assemblies of the disciples, we must approach this text with the understanding that the identified members of the body in the region were meeting in the homes of the disciples. This is significant in order to understand the Holy Spirit's instructions to solve the problem. It is important to understand the home assemblies of the early church lest we

read into the letter our modern-day institutional behavior of large single-assembly churches. This is important lest we also read into the text a behavioral practice of assembly that was not relevant to the situation that prevailed in the first century.

The historical scenario was not a problem within a particular assembly of disciples. The problem was that one particular individual took advantage of some disciples who were living in the area where the problem was created. We must keep in mind that the problem centered around individuals, not assemblies.

This point is significant. If we believe that the problem developed within a single-assembly of members in a particular region, then we might misunderstand both the instructions of John, as well as what was actually transpiring in the development of the problem. For example, if we interpret the text from the viewpoint that the problem developed within a particular group of disciples in a region who were meeting in one assembly, then we might erroneously conclude that there was "division in the church." We might conclude that Diotrephes was drawing away from one particular assembly of disciples a group the disciples over whom he could exercise lordship authority. His group of followers, therefore, would not be showing up at the general as-

sembly of the saints. They would be meeting on their own apart from the greater gathering of the disciples. Diotrefes was certainly exercising lordship authority, but we would question his exercising of such authority in order to divide a group of disciples.

John does not deal with the problem that prevailed as if it were a problem of division within a particular single-assembly church. The problem was not division of a church, but the erroneous beliefs and behavior of a particular individual who was disrupting the mission responsibility of each member of the church. Diotrefes was dominating an entire group of people, and thus threatening with disfellowship those over whom he lorded.

Though the application of the instructions of John would have a secondary application to division among members of a single-assembly church, such an application would be slightly misapplied. It is imperative, therefore, that we understand the text from the historical fact that the early disciples were assembling in many different homes throughout a particular region. Diotrefes' influence was over a particular group of disciples with whom he had a lordship relationship.

John gave no instructions for Gaius to start another assembly of the saints with someone else in order to

correct the problem that he had with Diotrefes. The problem was not in reference to a particular church group as a whole, but with individuals. It is important to make this distinction in reference to John's instructions lest we twist his instructions to be advice to pit one assembly of disciples against another.

Though the preceding scenario could have been happening among those who were customarily meeting at the same house, we would conclude that John was advising Gaius to separate himself from the control of an individual, not from an entire assembly of good people who had been captured by an autocratic leader. We do not believe that it was the intent of John's instructions to encourage any member to disfellowship himself from the whole in order to avoid the one. At least in this context, John advised Gaius as an individual to associate with the good that came from brother Demetrius, and thus shun the influence and behavior of Diotrefes (3 Jn 11,12).

Regardless of our lack of information concerning assemblies in the text, we find it difficult to believe that John advised Gaius to start another assembly in order to correct the problem. Correction of any leadership problem as that which is identified in this brief letter indicates that we must directly approach an individual who

is causing the problem. In this case, the apostle John was personally going to approach the source of the problem. In the meantime, he instructed Gaius on what to do until he showed up at the scene.

It would be closer to the truth of the historical house assemblies of the early church to believe that there were several ongoing assemblies in houses throughout the region where Gaius and Diotrephes lived. The sin of Diotrephes was that he was teaching and practicing the autonomy of his group over whom he exercised dominance. Since all the saints were meeting in many different houses in the region, Diotrephes took advantage of the situation by drawing away those under his influence from the rest of the saints in the area. His love to be first moved him to take control of his own group.

B. Endangered servanthood leadership:

Since Diotrephes was behaving autonomously by exercising lordship over his sect (group) of disciples, he was disrupting the evangelistic function of the body as a whole. Since there was to be no such thing as autonomous groups of disciples functioning separate from one another in the universal body, what Diotrephes was doing as an individual was mak-

ing it difficult for the traveling evangelists to go from one group of disciples to another in order to be encouraged and supported to continue their ministry of preaching the gospel to the world. If we understand correctly the instructions in the context of this function of the evangelists of the early church, then we can better understand the instructions that John wrote to Gaius.

Since the letter of John is a late letter of the Holy Spirit, then we must assume that what was transpiring in the area of Gaius and Diotrephes had developed over a period of about two decades. Therefore, we must go back a few years in order to lay the foundation for what had become dysfunctional by the time John wrote.

About twenty years before, and while Paul was among the leaders of the church in Ephesus, he warned the Ephesian elders, “*Also from your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves*” (At 20:30). About fifteen years after Paul’s meeting with the elders of Ephesus in Miletus, Peter wrote to the disciples throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (1 Pt 1:1). To the leaders of the church in these provinces, he specifically admonished the elders with the following words: “*Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, serv-*

ing as overseers, not under compulsion ... nor as being lords ..." (1 Pt 5:2,3). This admonition was based squarely on Jesus' mandate that there be no lords of authority among His disciples (See Mk 10:35-45).

That about which Paul had warned the elders in Ephesus, was coming true only about fifteen years later among some of the elders throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. At least one very important lesson is learned from Paul's warning, and evidently Peter's identification of lords among the sheep. By the time Peter wrote, there were some leaders already at the point of drawing away disciples after themselves through lordship behavior. When John wrote to Gaius, Diotrephes was behaving in a lordship manner about which both Paul and Peter wrote. The important lesson to learn is that among leaders there is always the temptation for them to function autonomously in order to exercise lordship over a particular group of disciples. It does not take much time for such a disorder to develop among disciples.

It is believed that in the latter years of the apostle John, John resided in some area of the aforementioned provinces. At least in his latter days he was in exile on the island of Patmos off the West coast of Asia, and subse-

quently directed the letter of Revelation "*to the seven churches that are in Asia*" (Rv 1:4,9). We could assume, therefore, that some of the leaders of the church in the five provinces identified by Peter did not listen to the Holy Spirit's instructions through Jesus, Paul, Peter, and now John. The apostasy of church autonomy based on lordship authority had already set in as individual leaders assumed lordship over separated groups of disciples. In doing this they were doing as Diotrephes who drew away disciples into his own autonomous group in order to exercise lordship over them. The outline that John gives us in 3 John are instructions on how such leaders become lords of autonomous groups of the flock of God in order to stymie the mission outreach of the disciples.

C. **Endangered missions:**

Gaius was justifiably concerned about the disruptive influence of Diotrephes. He was concerned because Diotrephes' behavior was affecting him personally where he lived. He was being discouraged in fulfilling his personal ministry to support missions. Diotrephes was not only behaving with a sectarian spirit, he was disrupting the mission function of the universal body of Christ. While Gaius sought to live the gospel by sup-

porting the preaching of the gospel, he was being threatened by Diotrephes who sought to discourage others from supporting traveling evangelists.

We must notice carefully how John established the foundation upon which he would eventually judge Diotrephes' behavior to be both divisive, disruptive and evil. John made the following statement in order to encourage Gaius, as well as identify the organic function of the body: "*For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you*" (3 Jn 3).

There were traveling evangelists moving among the early disciples in their ministry to preach the gospel to the unbelievers. Those who had visited Gaius eventually made their way to John. They reported to John that Gaius gave them accommodation, as well as supported them financially to go on to the next point of preaching. Therefore, John wanted to encourage Gaius with the following introductory comment: "*Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren [evangelists] and especially for strangers*" (3 Jn 5).

John's introduction in the letter was directed specifically to encourage Gaius in the midst of his turmoil with Diotrephes. He wanted to encourage Gaius to continue with his personal responsibility to evangelize the world

through those whom he supported.

The reason for this encouragement was obvious. Since the evangelists went forth (1) for the sake of preaching the name of Jesus, (2) while they took up no contributions from those to whom they preached, it was necessary that (3) local brethren partner with them financially in order that they continue to preach the gospel (3 Jn 7,8). John encouraged Gaius to continue "doing well" in supporting these evangelists. Diotrephes, however, was disrupting the flow of traveling evangelists among the disciples. He was trying to stop the supply line of finances to support missions.

In order to identify the disruptive efforts of Diotrephes, the Holy Spirit gives us a list of characteristics that identify the personality and behavior of the one who would seek to call disciples after themselves, and thus hinder the preaching of the gospel (At 20:30). This would be the leader who would disrupt God's system of the function of the organic body to reach throughout the world with the message of the gospel. From 3 John 9,10, the following is a summation of both the character and behavior of Diotrephes to disrupt the mission responsibilities of the body:

1. Diotrephes loved to be first among the disciples. He craved notoriety.

2. Diotrephes did not receive (support) the apostles or anyone who might challenge his position of authority. He was so locally focused on his ministry that he could not see lost souls beyond his locality.
3. The deeds of Diotrephes were contrary to the purpose of the church because his efforts resulted in the loss of souls, for he discouraged both the missionaries and those, as Gaius, who would support them (3 Jn 11).
4. In order to convince others not to receive and support the traveling evangelists (missionaries), Diotrephes slandered those who would threaten his lordship over those whom he dominated. Through slander he hoped to recruit a group of oppositionists who would stand with him in opposing any transient evangelist who might be passing through their area.
5. Diotrephes did not receive (support) the brethren who were traveling about preaching the gospel, and thus he discouraged others from doing so.
6. Diotrephes intimidated any person of the group over which he lorded in order that they also not receive (support) any apostle or evangelist whom he could not dominate.

7. Diotrephes lorded over those whom he seized control by threatening them with excommunication from his group.

D. **Endangered by evil:**

In ancient Greek times, the name “Diotrephes” was given to individuals of influence. It was not a name given to those of low estate. We note this because we wonder why Diotrephes rose to the position of power that was allowed by those over whom he dominated. **We might conclude that those who are successful and influential in the world may not be the best leaders among a flock of slaves.** Unless a leader truly lives the gospel of the incarnate Son of God, he cannot lead those who are living incarnationally (See Ph 2:5-8).

It is difficult for those who are leaders in the world and successful businessmen to live incarnationally among the disciples. The best advice to give to a leader of the world, or a successful businessman who is converted to the Lord, would be, “*But what things were gain to me [in the world], those things I have counted loss for Christ*” (Ph 3:7). If a successful person in the world cannot live this statement, then it would be very unwise for the slaves of Christ to designate him to be a leader among the disciples. Diotrephes took advantage

of the innocence of the sheep, and in some way became dominant among the sheep because of his influence that he had before he became a Christian.

It is noteworthy that John did not judge the sheep for allowing Diotrephes to capture them through his autocratic behavior. John judged the cause of the problem, the one who was the opportunist who lorded over the innocent sheep. Embedded in John's reply is his assurance of Gaius that individuals as Diotrephes will eventually take ownership for their own behavior in the final judgment because they seized an opportunity to steal the flock of God. Until then, James reminded all leaders with the following caution: "*Let not many of you become teachers [leaders], knowing that we will receive the stricter judgment*" (Jn 3:1).

Because lordship leaders will be held accountable for lording over the flock, they must understand that it is evil to substitute their lordship in the place of the one Lord to whom we must all give our allegiance. So John exhorted Gaius, "*Beloved, do not follow what is evil*" (3 Jn 11).

The character and behavior of Diotrephes was evil. He sought to establish an autonomous group of disciples under his own lordship, and thus, steal the sheep from their true Lord. The Holy Spirit defined this behavior as evil. If we would make a

general list from 3 John of what God considers evil among those who would lord over His sheep, it could be the following:

1. It is evil to crave to be the leader of the flock for the purpose of either notoriety, lordship, or financial gain. (We must not confuse this with the desire to shepherd the flock about which Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 3:1. That about which Paul spoke was in reference to desiring ministry, not notoriety or authority.)
2. It is evil to separate a group of disciples under the banner of one's own personality and command.
3. It is evil not to support those who are traveling about in order to preach the gospel to the lost.
4. It is evil to disrupt the mission support of the church.
5. It is evil to discourage any individual member from supporting the preaching of the gospel to the lost.
6. It is evil to slanderously damage the reputation of an evangelist who seeks to preach the gospel to the lost, for in so slandering an evangelist, supporters would be reluctant to preach the gospel through him.
7. It is evil for a church leader to hinder the mission purpose of the church.

8. It is evil to threaten disfellowship from the disciples those with whom one would disagree in reference to receiving and supporting preachers of the gospel.

E. Endangered world evangelism:

The behavior of Diotrephes was evil because his behavior would lead to the loss of many souls. On the other hand, Gaius was doing well in supporting those who came his way and left to evangelize other areas. Gaius was living the gospel. Diotrephes was discouraging Gaius from his gospel living. Diotrephes' behavior, therefore, was contrary to the gospel.

If evangelists were not supported, then many people would never have an opportunity to hear and obey the gospel. Those who live the gospel know this. Diotrephes' behavior, however, was disrupting the evangelistic function of the body of Christ because he was threatening Gaius and others who supported the preaching of the gospel. In contrast to living the gospel, he was doing evil by obstructing the evangelistic function of the body of Christ.

We must look beyond Diotrephes when interpreting the "evil" that was encouraged by this one individual. The problem went far beyond both Gaius and Diotrephes. If Diotrephes' example and influence were contin-

ued into the next generation of leaders after him, then the preaching of the gospel to a great extent would terminate before the close of the first century. It was for this reason, therefore, that the Holy Spirit deemed it critical that this very short letter be included in the canon of Scriptures for the church for centuries to come.

The church must be warned about allowing any leader to capture the church to the detriment of evangelizing the world. If Diotrephes' behavior of church leadership were passed on to those who followed him, then his cancer of opposition to the gospel would have been catastrophic. Thousands of souls would have been lost.

But in order to satisfy the immediate frustrations of Gaius, John advised Gaius to receive Demetrius (3 Jn 12). Gaius must put himself in the fellowship of those who have a good reputation (3 Jn 12). We thus assume that Demetrius had the reputation of living the gospel that must be preached throughout the world. Demetrius may have been a messenger sent by John with John's letter in hand. Whether he lived in close proximity to Gaius, or was one of John's fellow evangelists, John encouraged Gaius to receive and fellowship him as a source of good.

Because Diotrephes' influence could possibly spread throughout the

church at the time, the Christ-sent apostle John determined that he should personally show up at the door of Diotrephes' house. If John had in mind his responsibility to exercise the duty of a Christ-sent apostle, then the ring of Diotrephes' doorbell would not be pleasant.

By this time in the history of the church, Diotrephes had surely heard that disciples dropped dead before Christ-sent apostles in the early beginnings of the church (At 5:1-11). Some were delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that they might be taught gospel behavior (1 Co 5:4,5). Some were struck blind by a Christ-sent apostle (At 13:11). If John were coming with the same rod of discipline that Paul was prepared to use with some arrogant leaders in Corinth (1 Co 4:21), then Diotrephes was in trouble. John's coming to Diotrephes would be as Paul's coming to some arrogant leaders in Corinth:

*For I fear, that perhaps when I come, I will not find you as I wish, and that **I will be found by you to be as you do not wish** ... lest when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I will mourn over many who have already sinned, and have not repented ... (2 Co 12:20,21).*

We must mention the preceding because we wonder why John decided

not to write a lengthy letter about the problem. "***I had many things to write to you, but I will not with ink and pen write them to you***" (3 Jn 13). John did not write a lengthy list of instructions because he possibly felt that this situation was so serious that it needed the direct intervention of God through a Christ-sent apostle. Therefore, John wrote, "***I hope to see you shortly***" (3 Jn 14).

When we are faced with problems among the disciples in the church, it is best to first determine if the problems directly affect the underlying principles of the gospel and our responsibility to preach the gospel to the world. There will always be personality problems among disciples. Such was the case with Euodia and Syntyche in Philippi (Ph 4:2,3). But when problems affect the God-defined organic purpose of the body of Christ to preach the gospel to the world, then it is time to take action. This was the case where Gaius lived, for the evangelistic function of the body was under threat. The mission function of the body to preach the gospel to the world was being curtailed.

This particular case involved a local dysfunction of the mission outreach of the church. But the problem could have gone further, and subsequently, affected the immediate area in which the participants lived. It

would be worth mentioning in this context the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas when Paul determined that it was time to continue their mission into Asia (At 15:36).

There was a disagreement between Paul and Barnabas in reference to giving John Mark a second chance, for he had turned back on the first journey (At 13:13). When it came time to go on the second journey, Paul did not believe that Mark was mature enough to go into the difficult areas to which he planned to go. Paul and Barnabas divided over the level of Mark's spiritual maturity, but both evangelists **did not** allow their disagreement to detour them from doing that which they must do, that is, preach the gospel to the world. Paul simply took Silas, and Barnabas took Mark, and all four men carried on in their mission to preach the gospel to the world (At 15:39-41).

Nothing should ever become an obstacle to the preaching of the gospel to the lost. If we allow dysfunctional problems in the local church to hinder the preaching of the gospel to the world, **then we know that we are wrong**. We are wrong because we are allowing personal squabbles to lead to the loss of souls.

It is not possible for most individuals as Gaius to quit their jobs and

go into all the world as evangelists. If Gaius gave up his means of support, then there would be no support to give in order to send others into all the world. God's system of world evangelism involves senders and those sent. Paul explained, "*And how will they preach **unless they are sent?***" (Rm 10:15).

The point is that if a sender is discouraged in his responsibility to send, then there is a problem. God's system of world evangelism breaks down. If another individual covets the money of the willing sender, then evil has entered the heart of the covetous person. This may have been the problem with Diotrophes. He may have simply coveted Gaius' support money for himself. Such is evil.

We must never forget that the eternal soul of a person is far more precious than any personal disagreements we may have with one another, or any love of money (See 1 Tm 6:12). Diotrophes was standing in the way of the preaching of the gospel to the world. For this reason, the Christ-sent apostle John was on his way to deal with him personally in order to either bring him to repentance, or move him out of the way. In either case, the gospel mission of the organic body of Christ had to go on.

Chapter 9

CONTACT PROBLEMS

We must understand dysfunctional religion in order to understand autonomy. The word “autonomy” is not used in the New Testament. However, the concept is inferred in reference to warnings that the disciples guard themselves against dysfunctional religion that is sustained by lords of authority. We have found that it is quite difficult to explain the concept of autonomy to those who live in a religious world wherein individual church assemblies have commonly become insular, or a cocoon of fellowship within which members reaffirm their membership with one another. It is easy to be misunderstood when speaking of these things in a religious world of independent church groups that seek to function on their own. Nevertheless, we will give it a good effort. Since the Lord mandated that there be no lords of authority among His disciples, then it is imperative that we are vigilant in these matters lest we establish autonomous assemblies wherein dominant personalities take control of a group of disciples (See Mk 10:35-45).

In order to understand autonomy, it is necessary to first understand the simple fact that each individual disciple has direct contact with Jesus.

Each Christian has a direct relationship with Jesus in his or her personal life. In order to understand this, we **must not** view the book of Acts from the perspective of independent church groups on earth looking up to the one head of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ. We must in thinking take our minds into the heavenly realm of Jesus at the right hand of God. From heaven, we must look down from the throne of Jesus to individual members of the body on earth. In the book of Acts, we see the Holy Spirit recording the function of the members as they went about as the result of the gospel motivating them to serve the Lord. The Holy Spirit, through the book of Acts, seeks to transcend our view of the organic body from a heavenly perspective. **In order to do this, He places no emphasis on church groups functioning as independent groups that are governed by local authorities. He does not picture independent churches seeking to preserve their independence to be separated from one another.**

On the contrary, the book of Acts is a heavenly view from the throne of King Jesus as He looks down on the obedient subjects of His galactic kingdom reign. The obedient subjects’ re-

lationship with the King, therefore, is direct, regardless of what group with which they sit on Sunday morning. The members' relationship with their King is not via independent church groups with whom the members showed up to sit together on Sunday morning. The fact that they sit together during an "hour of worship" does not allow them the opportunity to declare their autonomy from other assembled groups across town, or across the state. In other words, assemblies are not inherently autonomous.

Because we live in a world where we make Sunday morning assemblies identify the existence of "a church," we often confuse ourselves. We know that our membership is in heaven, but we are often confused by a secondary membership that we place with our favorite group with whom we assemble on Sunday morning. But the fact that the New Testament says nothing about the second membership emphasizes the point that our focus must be on our direct relationship with Jesus. Our relationship is directly with Jesus, not via our personal relationships with one another.

The rise in the last few decades of literature on the subject of one's "personal relationship with Jesus" is evidence of the fact that people are struggling to release themselves from the confines of institutional church-

chianity in order to restore a direct relationship with King Jesus. Our struggle to release ourselves from churchianity is a movement away from institutional religion. It was the same movement that Paul sought to encourage when he wrote the statement, "*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).

If we place ourselves in the bondage of any lord but the Lord Jesus Christ, then we become a part of an autonomous institutional group that has separated itself from the whole. We have succumbed to a group of disciples who have been drawn away from the whole by those who seek to rule over us (See At 20:30).

Both Paul and Peter, following the exhortation of Jesus in Mark 10:42,43—that there be no lords of authority among the disciples—warned the disciples about forming autonomous structures of authority. These structures of autonomy are simply contrary to the personal relational connection that members of the body are to have with the universal Head of the body. Autonomous religious structures that separate individual members of the body from one another are contrary to the mandate of the Holy Spirit that the church is a worldwide fellowship. Where the members sit on Sunday morning in

different cities and states does not separate them from one another. Assemblies of the members must never be used to make the members autonomous from one another. The Spirit says,

For as the body is one [universally], and has many members [throughout the world], and all the members of the one [universal] body, though they are many [worldwide], are one body, so also is Christ [universally]" (1 Co 12:12).

Chapter 10 ISOLATIONISTS

One of the greatest fellowship statements of the Scriptures that explains the cause of the universal bond that Christians have with one another throughout the world is 1 John 1:3:

That [resurrected Jesus] which we have seen and heard we [apostles] 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.

Included in John's use of the word "us" is at least himself and the other Christ-sent apostles who experienced the resurrected body of Jesus. But since 1 John was written to all of us, then the bond that holds all of us together as one universal family is the resurrected Son of God. Whatever our definition of autonomy might be, it must never endanger the unity that we have with one another as the universal body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:12 is a clear

statement of the connectivity in ministry of the members of this universal church of Christ. When we allow the individual members of the body to maintain their direct connection with the resurrected Jesus as their only Lord and Head, then there is no temptation to move toward autonomous institutional sects. We are functional with one Lord and one Head. When different sects serve different lords and heads on earth, then the members of each sect become dysfunctional in their relationship with the only Lord and head of the church.

If we understand the true meaning of 1 Corinthians 12:12, and the entire context of 1 Corinthians 12, then we must conclude that there is no such thing as autonomous assembly sects, regardless of where the members of each group sit on Sunday morning. Individual submission to the lordship of Jesus guards against the members' becoming autonomous from one another. When members of

the body determine not to be brought into the bondage of institutional religion that is perpetuated by authorities on earth, then they begin to understand the fellowship of the worldwide body of Christ from the top down, and not from the bottom up. When all of us focus on the one resurrected King Jesus, then we are held together in the bond of peace.

An example is fitting here to explain this organic function of unity. We must resort to our former Mid-western Kansas rural culture. Throughout the state (province) of Kansas in America there are several assemblies of the saints. The assemblies are scattered across the state, being several miles from one another. It is impossible for them to be together as “one church” in one assembly on Sunday morning. Nevertheless, they seek to behave as one church throughout the state of Kansas regardless of where they are on Sunday morning. Now those institutional churches that seek to be autonomous with their own authority structures, cannot identify with this behavior.

In the central part of the state of Kansas is the well-known Silver Maple Camp. Throughout the year, this camp is used as a collective gathering of all the members of the body in Kansas, whether young or old. When we were young children, we used to go to this camp and meet with

other young people from across the state. The same tradition continues today. At the “camp assembly (church)” attendees would identify themselves as being from a particular town somewhere in Kansas. They would do so if there were only one assembly of the church in the small town from where they came. If there were more than one assembly in the particular town or city, the camp participants would identify the assembly group by a street address or city suburb.

But generally, everyone at the camp, both staff and participants, worked as the one church of Kansas regardless of where they sat on Sunday morning the first Sunday after any camp session. There was no autonomy among the participants because there were no power struggles between the town assemblies from which the members came. It was a reflection of the pioneering spirit of unity with which Central America was settled as a farming community two centuries ago. If farmers functioned autonomously from one another back in those pioneering days, then they would not have survived. They realized that their existence as farmers in the pioneering days of America depended on their working together as much as possible.

Hierarchal institutional religion works against the desire of members

of the body to function together as one body. If there is within the leadership those who seek to lord over the flock, or to draw away members after themselves in order to be autonomous, then they are walking contrary to the universal unity of the one body of Christ. They have weakened the body of Christ.

Therefore, autonomy is wrong when church groups structure themselves around an authority other than Christ who has all authority over all things (Mt 28:18). Strict autonomous groups hinder the growth of the church because of the religious structures of lordship that separate the disciples from one another.

However, autonomy is right when members of the body seek to keep themselves separate from autonomous religions and their struc-

tures of authority by which the members would be brought into the bondage of any individual or board of individuals. When institutional churches start coming together in order to designate a regional chairman, president, head or pope of the churches in the city or province, then it is time to read again Jesus, Paul and Peter. Those individual members who seek to avoid the institutional structures of religious authority must declare their autonomy from such. If they do not, then the autonomy of the religious authorities will eventually destroy their fellowship with one another as the worldwide body of Christ. Their desire to conform to authorities on earth will endanger their submission to the only Lord and head over all things.

Chapter 11

STINGY GIVING

One of the first evidences of institutional religion shows up at the bank. There is, of course, the evidence of structures of authority that maintain the earthly organization of the religion itself. Organizational structures are set in place in order to maintain the identity of the institution. But in order for order to be maintained, there must be those whose focus it is to preserve the institution

through doctrinal pronouncements. These promoters must be professionals, and thus supported by the institution itself. When salaries determine faithfulness to the institution, then the institution is perpetuated by the full-time professionals, whose salaries depend on the existence of the institution.

The early Jewish disciples came out of a very stringent religious sys-

tem that was funded by the Pharisaical establishment of the day. As the fully supported religious leaders of the establishment, the Pharisees were lovers of money (Lk 16:14). In fact, they were so dominant over the Jews in reference to money that they obligated the children of aged parents to first contribute to the religious establishment—which meant support for the Pharisees—before they considered supporting their own aged parents. They laid guilt on the hearts of the children by pronouncing that the financial contributions of the children be declared as Corban, “*that is to say, given to God*” (Mk 7:11). And when the Corban contribution was “given to God,” we know who profited from the contribution.

When the early disciples obeyed the gospel, they were delivered from this corrupt system of the Pharisees. They even went from legalized contributions of the tithe to contributions that were free-will, that is, given cheerfully out of a heart that was moved by the gospel of grace. The motivation for the contributions of the disciples, therefore, is explained in 2 Corinthians 9:7: “*Let each one give according as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*” This is incarnational giving as Jesus gave Himself to us. It is totally contrary to the compulsive giv-

ing that was taught by the Pharisees.

When one obeyed the gospel and began his journey of incarnational living, giving was no longer a legal tithe according to the Sinai law. Since the early Jewish Christians became “*dead to the law through the body of Christ,*” they were no longer under the law of the tithe (Rm 7:4). They no longer gave according to law, but according to grace. For this reason, those who enforce giving according to law, do not understand the gospel. Laying burdens on the people according to law is contrary to gospel giving. When Paul revealed that we are no longer under law, but under grace (Rm 6:14), he meant that even the tithe according to law was gone. There need be no law for giving when grace moves one beyond what law would require (See 2 Co 8:1-4).

As the body of Christ, a Christian now “*purposes in his own heart*” that which he would give. This is not purposing according to law, but purposing according to gratitude. In this manner, the contribution is not grudgingly given according to law. Nor is the contribution made under compulsion as was the Corban contribution that the Pharisees demanded. Because Christians give out of gratitude, they are thus loved by God because they have given out of their love for God. Whenever contributions are demanded by compulsion, then the “ex-

tractors” steal away the cheerfulness of the giver. And if God loves the cheerful giver who gives out of thanksgiving, then what would be His relationship with the one who gives out of law or compulsion?

We must make this point in reference to contributions that were made to the widows of the early church. We must also make the point of twisted giving that was promoted by the Pharisees and was part of the religious culture of the day. We seek to understand the culture of Pharisaical giving in order to understand how some in the early church took advantage of gospel-motivated giving.

Gospel-motivated giving was contrary to that which was demanded by the Pharisees who sought to be put on the top of the priority list when it came to giving. In declaring the contribution of the children to be Corban—that is, given to the full-time workers first—the early disciples reversed the order. The aged widows came first, and then contributions could go to others.

In the previous statement of Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:7, gospel giving was identified. Stated clearly, it was the gospel of grace that motivated the early disciples to sacrificially give. We see this in Paul’s statement of 2 Corinthians 4:15: “*For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace that is reaching many people may cause*

thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.” Grace is abounding when it shows up in the collection plate.

Because the early disciples had obeyed the gospel of grace in baptism, they sought to give as God had given grace to them through His incarnate Son. Paul wrote that we “*know the things that are freely given to us by God*” (1 Co 2:12). We thus give because we were freely given grace by God. This answers why the early Christians were so eager to give, even from the very beginning of the church in Acts 2.

Now all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they sold their possessions and goods and divided them to all, as everyone had need (At 2:44,45).

Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul. And no one said that any of the things that he possessed was his own. But they had all things in common (At 4:32).

Nor was there any among them who lacked, for as many as were owners of land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold and laid them at the apostles’ feet. And distribution was made to everyone according as each had need (At 4:34,35).

The early disciples were zealous in their sacrificial giving because “**great grace was upon them all**” (At 4:33).

We can only imagine what it would have been like to be in their presence. Because we live in such a materialistic world today wherein possessions are held in high esteem, we wonder how powerful the grace of God can work in one’s heart to give in such a manner as the early Christians. Their gospel-obedient giving was so strong that some, even out of their poverty, were willing to give to those who were suffering from a famine (2 Co 8:1-4). Paul wrote to the Corinthians about what the Philippians had done in their contributions to the famine victims of Judea. The Holy Spirit had Paul record in Scripture the behavior of these incarnate givers in order to spur us on to sacrificial giving as the incarnate Son gave to us.

The Corinthians had become dysfunctional in their promised contributions to the famine victims in Judea. Out of sight, out of mind. They had promised a year before that they would contribute to the need (2 Co 8:10). However, it seems that dysfunctional behavior among them as an organic body had diverted their attention from their responsibility as a part of the worldwide body of Christ to partner in care for the worldwide body. They held up their contributions

while they argued over authority among themselves, debated over the eating of certain foods, and squabbled over tongues and prophecy. All such disorderly behavior among them was contrary to the love that should be expressed by God’s family, both locally and universally. So Paul wrote 2 Corinthians 8 in order to embarrass them in reference to their promised contribution to those they should love in Judea.

In order to further embarrass them by what others were doing in reference to the famine, Paul wrote, “**Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God that has been given to the churches of Macedonia**” (2 Co 8:1). Grace was given through their obedience to the gospel of grace. The response to this grace was overwhelming. The same grace should produce the same response in the hearts of the Corinthians. It should inspire the same response in our hearts today.

Philippi and Thessalonica were both cities of the province of Macedonia. At the time, the disciples who lived in these cities were “*in a great trial of affliction*” (2 Co 8:2). However, out of “*their deep poverty*” they were cheerful givers. They were so willing in their giving that “*beyond their ability they gave of their own accord*” (2 Co 8:3). In fact, Paul wrote that they begged “*us with much ur-*

gency that we would receive the gift” (2 Co 8:4). Gospel givers beg those in need to receive their gift.

All the grace-motivated Macedonians needed was the news that there was a famine in Judea. They then took the initiative to make the contribution, and then deliver it to Paul, Silas and Timothy to take on to Judea. It seems that the evangelists were unaware that the disciples in Thessalonica and Philippi were making the contribution. The Macedonians simply made the contribution because they heard of the need of their brothers in Judea. They then begged the evangelists to take the contribution on to Judea.

When we understand the extent

and willingness to which the early disciples were driven by the gospel of the incarnate Son of God who gave up heaven for us, then we begin to understand the power of the gospel to transform lives. We begin to understand also that the gospel produced a culture of giving that was unparalleled in history. When people live the incarnational life of the Son of God, sacrificial giving is no longer sacrificial. It is natural for those who seek to live incarnationally after the example of the incarnate King. Therefore, we can only imagine that there would be those who would take advantage of such willingness to give sacrificially from the heart.

Chapter 12

MONEY PROBLEMS

Then in their mission travels, Paul, Silas and Timothy, after leaving Philippi, came to the city of Thessalonica. From the province of Macedonia, where the cities of Thessalonica and Philippi were located, a curious financial scenario developed as the body of Christ increased in the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia. The relationship between the Macedonian and Achaian disciples illustrated the relationship between the gospel-driven Macedonians and dysfunctional Achaians in reference to the

universal function of the body of Christ.

From the low income environment of Philippi, to the high income socialites in Thessalonica, the nature of the church in Macedonia was established on the foundation of economic extremes. Nevertheless, the church in both cities caught the vision of gospel-motivated evangelism.

When the gospel was preached in Thessalonica, many were *“persuaded and joined with Paul and Silas, a great multitude of the devout*

Greeks and not a few of the leading women” (At 17:4). The leading women were certainly not financially challenged. In order to help ourselves make our way through the Holy Spirit’s manual on church finances, we must follow the story of the Thes-salonians and Philippians as they reached out to partner in order to evangelize Achaia.

The first chapter of the Achaia’s dysfunctional behavior in reference to finances was addressed when Paul wrote the letter of 2 Corinthians (2 Co 1:1). The letter of 2 Corinthians was evidently written from the province of Macedonia where Paul was at the time on his second visit to Achaia, and specifically to the city of Corinth. In the first chapter of the letter, Paul explained that he had a change of plans while he was still in Asia.

And in this confidence I intended to come to you before [straight from Ephesus] so that you might have a second blessing [of my teaching], and to pass by you [in Achaia] on my way to Macedonia, and to come again out of Macedonia to you, and be helped [supported] by you on my way to Judea (2 Co 1:15:16).

But in order to spare the Achaia’s embarrassment of not having taken up their provincial contribution for the famine victims of Judea that they

promised a year before, Paul changed his plans and went first to Macedonia after leaving Asia (2 Co 1:23; 2:13). From Asia, however, he sent Titus on to Achaia. From Macedonia he wrote the letter of 2 Corinthians to all the Christians in Achaia. In the letter he made several comments about their financial dysfunctions that needed to be corrected before he arrived. If they were not corrected by the time he and some Macedonian brethren arrived in Achaia with him, then both he and the Achaia’s would be embarrassed.

When Titus eventually came from Achaia to Paul in Macedonia to report concerning the “desire, mourning, and zeal” that the Achaia’s had for Paul, Paul was greatly comforted (2 Co 7:6,7). Because of the “church politics” that prevailed in Achaia at the time, Paul was fearful for the reception of Titus. But when Titus arrived from Macedonia, he brought with him great comfort to Paul concerning how he was received in Achaia. Paul was reassured that his first letter to them to correct problems that surrounded different immature personalities was successful.

Paul’s first letter of correction had produced great sorrow in the hearts of the Achaia disciples (2 Co 7:8-12). However, their sorrow over previous dysfunctional behavior was their vindication that they still had a heart for God (2 Co 7:11). Their tre-

mendous reception of Titus was the evidence that their hearts were still right with God, though there were still some among them who were false apostles masquerading themselves as apostles of Christ. Nevertheless, the majority prevailed and the rebellious minority were sidelined.

The Achaians had promised a year before that they would make a combined contribution to give to the famine victims of Judea. But because of their squabbles over church politics, they had not followed through on their promise, and thus needed to be reminded by Titus. Because of some power struggles among the Corinthians, their thinking was diverted. Church politics had plagued their thinking with inward turmoil. But now from Macedonia, Paul sought to encourage them to get their contribution together before he arrived. So he reminded them of the generous givers of Macedonia, which included Christians in both Thessalonica and Philippi.

Paul wrote to all in Achaia, “*We make known to you the grace of God that has been given to the churches of Macedonia*” (2 Co 8:1). This grace was made known in their hearts because of the Macedonians’ response to the needs of those in Judea. So “*in a great trial of affliction, the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty, abounded in the riches of their liberality*” (2 Co 8:2). When hearts

are moved by the heart of God, money becomes only an instrument to bless others who are in need. Giving according to law passes away when gratitude for the gospel takes hold of our hearts.

This is the nature of grace. Grace was given to us when we were in need (Rm 5:8). Grace, therefore, can be manifested in our hearts only when we give as God gave to us. This is the principle that Jesus revealed to the apostles: “*Freely you have received, freely give*” (Mt 10:8). There were no limits to the free gift of the grace of God (Rm 5:15-17; 6:23). There must therefore be no limits to our free giving when we are moved by His free grace. We freely give in abundance because He freely gave His grace in abundance while we were yet in sin (Rm 5:8). We do not forget what the Holy Spirit wrote to the Romans: “*They who receive abundance of grace [that’s us] and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ*” (Rm 5:17).

Paul related to the Achaians that the Macedonian Christians in their deep poverty went beyond what they had previously planned to give (2 Co 8:3). After witnessing their poverty, Paul was apprehensive about receiving their contribution. He was so apprehensive that **the Macedonians had to beg him to receive their contribution** (2 Co 8:4).

Some historians believe that the Macedonians had recently suffered through a devastating earthquake in the region, since earthquakes are common throughout Greece. Regardless of what caused their “deep poverty,” they were freely willing to give to others. This is gospel-motivated giving that is caused by the free gift of God’s grace (2 Co 4:15). Therefore, gospel-motivated people are revealed through their gospel-motivated contributions. Stingy givers have little appreciation for the grace of God by which they are saved.

We must give some credit to the Achaians. A year before they were zealous to make the contribution. But this was before Paul wrote 2 Corinthians. *“I know the willingness of your mind, of which I boast of you to those of Macedonia, that Achaia was ready a year ago. And your zeal has stirred up the majority”* (2 Co 9:2). But they had become either forgetful, or indifferent about carrying through with what they had promised. Their minds were sidetracked by internal turmoil within the fellowship of the disciples. So Paul sent brethren to Achaia to talk specifically about contributions for the famine victims (2 Co 9:3-5). They needed exhortation to turn their dysfunctional lack of contributions into functional action.

In the 2 Corinthian letter Paul reminded the Achaians of his first

mission trip to the area. While in Corinth on his second missionary trip, he supported himself through tentmaking (At 18:1-3). He did so in order not to be a financial burden to them as new converts (2 Co 11:9). It was then that the new converts of Macedonia continued to send support to him in order to make up what his tentmaking business lacked (2 Co 11:9). So Paul had initially preached to them without obligating them to support him. He took pride in the fact that he preached the gospel to them freely. *“As the truth of Christ is in me, no one will stop me from this boasting [in supporting myself] in the regions of Achaia”* (2 Co 11:10).

Some “full-time” preachers today cannot say this about themselves. In fact, there are those who often boast in the fact that they are supported full-time. In the past, we have unfortunately witnessed a few formerly full-time preachers who stopped preaching when their support stopped. The termination of their preaching when their support was terminated proved that their support should have been terminated, for they were not gospel-motivated messengers of the gospel. If one preaches the gospel because he is supported to preach, then he should immediately cease accepting support until he awakens within him the motivation of the heart of God. His motives are contrary to the free gift of

God's grace through the gospel if he is preaching in order to receive a pay check.

Paul's point in the context of 2 Corinthians 11 was to remind the Achaians that when he was in their midst sharing the truth of the gospel with them, someone else was paying the bill. He was the only "Bible" they had, but someone else had to pay for their Bible. He reminded them, "*I robbed other churches, taking wages from them, in order to serve you*" (2 Co 11:8).

The Achaians were financially dysfunctional from the beginning in that they allowed others to pay their preacher. Disciples who continually receive teaching from one who is supported by someone else, will never spiritually grow to the limits to which the gospel can take one. They will always be spiritually dysfunctional and financially crippled because they have not taken ownership of supporting the laborer among them who is worthy of his hire (Lk 10:7; 1 Tm 5:18).

Of course there was a reason why Paul allowed the Achaians to be dysfunctional in this matter when he first arrived in Corinth. There were those among the Achaians who were prophets for profit. So in order to cut off accusations from the profiteering prophets, Paul supported himself. However, he was coming to them

again, thus he reminded them that he would do the same as he did on his first visit, that is, support himself. He wrote,

But what I do [in supporting myself] I will continue to do so that I may cut off opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the matter about which they are boasting (2 Co 11:12).

In their efforts to be supported by the Corinthians, the profiteering prophets among them were "*false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading themselves as apostles of Christ*" (2 Co 11:13).

There is often a slow start in the beginning of the gospel in the hearts of some. However, this was not the case with the Macedonians (See Ph 4:15,16). The Macedonian disciples gave out of their poverty because they sought to live the incarnational life of the One who brought them into His fellowship through the cross. The Achaians, on the other hand, were not yet there. They knew what to do. But the problem was the self-centered false prophets who were yet among them. These false teachers diverted the Achaian's novice thinking away from Paul and the famine victims. They sought the support that should be going to benevolence and the

preaching of the gospel, just as the Pharisees pronounced the support of the children for their aged parents to be Corban (Mk 7:11). For this reason, the masquerading false apostles among them would soon taste the discipline of the rod of the Christ-sent apostle if they did not repent (1 Co 4:21).

What is encouraging about the Achaians was their response to the personal visit of Titus. Their response to the coming of Titus proved that the majority of the disciples in Achaia continued with great love and concern for Paul. After writing the second letter, they corrected their dysfunctional giving by the time he arrived in Corinth on his second visit. From the time Paul wrote the first letter from Asia, and the arrival of Titus from Achaia, to the time he wrote the second letter from Macedonia, they had repented. Though they were about five years in the faith after being converted from temple idolatry, they were willing to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Pt 3:18).

The Achaia story teaches us a

very important lesson in reference to spiritual growth in kingdom business. At the beginning of their journey in discipleship of Jesus, the Achaians were not where they wanted to be, or should be. They were diverted by “ministry thieves” who sought to draw attention to themselves. These false apostles sought to divert the novice Christians’ attention away from the famine victims in Judea in order to extract support for themselves. They were self-centered profiteering preachers among them who wanted the money for themselves, and thus they possibly urged the Achaians not to send their money off to the foreign country of Judea. Whenever a preacher behaves in this manner, he has identified himself as a profiteering prophet who masquerades as a true messenger of the word of God. But such people are as Paul identified them: “*False apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading themselves as apostles of Christ*” (2 Co 11:13). Such profiteers existed in the first century. They will exist today.

Chapter 13

PROFITEERING PROPHETS

Remember those women of wealth in Thessalonica (At 17:4)? They had not lost their wealth by the time Paul wrote his last epistle, which was directed to Timothy. When Paul

finalized the letter, he wrote of one preacher who was, as the Pharisees, a lover of money (Lk 16:13). So Paul established his legacy in Scripture since the first century: “*Demas has*

forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed to Thessalonica" (2 Tm 4:10). It was not stated that Demas was afraid to die with Paul in Rome. He "loved this present world." And in being a lover of money, he went where he could find some soft-hearted wealthy sisters. He headed for Thessalonica.

Profit-seeking preachers often harp Sunday after Sunday about "tithing." "Don't rob God," is a statement that is often voiced from those who are preachers for hire. It was because of this that Paul worked as a tentmaker in Corinth. What he financially lacked was supplied by those from Macedonia. The problem in the Corinthian society was that the city was laden with prophets for hire. Paul did not want to be identified with any of these profiteers.

Simon the sorcerer was one of these people in the city of Samaria. When Philip went to Samaria, his presence threatened the financial status of Simon. When "*the people with one accord gave attention to those things that Philip spoke,*" then there were problems for Simon (At 8:6). It was then that Simon, who claimed "*that he was someone great,*" became jealous (At 8:9). As the people turned to the gospel that Philip preached, Simon saw that his financial base was in trouble.

Simon "*had for a long time astonished them with his magical arts*"

(At 8:11). But this means of support was coming to a close. Therefore, he tried to make a financial investment in the ability of the Christ-sent apostles of Peter and John, who later came to Samaria. He offered them money for their gift to impart the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit in order that he too could do the same for a profit (At 8:18). But the Holy Spirit judged his motives as "wickedness" (At 8:22). He was full of bitterness because his means for financial gain in Samaria had been destroyed through the preaching of the gospel (At 8:23).

Religious profiteering also existed in the city of Ephesus. When the gospel was preached in the city, "*many who believed kept coming, confessing ...*" (At 19:18). "*So the word of God grew mightily and prevailed [over religious superstition]*" (At 19:20). This created a significant problem for those who profited from religion. Demetrius, who made idol shrines, led a rebellion against the gospel preacher. He rightly accused, "*Not only is this our craft in danger of falling [financially] into disrepute,*" but also the center of our religion, the great temple of Diana (At 19:27). So when the other religious profiteers heard this, "*they were full of wrath*" (At 19:28). And so are all those whose pay check is endangered by the preaching of the gospel.

In Corinth, the same financial scenario existed among religious leaders as the case in Samaria with Simon. Profiteering preachers pronounced oracles for gain. In Ephesus they made idols for gain. But when the gospel arrived through Paul, evidently some of these profiteering prophets did the same as Simon. They joined themselves to the body of saints, and subsequently sought to continue on with their profiteering by taking advantage of the novice disciples in Achaia. They were taking advantage of the body of Christ, and such called for extreme measures if it were not corrected by the time a Christ-sent apostle arrived in town.

The Christ-sent apostle was coming to the church in Corinth with the rod of discipline. This was not a hard sermon, but physical discipline. It was discipline that came upon brothers Hymenaeus and Alexander whom Paul “*delivered to Satan so that they might learn not to blaspheme*” (1 Tm 1:20). We should ask Ananias and Sapphira about the power of a Christ-sent apostle (See At 5:1-11). And then we should ask the false prophet Bargesus (At 13:10,11). When Paul was coming to Corinth with the rod of a Christ-sent apostle, there was coming more than judgments made during a church business meeting.

There were those in Corinth who were taking financial advantage of the

new Christians who had not been in the faith for more than five or six years. After reviewing both the law of God, and logic to support a laborer (1 Co 9:1-11), Paul came to a very important statement in reference to what was going on among the Achaiaans. He introduced his instructions of rebuke with a question, “*If we sowed to you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we reap your material things?*” (1 Co 9:11). And then he stated,

***If others are partakers of this right over you** [to support them], do we not more [have a right to be supported by you]? Nevertheless, we have not used this right [to be supported], but endure all things so that we should not hinder the gospel of Christ [by being accused of preaching for money] (1 Co 9:12).*

There were others among the Corinthians who were being supported by the Corinthians. These were those who made slanderous reports against Paul. In order to guard their support from the Corinthians, they took the Diotrophes’ route of slandering all possible opposition (1 Co 10:30; see 3 Jn 10). Paul was fearful that when he came to them, “*I will not find you as I wish*” (2 Co 12:20). He was fearful that if he came and found among them strife, jealousy,

wrath, disputes, slanderings, whisperings, conceits and tumults, then he knew, *“My God will humble me among you, and I will mourn over many who have already sinned and have not repented”* (2 Co 12:20,21).

His coming to them would be a situation as that of Annanias and Sapphira who dropped dead before the disciples in Jerusalem. There was great sorrow over the fact, but God took the matter into His own hands by taking their life from them before the whole church. In view of such an incident in the Jerusalem church, Paul was fearful that if he came to the Corinthians, and stood before those who slanderously reported of things by which they would exalt themselves, the same might occur in the Corinthian church. They behaved in such a manner in order to retain the financial support of those over whom they had deceived. But they were taking financial advantage of the body of Christ. Such financial profiteering at the expense of innocent sheep could not continue.

The new Christians were so naive concerning these matters that those they had supported were involved in idolatrous temple behavior. They were involved in *“uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness”* (2 Co 12:21). We once heard the complaint of some disciples who could not get rid of their preacher. He had com-

mitted adultery with four of the sisters of the church, but they still could not rid themselves of him. We must not think that these were only first century problems in Corinth. If one would look around in the religious world today, the same unrighteousness prevails among those who are preachers for hire.

We must always be reminded of the situation that prevailed during the time of Eli and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas (1 Sm 2). The Holy Spirit identified these two sons to be *“sons of rebellion”* (1 Sm 2:12). *“They did not know the Lord”* (1 Sm 2:12). They behaved as profiteering preachers today. In other words, they financially took advantage of the people by extracting gain from what the people were obligated to do in obedience to God.

In the case of Hophni and Phinehas, they took advantage of the peoples' offerings. They wanted to take the offerings before they were properly boiled in the pot (1 Sm 2:15). They wanted the meat raw. When the people said they could have as much as they wanted after it was properly boiled, Hophni and Phinehas said, *“No, but you will give it now, and if not, I will take it by force”* (1 Sm 2:16). Samuel recorded of the behavior of these two preachers: *“Therefore, the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord, for men ab-*

horred the offering of the Lord” (1 Sm 2:16).

With some religious groups, it is sometimes as faithful people today abhorring attendance that they are obligated to do. They abhor attendance because the profiteering preacher always preaches on tithing in an effort to extract their money for his own coffer. One church group was so guilt ridden with the preacher’s intimidation concerning the offering that they decided to get together and scrape up enough money to buy the preacher a vehicle. So they contributed together only enough money to buy the preacher a small Citi Gulf (similar to a Volkswagen Beetle). With great pride they presented the vehicle as a surprise gift to the preacher. But the preacher took the little Citi Gulf down to a local vehicle dealership and traded it for a new Chrysler. He did not want to be seen driving around in a humble little Citi Gulf.

We know the end of the story of Hophni and Phinehas. God first went after Eli for not disciplining his two sons in righteousness.

Why do you kick at My sacrifice and at My offering that I have commanded in My habitation, and honor your sons more than Me, to make yourselves fat with the best of all the offerings of Israel My people? (1 Sm 2:29).

God then went after the two sons. When it was too late for the two sons, the sons “*did not hearken to the voice of their father, because **the Lord desired to slay them***” (1 Sm 2:25). And such the Lord did.

It would not have been a strange thing, therefore, if Paul came to Corinth with the rod of discipline. There would be some delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh in order that they might be taught. People as Hophni and Phinehas must be taught not to mess with the body of the incarnate Son of God. Though in this present age those unscrupulous profiteers who take advantage of the innocent sheep of God are not punished directly, they will eventually face their judgment when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven.

Chapter 14

MINISTRY THIEVES

Throughout our years of work around the world, we have had the privilege of working with several different ministry outreaches. With the

help of many volunteers, first we focused on those ministries that were first evangelistic, and then with efforts to build up the body of Christ world-

wide. We mention these ministries in order to establish a context that seems to have happened in Achaia in reference to the ministry of Paul. The principle of “ministry theft” is based on either the unwillingness, or inability, of some who have difficulty in initiating and working their own ministry. Instead of initiating their own ministry, they would seek to take over the ministry of someone else. This seems to have been the case with some in Corinth.

As we study through what happened in Achaia, specifically in the city of Corinth, we gain a better understanding of those who have difficulty exercising self-initiative in starting and maintaining their own ministry. There was ministry theft going on after Paul left Corinth to go on to other areas. When he wrote back a few years later after leaving Corinth, he identified what was happening, and thus, he defined for us some things that would help us as leaders to approach and correct those who would seek to take over the ministry of someone else against their will.

A. Initiation of the work:

It was on Paul’s second missionary journey that he made his way to Corinth. This may have been in A.D. 51 in his efforts to be in Corinth for the Isthmian Games where athletes

gathered from across the Roman Empire for competition in games that were similar to the Olympic Games.

After preaching the gospel in the city of Athens, “*Paul departed from Athens and came to Corinth*” (At 18:1). It was in Corinth that he met Aquila and Priscilla, with whom he joined in ministry of the word to all Achaia, supporting himself with them in the tentmaking business (At 18:2,3).

During his initial stay, “*he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks*” (At 18:4). The team of three were later joined by Silas and Timothy who came from Macedonia (At 18:5). Regardless of some opposition from the unbelieving Jews, “*many of the Corinthians hearing, believed and were baptized*” (At 18:8). Paul subsequently stayed in Corinth for a protracted period of time. “*He continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them*” (At 18:11).

He could have possibly stayed longer than the year and a half mentioned in Acts 18:11. After stating the period of one and a half years, Luke also stated in verse 18, “*Now Paul still remained there a good while.*” After this, “*he took leave from the brethren and sailed for Syria*” (At 18:18).

We would thus credit the initial

preaching and establishment of the disciples in Corinth to the initiative of Paul who initially worked in the city. We do not know how long he worked until he eventually encountered Aquila and Priscilla, but it was possibly soon after his arrival. We do not know when Silas and Timothy eventually followed him from Macedonia to join in the ministry. But in reference to the problem that later developed, we must give the apostle Paul credit for initiating the preaching of the gospel in the city of Corinth. He stood alone as he stood up and preached the gospel.

B. Entrance of ministry thieves:

When Paul left Corinth for Syria on his way to Jerusalem, there arose among the disciples in Corinth the problem of ministry theft about which he later referred in 1 & 2 Corinthians. When he wrote in reference to those who sought to assume credit for the existence of the Corinthian disciples, he introduced this subject with the following statement:

*Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men, for you see your calling, brethren, how that not many **wise** men after the flesh, not many **mighty**, not many **noble**, are called (1 Co 1:25,26).*

Those who would seek to take ownership of the ministry of others are puffed up. They are not wise in their efforts, nor mighty in works they claim for themselves, and thus they lack nobility. If one would claim the ministry of another without giving honor to the one to whom honor is due for initiating the ministry, then he is not wise, mighty or noble. This helps us understand the personality of those who would seek to take over the ministry of others, and thus claim the ministry for themselves. This would help explain the character of the preacher who follows a hard working preacher who labored before him. If the succeeding preacher takes credit for the work of the preacher who went before him, then he is not wise.

As we work our way through Paul's description of ministry theft, it is necessary to notice his sarcasm. For example, those who steal the ministry of others think they are wise. They think they are mighty for their works. The result is that they have deceived themselves into thinking that they are noble people. But they are not. The very fact that they seek to take ownership of someone else's labors identifies their true character.

So Paul begins his rebuke of these takeover artists with a question: "For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of man that is in him?" (1 Co 2:11). There were

those among the Corinthians who knew only the things of men. But in contrast to worldly wisdom, Paul wrote, “*Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God*” (1 Co 2:12). God had given the Holy Spirit to Paul and the other apostles “*so that we [apostles] might know the things that are freely given to us by God*” (1 Co 2:12). Paul thus lays the foundation of contrast between those who would claim that the human spirit that is within them is the Holy Spirit, but is actually the wisdom of their own spirit.

The Holy Spirit was not in them to lead them by inspiration to reveal the truth of God. They had only their spirit of understanding on which to depend. And in their claim to have the Holy Spirit to reveal “the things” that were delivered to the Corinthians by the Spirit-inspired revelation of the apostle Paul, they were arrogantly trying to compare themselves with a Holy Spirit-inspired apostle. Paul would later refer to such people as “*false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading themselves as apostles of Christ*” (2 Co 11:15). He later instructed the misled Corinthians, “*And no wonder, for Satan masquerades himself as a messenger of light*” (2 Co 11:14). He was saying to the gullible Corinthians that they should not be easily led astray

by those who are so presumptuous as to claim to have the same power as a Christ-sent apostle.

We must not take lightly those in Corinth who were seeking to lay claim to the work of God that came through the Spirit-inspired work of Paul. We must not be surprised that such people also work today among the people of God. When there are those who seek to steal the ministry of others by self-appointing themselves to be somebody, we must identify the source of the problem. Paul later identified the source in Corinth,

Therefore, it is no great thing if his [Satan’s] ministers also masquerade themselves as ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works (2 Co 11:13).

C. Character of ministry thieves:

In addressing the Corinthian disciples as a whole, and in general all the saints throughout the province of Achaia (2 Co 1:1), Paul identified a problem that existed among the saints. “*And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to carnal, as to infants in Christ*” (1 Co 3:1). They were behaving as babies. “*I have fed you with milk, and not with meat, for until now you were not able to receive it. Even now you are still not able*” (1 Co 3:2). Therefore,

he concluded, “*you are still carnal*” (1 Co 3:3).

If they questioned his assessment, he asked them to answer a simple question: “*For where there is envying and strife, are you not carnal and walking as worldly men?*” (1 Co 3:4). So in the general context of their behavior as infants, he stated, “*Brethren, do not be children in thinking. However, in malice be babes, but in thinking be mature*” (1 Co 14:20).

Paul initially laid the foundation of the gospel in Corinth, and thus no other person could ever again lay claim to having started the church in Corinth. “*I have laid the foundation and another builds on it*” (1 Co 3:10). He then stated that someone must lay the foundation of Jesus Christ. If others come along and try to lay any foundation other than Jesus Christ, especially a foundation upon their own personality, then it is a foundation of wood, hay and straw (1 Co 3:12). Paul infers, therefore, that the day of trial will determine if the foundation he laid, which was “gold, silver, precious stones,” would be true, and the foundation of others, which was “wood, hay, straw,” would be unstable.

If churches are built on the foundation of carnally thinking men—laying the foundation of a church on one’s own person is carnal—then the works of such ministries will be

burned up. Paul reminded the Corinthians that his work would permeate the fire of persecution because it was built on the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, “*If anyone’s work endures that he has built, he will receive a reward*” if he builds on Jesus (1 Co 3:14).

Paul’s warning for the carnal among them was certainly appropriate: “*Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this world, let him become a fool so that he may be wise*” (1 Co 3:18). Those who are arrogant have a difficult time building on the foundation of Jesus Christ because they seek to focus the attention of others on themselves.

As a Christ-sent apostle, Paul was a servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God (1 Co 4:1). He reminded the Corinthians, therefore, that “*it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy*” (1 Co 4:2). He was assuming that the disciples of Corinth could make a decision concerning the character of those who would claim to be Christ-sent apostles as he. They were claiming to be apostles, but they were masquerading as such, and thus, the masquerading apostles identified themselves to be untrustworthy.

Every preacher who wears a mask is not trustworthy. Some hide behind the mask of smooth and fair

speech. They sound good, but inwardly they are wolves. Some hide in the deception of false miracles. They perform well before mesmerized audiences, but they are leaders in wolves' clothing who are seeking the money of the people.

Though the efforts of the thieves urged the disciples to cast judgment upon Paul, Paul reminded them, "*But to me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not judge my own self*" (1 Co 4:3). Paul ignored their judgment of him because he was cautious not even to judge himself. Only God knows our hearts better than we know ourselves.

Jesus only will be our final judge (At 17:30,31). When He comes, He will "*bring to light the hidden things of darkness and will manifest the motives of the hearts*" (1 Co 4:5). The untrustworthy accusers of Paul would eventually be exposed. Unfortunately, at the time they would be exposed, it would be too late in reference to their salvation.

The ministry thieves in Corinth were puffed up, and subsequently judged Paul in comparison to themselves. But Paul revealed their behavior by his exhortation "*that none of you take pride in one against another*" (1 Co 4:6). Ministry thieves always find themselves comparing themselves with those whose minis-

try they have claimed ownership. In the second letter, Paul specifically identified the character and behavior of such people:

For we dare not class or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise (2 Co 10:12).

Those who seek to take credit for the ministry of others often marginalize the efforts of those who came before them. In a subtle rebuke of such people, Paul wrote, "*We are not boasting of things beyond our measure, that is, of other men's labors*" (2 Co 10:15). Those who assume control over the work of others seek to minimize the efforts of those who went before them. They assume that they are preaching new things to the audience, claiming and wondering why the audience has never before heard what they are preaching. They forget that their audience often has a short-term memory problem in reference to the hard labors of the previous preacher.

Those who have gone before them have gone on to other regions. Paul went on from Corinth "*to preach the gospel in regions beyond you, and not to boast in another man's realm of accomplishment*" (2 Co 10:16).

This was Paul's subtle challenge to those who came in behind him in Corinth and sought to take ownership of his ministry in Corinth. Paul was the initial preacher of the gospel in Corinth. These boastful preachers should do as he did by initiating their own work somewhere else.

Paul went on to other regions to preach the gospel in order that he preach Christ where Christ had not been preached. And because he was the initial messenger of the gospel in Corinth, as well as in virgin regions to which he went after Corinth, those who came after him could lay no claim to being the original preachers in Corinth. After Paul preached the gospel in Corinth, no one ever again could claim to be the father of the faith of the Corinthians.

Some preachers need to remember, "*For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends*" (2 Co 10:18). Before one starts bragging about his work in the Lord, he needs to remember that there is no commendation of one's work outside the Lord. Before one starts taking credit for those he may baptize, he needs to consider the fact that someone may have preceded him in teaching the baptized person. For this reason, those who use baptism as a sign of their own successes may be trying to take ownership of another's work who before them la-

bored in the same area. We must keep in mind that we have the duty to plant and water. God gets all the glory for the increase (1 Co 3:6).

And continuing with his challenge to the ministry thieves, Paul referred to those who were boasting among the disciples. Notice how he sarcastically rebuked them in the following statement: "*We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are honored, but we are despised*" (1 Co 4:10). Paul's sarcastic rebuke of some in Corinth was that they claimed to be wise, strong, and thus sought honor. If they would be as Paul, they would claim to be "*fools for Christ's sake.*"

Paul did not write to shame the entire church (1 Co 4:14). As a whole, he dealt with them as his children in the faith. But in doing so, he sought to shame the false apostles among them. He reminded the whole, "*For though you have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you have not many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I have brought you forth through the gospel*" (1 Co 4:15). It was through his initial preaching of the gospel that motivated them to obey the gospel. The gospel did not originate with Aquila and Priscilla. It did not originate with the masquerading apostles. In Corinth and all Achaia it originated with the preaching of the gospel by Paul.

When ministry thieves seek to take ownership of someone else's ministry, they will bring accusations against the father of the ministry. They, as Diotrefes, will slanderously accuse the father of the ministry of some lie or immoral behavior in order to gain the confidence of those over whom they seek to have control (See 3 Jn 10). So there were those among the Corinthians who accused Paul of being weak, and thus he could not stand against them in their honored positions that they assumed for themselves among the disciples. *"Now some are arrogant, as though I would not come to you"* (1 Co 4:18). Where the arrogant were wrong was that they thought Paul would not come. Paul wrote, *"But I will come to you shortly"* (1 Co 4:19).

He would come to them, but when he did, there would be no debates with words. He continued, *"And I will know, not the speech of those who are arrogant, but the power"* (1 Co 4:19). He was coming with the rod of discipline of a Christ-sent apostle. The Corinthians had to make a choice as to whether they wanted him to come with the power of the rod of discipline, or as he formerly came to them in a spirit of meekness (1 Co 4:21).

Since the ministry thieves had formerly experienced the power that God unleashed through a Christ-sent

apostle, we would assume that they would be shaking in fear at what power Paul could unleash on them when he came. In a second letter of warning that he wrote from Macedonia, he reminded them, *"Truly the signs of an apostle were worked among you in all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds"* (2 Co 12:12).

Paul was coming, but he wrote that repentance must occur before he arrived. *"For I fear,"* he warned, *"that perhaps when I come, I will not find you as I wish, and that I will be found by you to be as you do not wish"* (2 Co 12:20). Because he knew that God would obligate him to exercise the power of physical discipline in order to protect the body of His Son, Paul delayed his coming to them until they sorted out the arrogant false apostles among them. He wrote from Macedonia, *"Moreover, I call God as a witness to my soul, that in order to spare you, I did not return [immediately] to Corinth"* (2 Co 1:23).

He did not return according to his original plans to go directly from Asia. Instead, he went on to Macedonia in order to give them time to repent. If he had come directly from Asia as he originally planned, then he would have found them in the quagmire of their immaturity. God then would have delivered some unto the destruction of the flesh (See 1 Co 5:5).

Our immaturity is sometimes revealed when the temptation of money presents itself to our carnal nature. When there are those who come through with great sums of money in search of a ministry, they first try to purchase preachers. If a preacher can be bought with full-time support, then they will seek to purchase his ministry with their money.

No few preachers have been bought in the efforts of some to capture a ministry. This is especially true in developing world economies. We have witnessed the loss of freedom on the part of many faithful servants who sold themselves and their ministries as Balaam to the highest bidder (2 Pt 2:15). They subsequently preached the message of their supporters, and changed their ministry and preaching to conform to the desires of those who knew little about the field in which they labored.

The arrogant false apostles in Corinth saw the money, and thus they sought the support. Paul rebuked the entire group of disciples for allowing

these false apostles to take advantage of them in reference to supporting them (1 Co 9:12). He embarrassed them by reminding them that though they were his children in the faith, they did not offer to support him while he was with them. Maybe they did not offer to support Paul because they knew that he could not be bought. He would not change his message in order to conform to their desires. He thus remained free from the strings of their support in order to preach the gospel without the meddling influence of a pay check.

Churches are often gullible in reference to supporting those who can be bought. Paul could not be bought, and thus when he came to the Corinthians again, he would not receive their support. And in the context of discussing this matter of financial support with the Corinthians, he concluded, *“For though I am free from [the support] of all men, I have made myself a bondservant to all, so that I might gain the more”* (1 Co 9:19). Not bad advice.

Chapter 15

IDLE SPONGES

Living the gospel means more than believing the truth of the gospel. In his example before those to whom he formerly preached the gospel in Ephesus, the apostle Paul reminded

the church leaders that if one would manifest himself as a Christian before others, then he must work with his hands in order to support himself. While he was preaching the gospel in

Ephesus, Paul later reminded the leaders that he did just that: “*You yourselves know that these hands have ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me*” (At 20:34). This is part of living the gospel that one obeys.

There was more to working with one’s hands to support one’s self in order not to be a burden to others. “*I have showed you all things,*” Paul said to the church leaders, “*that by laboring as this you must help the weak*” (At 20:35). Paul supported himself with his own hands throughout most of his mission to preach the gospel (See At 18:3). But he did so in order that he might be able to leave a gospel example to help the poor.

There were gospel principles behind his labors. He wrote to Timothy the following exhortation in reference to the responsibility of the Christian to work:

But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tm 5:8).

These are serious principles in reference to one taking ownership of his responsibility to provide for his own necessities, and those of his household. In the preceding statement, it was more than providing for

one’s self. One also had the responsibility to provide for those of his own house, as well as have the opportunity to give to the poor. If one does not work in order to provide at least for his own household, then he has denied the faith. If one would live the gospel of Jesus, therefore, he must work.

Some in Thessalonica fell short in this responsibility. They did so because they misunderstood Paul’s teaching in reference to the final coming of Jesus. In the first letter that he wrote to the Thessalonian disciples, Paul made the following statement:

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord will not go before those who have fallen asleep (1 Th 4:15).

When Paul wrote concerning the final coming of the Lord Jesus, the thinking of some in Thessalonica went wild. For some reason, they thought that Paul was speaking of Jesus’ coming in their lifetime, if not immediately. They subsequently quit their jobs and prepared for the end.

Because some quit their jobs, a serious dysfunctional social order developed among the members of the church in Thessalonica. Some quit their jobs and waited for the end. However, not everyone misunder-

stood Paul's reference to the final coming of the Lord. They had some sense about the matter, and thus they continued on with their jobs of working with their hands to support themselves and their families. But there were some who were either misguided, or simply somewhat lazy. They seized the opportunity to live off the labors of other brethren. In doing so, **they gave up their right to remain in fellowship with the church.**

By the time Paul wrote the second letter to the Thessalonians, some in Thessalonica had "denied the faith." They did not deny the faith by believing and teaching some heretical doctrine. They denied the faith through their laziness. When we read the Holy Spirit's correction of their dysfunctional life-style, we are reminded of the example that Paul revealed to the leaders of the church in Ephesus. We learn that obedience to and living the gospel is more than doctrinal matters. His was an example of gospel behavior that went far beyond the waters of baptism.

Paul began his rebuke of the lazy members among the Thessalonians with a commendation: "*We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you both do and will do the things we command you*" (2 Th 3:4). Now here is one of those commands:

Now we command you, brethren, in

*the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you **withdraw yourselves** from every brother who **walks disorderly** and not after the **tradition** that he received from us" (2 Th 3:6).*

Unfortunately, this is one statement of Scripture that has been greatly misused and applied. Paul was saying nothing about doctrinal matters. It is unfortunate that many have failed to understand that this "command" about which Paul wrote was not in reference to what we commonly refer to as "doctrine." He was referring to how we would live the gospel. Their disorderly walk was in reference to how they behaved, not primarily what they believed in reference to the truth.

In the passage, Paul used the word "tradition," not doctrine, though what he is discussing may be considered doctrine. It is not doctrine according to our common understanding of the word. The tradition that the Thessalonians received from Paul was the behavioral example that he left with the church in Ephesus. This was the "doctrine" that "*these hands have ministered to my necessities*" (At 20:34). This was the gospel life-style that Paul left with the church in both Ephesus and Thessalonica. He explained,

*For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, **for we did not be-***

have ourselves disorderly among you, nor did we eat any man's bread without paying for it. But we worked with labor and hardship night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you (2 Th 3:7,8).

It was not that Paul did not have a right to be supported by Christians. But he, Silas and Timothy worked at tentmaking in order to “*make ourselves an example to you to follow us*” (2 Th 3:9). The three evangelists journeyed from Philippi to Thessalonica. It is true that the Philippian jailor and Lydia “*sent once and again*” in order to make up where the tentmaking business did not provide enough support when the evangelists arrived in Thessalonica (Ph 4:16). But the context of 2 Thessalonians 3 is not about Paul’s initial arrival in Thessalonica. He was referring to the time after the first disciples obeyed the gospel and the church was established. After the church was established, Paul gave an example to the new Thessalonian Christians as he gave to those in Corinth. It was a principle of gospel living that must be assumed by everyone who would obey the gospel in baptism.

Therefore, Paul reminded the Thessalonians, “*For even when we were with you we commanded you this, that if anyone is not willing to work, neither let him eat*” (2 Th

3:10). We search through the word of God in order to find all sorts of commands. But we often overlook this command. And it is obedience to this command that will determine our right to have fellowship with the body of Christ.

Paul began his correction of the disorderly among the Thessalonians by saying that in their fellowship with one another, something was out of order. The word “disorderly” in verse 6 is a military term. It was used in the military of the Roman army to refer to a soldier who was marching out-of-step with the rest of the soldiers. **The person who is not working with his hands in order to support himself and those of his family is marching out-of-step.** The point is that he is marching out-of-step with something that defines the order of one marching in step with the group. This context is teaching that each Christian must take responsibility for providing for his own needs. The preacher has a right to be supported by the whole. But Paul, Silas and Timothy did not exercise this right in Thessalonica, nor in Corinth (2 Th 3:9).

“*Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel*” (1 Co 9:14). It is necessary that we clarify an important point in reference to this statement. The passage states

that one has a right to receive support if he is **“preaching the gospel.”** This would be the right for support of the evangelist or missionary **who is going forth to preach the gospel to the unbelievers.** He has a right to receive support from the church, because he must take no support from the unbelievers (3 Jn 7,8).

The gospel is not preached to those who have already obeyed the gospel. When Paul, Silas and Timothy left Philippi and went on a mission trip to Thessalonica, the Philippians assumed their responsibility to support the three evangelists in Thessalonica. But when Paul, Silas and Timothy experienced the fruit of preaching the gospel, they did not *“eat any man’s bread without paying for it”* (2 Th 3:8). **They did not take up a contribution from the unbelievers when they preached the gospel.** However, when believers were brought forth from their preaching of the gospel, it was then that the evangelists paid their own bill at the local restaurant.

The above teaching was emphasized by John. Listen to this:

*For they [evangelists as Paul, Silas and Timothy] went forth for the sake of the Name, **taking nothing from the Gentiles.** Therefore, we ought to show hospitality [support] to such men so that we might be fellow work-*

ers for the truth [of the gospel] (3 Jn 7,8).

The Philippians obeyed in this support of traveling evangelists when the evangelists went from their presence to Thessalonica. But when there were those who were born again in Thessalonica, these new Christians had a responsibility to support the evangelists as did the Philippians. This the Thessalonians evidently did when the evangelists went on to Athens and Corinth (See 2 Co 11:9). But while Paul, Silas and Timothy were resident teachers of the new disciples in Thessalonica, they did not receive support from the new Christians. They did not receive support lest they be accused of preaching for money.

What the evangelists did was an example for the new Christians in Thessalonica. Some, however, did not follow this example, and subsequently they took advantage of the good hearts of some leading (wealthy) women (At 17:4). Some evidently saw an opportunity for money, or possibly willingly twisted Paul’s teaching on the final coming. They subsequently convinced others that Jesus was coming immediately in His final coming. So they started living off the labors of others.

When one can work, and there is work available, but he will not work, then he cannot be in fellow-

ship with the church. This is Paul's "command" in 2 Thessalonians 3:6. If one will not work, then those who are working are under the mandate that they not feed the lazy brother (2 Th 3:10). This may seem harsh, but the point is that the brother who seeks to live off the labors of another who is working with his hands, **has denied the faith** (1 Tm 5:8). If one feeds, or gives a loan to a brother who will never repay it because he is not working, then the one who feeds the dysfunctional brother is enabling him to continue in his denial of the faith.

Because gospel living saints are seeking to live the incarnational life of the One who gave everything for them, they are often easy targets for clever people to take advantage of their soft hearts.

There were some wealthy women in Thessalonica. We can imagine how some opportunistic beggars would easily take advantage of such women who were new in the faith. The Holy Spirit in this harsh judgment of the beggars never blamed the wealthy sisters. On the contrary, the Spirit went right where the problem rested. Church beggars were marching out-of-step with those who were struggling to live the gospel. Be-

cause they were taking advantage of those who sought to live the heart of God, they needed to be starved out, and then pronounced out of the fellowship of the body of Christ. They had given up their right to remain in fellowship with those who were seeking to incarnationally live the heart of God.

In the command of 2 Thessalonians 3:6, those who were working with their own hands were commanded to disfellowship from their presence those who denied the faith by not working with their own hands as Paul, Silas and Timothy. They had been given an example of work. But they were disobedient to the example, and thus disobedient to the ethic of working with one's own hands in order to support himself and his family.

Paul concluded, "*For we hear that there are some among you who walk disorderly, **not working at all, but are busybodies***" (2 Th 3:11). If a brother can work, but does not work when there is work, then he is a busybody that must be cast out of the fellowship of the body. "*Now those who are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, **that with quietness they work and eat their own bread***" (2 Th 3:12).

Chapter 16

CHALLENGED LEADERSHIP

We would estimate that the events that transpired in the case of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 took place approximately five years after the events of Acts 2. Though we are estimating the lapse of time according to our chronology of the events that were recorded by Luke, we conclude that some time had passed. The apostles remained in Jerusalem for about fifteen years after the Pentecost of Acts 2. They remained in Jerusalem about ten years after the death of these two disciples.

Judging from the harshness of the punishment of the husband and wife in this case, enough time had transpired since Acts 2 for many disciples to become somewhat complacent, if not competitive with the leadership of the apostles. Or possibly, there were some coming into the fellowship of the church who were diluting the moral standard of the gospel. In this case, we would judge that there had been no change in the moral integrity of these two who dropped dead in the presence of many witnesses.

Therefore, a review of the dysfunctional lack of moral change in the behavior of Ananias and Sapphira fits into our survey of problems that faced

the early disciples. In this situation, the integrity of the church before the community was brought into question. If the community of early witnesses of the disciples saw no change in their moral behavior, then the church would simply be considered just another sect of Judaism. If the gospel motivated no moral change, then the power of the gospel would be questioned by the community.

The events that transpired made everyone think twice before they joined themselves to the apostles. In the events leading up to what occurred, Luke recorded, “*And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection*” (At 4:33). And then after the expiration of the husband and wife, he again recorded,

*And by the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. **And the rest did not dare join with them** [the apostles], but the people highly esteemed them (At 5:12,13).*

People did not seek to join in the leadership positions of the apostles because they publicly witnessed God’s confirmation of their leadership. They did not question the lead-

ership of the apostles because God miraculously confirmed them to be His men. As God had confirmed Moses, He confirmed the apostles as His designated leadership among the early disciples in Jerusalem.

It was not that Ananias and Sapphira were without warning concerning the power that God could unleash through the apostles. They were not ignorant of the confirming power that God worked through the apostles in order to initially ground the early establishment of the church. They simply became complacent, and subsequently thought they could gain notoriety by their supposed sacrificial gift.

There were some in Corinth who tried to do the same in reference to the incarnational living of the apostle Paul. They boasted of their sacrifices. Their motive was to marginalize the leadership influence of Paul among the Achaians by boasting of their own sacrifices. Though the apostles who had left everything for Jesus (Mk 10:28), they could not embarrass Paul who also left all for Jesus (Ph 3:8).

In order to embarrass the presumptuous false apostles in Corinth, Paul gave a brief survey of the hardships that he endured because of his preaching the gospel (2 Co 11:16-29). We do not know all the motives of Ananias, but at least he wanted to give a show of his supposed dedication

through a great sacrifice. But when one starts comparing sacrifices in order to claim notoriety, or to compete with God's established leadership, he is in trouble.

Paul would say to Ananias, "*But in whatever anyone else is bold—I speak foolishly—I am bold also*" (2 Co 11:21). Paul knew that boasting of trials in the flesh was foolishness. Nevertheless, because of those as Ananias who were in Corinth, he wrote, "*Seeing that many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also*" (2 Co 11:18). And he did in order to shame those who would give the pretense of offering a onetime sacrifice to the Lord in order to be exalted. Ananias sought to offer a onetime sacrifice in order to be acclaimed sacrificial. But the apostles and Paul offered the sacrifice of their entire lives. If one would seek to lead because of his sacrifices, he should take note of what Ananias tried to do. He lied concerning his sacrifice, but more importantly, his motives were carnal.

God struck down presumptuous want-to-be leaders in the early establishment of national Israel after the Israelites came out of Egyptian captivity. Any rebellion against the authority of Moses was severely punished. When Aaron and Miriam questioned the authority of Moses, "*the anger of the Lord was kindled against them*" (Nm 12:9). The "*cloud departed from*

off the tabernacle,” and “*Miriam became leprous*” (Nm 12:10). When Kohath, Datham and Abiram challenged the authority and leadership of Moses, the earth opened up and swallowed them and their families (Nm 16). When God makes a paradigm shift in His work among men, He is serious about anyone who might question the leaders who are His representatives whom He designates to initiate the shift. After Ananias and Sapphira publicly fell dead, no one thought of masquerading themselves as Christ-sent apostles in Jerusalem. God had accomplished His goal in striking the two dead. And if news eventually reached as far as Corinth, then we can better understand the rod with which Paul was returning to the city to correct some who were challenging his leadership (1 Co 4:21).

Ananias and Sapphira were questioning the leadership of the apostles in God’s early efforts to initiate a paradigm shift away from Israel to the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. The couple questioned the leadership of the apostles by publicly presenting themselves as also having made great sacrifices for the church.

If people could get away with a lie before the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, then there would be moral chaos. The power of the gospel to transform lives would be greatly hindered. This was certainly the moral

struggle that was going on behind the scenes as we seek to understand the harshness by which God poured out His power of death on this brother and sister in Christ. Theirs was not simply a lie to the apostles, but an effort to deceive God, and thus subvert the paradigm shift of God’s people to the gospel of His only begotten Son (At 5:4).

The deception would eventually be known to the general public. People would discover the actual amount for which Ananias and Sapphira sold their possession (At 5:1,2). Before the apostles, the amount they claimed that they received from the sale was publicly stated. When the general public pulled out their calculators and subtracted the claimed sale amount from the actual amount of the sale, then they would calculate the extent to which they were able to deceive the leadership of this new movement of Christianity. The apostles would subsequently be made a public mockery. The “movement” that they supposedly started on their own would be understood by the general public to be just another sect of the Jews. And thus, the early establishment of the church would have been stymied before it got off the ground. This helps us understand the reason for the extremity by which God dropped these two deceivers dead in a public way.

As a result of the two falling dead before the apostles, Luke recorded, “*And great fear came on all those who heard these things*” (At 5:5). It is significant to understand that “all those who heard” indicates that the news of the event went far beyond the body of believers. This was “all those” throughout Jerusalem, Judea, and now, even us. But specifically, “*great fear came upon all the church and upon as many as heard these things*” (At 5:11). “Great fear” means terrified! It was after this event that the religious leaders in Jerusalem began to take seriously the paradigm shift that was being introduced by the apostles. In Acts 6:7 Luke later recorded after this event,

So the word of God increased. And the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly. And a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

These priests were scholars of the events of Jewish history that took place immediately after Israel was delivered from Egyptian captivity. They were not unfamiliar with what happened to Aaron and Miriam. They could read in their Bibles what happened to Kohath, Datham and Abiram. Insubordinate people died when God initiated paradigm shifts in reference to His work among men on

earth. If there were any opposition to His designated leaders, then there would be severe consequences against those who would rise up against God’s work among men in order to bring about His changes. Ananias and Sapphira, through their deed to question the leadership of the apostles, paid the price for questioning the work of God through the apostles.

We must not make the mistake of failing to see who actually extracted life from both Ananias and Sapphira. The text simply says, “*And as he heard these words [of Peter], Ananias fell down and breathed his last*” (At 5:5). It was not that Peter struck him dead. It is obvious that something as this had never before happened in the early ministry of the apostles. Neither has it happened since. Fear came upon everyone because it happened only this once, and thus, we must not assume that the apostles were initiating the punishment by death of their own free will.

This was a case where God stepped in directly and recalled His spirit from both Ananias and Sapphira. As everyone present witnessed the instant death of the two, the apostles too were also bystanders. The lie was made public, but it was God who caused the death publicly. We would assume, therefore, that when Luke stated that “*great fear came on all those who heard these*

things,” even the apostles were included in the “all” (At 5:5). “*Great fear came upon all the church,*” including the apostles (At 5:11).

It was a time in the history of the initial establishment of the church when God exercised a direct hand in confirming the leadership of those whom He had ordained should deliver all truth to the church (See Jn 14:26; 16:13). God worked on earth through those whom He assigned to lead in the initiation of a new era. As Moses was a bystander in reference to God’s punishment of those who questioned his leadership authority, the apostles were also bystanders in the case of Ananias and Sapphira who questioned the leadership integrity of God’s designated leaders in the initial establishment of the church. As in the case of God’s work through Moses to establish leadership and law-giving in Israel, so also God established leadership and law-giving through the apostles for the church. When the leadership and law-giving of the apostles was accomplished, then there

was no more a need for God to do the same throughout the history of the church. There will be no more members dropping dead in the church because of a challenge to the leadership authority of God on earth. The leadership authority in the church changed from men to the written word of God after the apostles had delivered unto the church all truth (Jn 14:26; 16:13). Only through the written word of Christ God continues to exercise His authority on earth (See Jn 12:48).

In the beginning of the church, only the apostles were designed leaders in that they had the responsibility to deliver all truth unto the church (Jn 14:26; 16:13). But once the truth of the gospel was delivered, the apostles had accomplished their mission, and thus the church carried on under the authority of the word of God in all matters of faith. Once the truth that came through the leadership of the apostles was completed, then people could know that God had no other authority for revealed truth other than the apostles.

Chapter 17

WATER SHORTAGES

We were once driving through one wilderness town after another in a desert region on planet earth. We felt that it was truly the “lonely planet” at the time. It was more than a wil-

derness. The small towns through which we ventured were really in a desert area where water was hard to come by. There were no bodies of water. Water was coveted solely for

drinking, and on occasions, for the occasional shower, or a bath with a wash cloth. And certainly, bathing in a bathtub full of water was almost out of the question. The smell of the resident citizen's human body was a testimony to the fact that water was scarce.

What we have found in desert regions as this is that people start believing that baptism (immersion) in water for remission of sins is not necessary. Salvation is by faith only, apart from obedience to the gospel. Some will provide a tank of water for their livestock, but no water in which to wash away sins (At 22:16).

However, now we better understand why John—the one who immersed in water—carried on with his preaching of the coming Messiah close to the “much water” of the Jordan River. The exact location where he was baptizing was in Aenon that was close to the village of Salim (Jn 3:23). The reason he was there was that the people who came to him could hear his message and then be baptized in much water. He was the “reverse evangelist.” Instead of him going to the people, they came to him in the wilderness area of Aenon in order to be immersed in much water for remission of sins. In announcing the coming Messiah, the people came to hear John's proclamation of the fulfillment of all prophecy in reference to the

Messiah.

They came to John in the desert for some very important reasons: “*John came in the wilderness baptizing and preaching the baptism of repentance for remission of sins*” (Mk 1:4). The people who believed realized that if they would receive the remission of sins in order to fulfill all the revealed righteousness of God, then they had to go to John. So there “*went out to him all the land of Judea and those from Jerusalem. And they were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins*” (Mk 1:5).

For lack of water, the people who came to John did not write off the necessity of his baptism. People walked across the province of Judea in order to get to the message and the water where John was immersing. Therefore, before one discounts John's baptizing for remission of sins, he or she should consider how much people believed in John's message and baptism in order get to him by the Jordan. How much more should one seek to be baptized today in the name of the One John said was coming, but now has actually come?

Back then, the people walked across the province of Judea to hear a simple message that the Messiah was soon to rise over the sun-lite hills of the promised land. In response to the message, they were baptized by John

for the remission of their sins. How much more compelling is the fulfilled message of John on this side of the cross? Would it not be reasonable to conclude that those who would want to respond to Jesus would at least do the same as those early disciples of John?

There went out to John multitudes from across Judea who wanted to hear his message and be baptized for the remission of sins. In fact, Matthew historically recorded that *“Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan, went out to him”* (Mt 3:5). *“And they were baptized ... confessing their sins”* (Mt 5:6). They went out to be immersed (baptized) in the Jordan for remission of sins because there was much water there (Jn 3:23). So John stayed in the region and received those who wanted to hear the message of the coming Messiah and be baptized (Jn 3:22). He stayed at the “Jordan River Baptistry.”

Now consider this: **John established a center for preaching and baptizing.** Since much water was needed for immersion, he stayed near much water. It was a similar location upon which Philip and the eunuch came in a desert region (At 8:26). While “driving” along the way in the eunuch’s chariot, they came upon a certain body of water into which one could be completely immersed (At

8:36). So the “desert baptistry” presented the opportunity for the eunuch to say, *“See, here is water! What hinders me from being baptized?”* (At 8:36). It was an opportunity for him to act on his faith. If he had simply passed by the body of water that represented opportunity to be baptized, then the sincerity of his faith would be questioned.

As we made our way across the desert region of the country in which we were traveling at the time, we too came upon a church that had a purpose-built baptistry. When speaking to a local leader of the church, he said, “Yes, people from throughout the region come to our baptistry in order to be baptized.”

So on our personal journey through so many desert towns and villages, we too wondered how people who wanted to respond to the gospel could say, “See, here is water!” In order to fulfill the desire of those who seek to be baptized in the name of Jesus for remission of sins, “water opportunities” should be provided. We once suggested that Christians do as John, and as one church in the desert that we visited. Someone in desert regions should build or dig a “Jordan River Baptistry” for all those throughout a region who believe on Jesus. At least it should be made known that one has a large bathtub.

The Jordan River offered a natu-

ral baptistry. But when there are no rivers running through the region, or bodies of water, at least someone could build a baptistry for all those in the region who realize that they must obey the gospel for remission of sins (At 2:38). Town halls are built for city gatherings. Schools are built for education. Sports fields are built for the gathering of athletes. So why not build a community baptistry for all those in a wilderness village to go in order to obey the gospel by immersion. In the city in which we presently live, some residents have provided their swimming pools as community baptistries.

Remember the 3,000 who were baptized in Jerusalem? Have you ever wondered where they were baptized in one day? There was the purpose-built and public pool of Bethesda that had five entry ways to the water (Jn 5:2). There was the public Pool of Siloam which was a purpose-built pool for cleansing (Jn 9:7). Archaeologists have uncovered other purpose-built public pools in Jerusalem that were specifically made for Jewish ritualistic cleansing. Our question is why someone could not build in a wilderness village a purpose-built baptistry for those who know that they must be immersed in water in obedience to the gospel for the remission of sins (At 2:38; 22:16).

Someone in desert villages and

towns need to accommodate the believers in the region by relieving the “spiritual stress” of those who know that they should follow Jesus to the Jordan River in order to fulfill all righteousness by being baptized (Mt 3:13-15). Someone can offer them the opportunity to do so by building a “Jordan River Baptistry,” and then announcing to the entire region the baptismal opportunity. They could, as John, wait for the people to come from throughout the region in order to be baptized for remission of sins. Sincere believers know that they must follow Jesus to the Jordan River. Aiding others to be baptized into Christ is something as simple as showing people where to find water (See Gl 3:26-29).

John was simply baptizing in Aenon **those who came to him for baptism**. He was not laying claim to those he baptized. He was simply fulfilling his God-commissioned mandate to announce the coming Messiah, and then baptize for the remission of sins those who came to him (Mk 1:4). After they were baptized, the people went home. John did not establish a data base of those who were baptized. That was God’s business (At 2:47). John was not recruiting baptized believers into his unique sect. God kept track of those who were baptized.

It was not John’s business to organize into groups baptized believers.

His business was only to preach the Messiah and baptize those who came to him. The baptized sorted out the rest. What John offered was the opportunity to hear his messianic message, and then be baptized for remission of sins. He allowed the people to do what Philip allowed the eunuch to do after he came up out of the waters of baptism: “*And he [the eunuch] went on his way rejoicing*” (At 8:39). And just in case Philip might lay claim to a baptized believer, “*the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip so that the eunuch saw him no more*” (At 8:39).

We must keep in mind that some snakes will also show up at the public “Jordan River Baptistry” (Mt 3:7). As some religionists (the Pharisees and Sadducees) showed up at John’s public baptistry near Aenon, so there will show up those to whom a gospel

message of rebuke must be delivered (Mt 3:7-12). They must be warned of the wrath they will suffer when Jesus returns with His mighty angels in flaming fire (See 2 Th 1:6-9). Some are indeed baptized with water unto repentance for remission of sins. But for the proud and arrogant religious leaders, they will be baptized with the “flaming fire” that Jesus will bring with him in order to bring down “*vengeance on those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (2 Th 1:8).

What God did through John’s ministry of baptism in the wilderness was to present the opportunity for both the sincere and the snakes to show up at the baptistry. When both showed up at the “Jordan River Baptistry,” then he had the opportunity to preach the word of God.