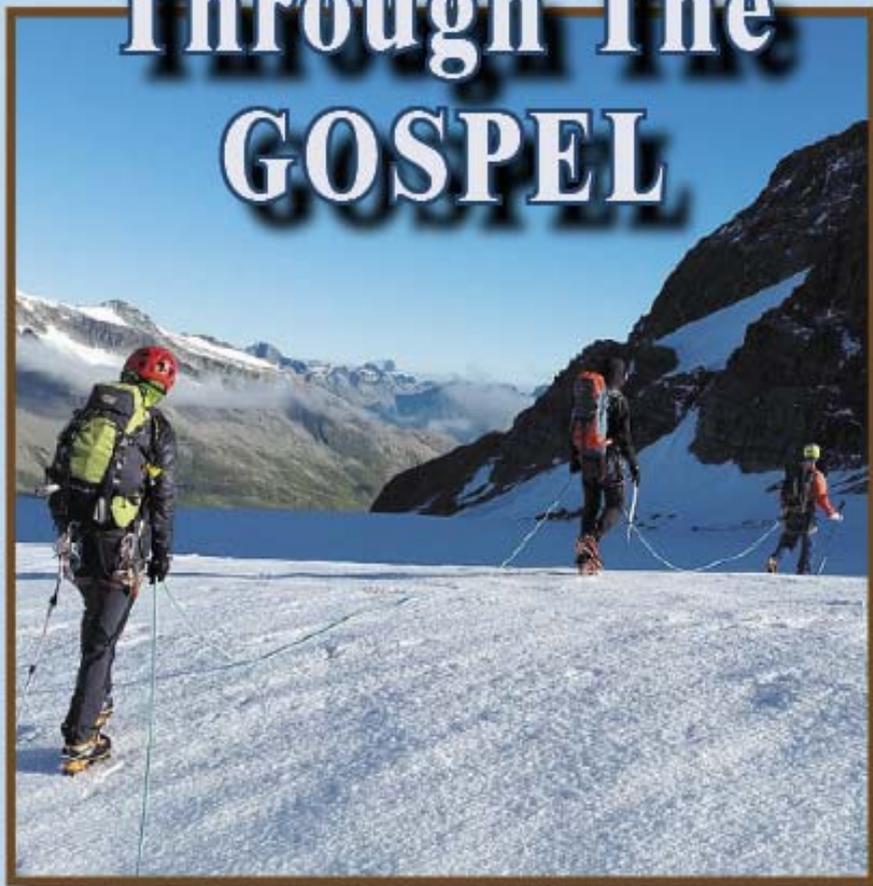


Tethered To Christ Through The GOSPEL



*Deliverance From The Bondage Of Religion
Into The Freedom Of The Gospel*

DICKSON

Tethered To Christ Through The Gospel

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Preface

When mountaineers climb the steep and dangerous slopes of mountain ranges, they tether themselves to one another. The connecting rope (tether) is a safety feature in dangerous mountaineering. If one climber slips, his tether to the other climbers can save his life. Tethering of the mountaineers, therefore, is a survival feature for safe mountaineering.

The same is true of our survival as Christians. We are tethered to one another because of our common obedience to the gospel. Our tethering to one another is based on all of us being tethered to Christ. Our tethering to Christ and one another is a safety feature. But it is a safety feature in gospel living only if every one on the team is tethered to Christ. Jesus only is the source of the life that we all have in Him. If we are not all connected to Jesus, then our tethering to one another would be worthless.

Being tethered to our religious heritage will not result in our desired eternal destiny. The heritage of any religious group saves no one. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who saves. Unfortunately, being tightly tethered to our religious heritage many times hinder our tethering to Jesus. We sometimes exalt church over Christ. But we must keep in mind that it is only when our sole source of spiritual life comes from our Lord Jesus Christ can we have the spiritual assurance that is needed for the treacherous climb of the Christian journey. We gain spiritual self-esteem only in Jesus. We are able to reach the peak of eternal salvation as long as we stay connected to Him.

The purpose of this book is an effort to aid the reader to understand bet-

ter the obstacles that religious traditions and heritages often present in our efforts to tether to Christ only through the gospel. Unless we realize that religion hinders being tethered directly to Jesus, we will have a difficult time appreciating the security that the gospel offers.

We live in a world where religious heritages have become the self-esteem of many people who know little about the gospel, and less about the Bible. If one would understand the impact that God intended that the gospel should have on the lives of all mankind, then there would be no competition between our religious heritage and the gospel. The gospel would become top priority, though we would appreciate the faith that our forefathers delivered to us.

But we must come to the conclusion that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ must be the foundation upon which we base our faith. If we can sift through all the confusion of religious traditions that prevail in a confused religious world, and seek for those fundamentals of the gospel that have been distorted or fractured by our lack of understanding of the gospel, then we are on our way to realizing a true faith experience.

These words are written to those of a religious paradigm shift that is taking place throughout the world today. There are thousands of religious leaders in this world who have launched out on a move away from traditional religions. They have realized that the traditional institutional religions of the past have run their course since the time of the Protestant Reformation Movement five hundred years ago. They have for the past half century

concluded that institutionalized traditionalism in the area of religion is often cold, indifferent to local needs, and in some cases, individually sterile in satisfying the spiritual thirsts of so many people.

They have thus set out from where they were in a quest to discover the individual's needed relationship he or she must have with a Creator who brought them into this world. In some cases they seek to restore or revive a simple faith that can become the foundation upon which they can establish a rewarding relationship with others who are likewise on the same journey of discovery. All these seekers desire unity among themselves that is based on the gospel alone.

In some cases these worthy spiritual adventurers seek that which is sometimes very obscure in the world of Christendom. They are thus having difficulty finding their way out of the quagmire of religion. In many cases, their call for a simple Christianity that is independent of the shackles of past religious traditionalism is somewhat misguided. They find themselves lost in the midst of so many failed attempts to be Christians only.

They thus find themselves lost in the midst of what is now a formalized independent church movement that is not unlike the fragmentation of the former Reformation Movement a half millennium ago. As these independents give birth to sons and daughters, they too are in dan-

ger of institutionalizing, and subsequently giving birth again to more institutional religions. The generations who follow them must again deliver themselves from religion through restoration. History will inevitably repeat itself with another struggle to reform that which should have been discarded.

The words of this book are directed to the present generation of independent church leaders. These are words of both warning and direction. They are words of warning not to lay again the foundation that is based on either man, or on a unique method of churchianity. In order to guard against misdirection that men always produce, our forthcoming words are thus meant to focus our minds solely on the gospel of Jesus Christ. If all of us tether ourselves to Christ through the gospel, then we will shift together. We will subsequently produce the result that will not again generate a fragmented Christendom that will need another restoration. If we all focus on the gospel, we will not only end up together in this world, but also in the world to come.

Though these may be times of religious confusion and turmoil, with Jesus as our renewed King, we can hang on to His word and enjoy the ride. As long as our focus is solely on Him, then we know that He will lead us together in the right direction.

INTRODUCTION

To be tethered to something means that one has boundaries beyond which he or she cannot freely go. This can be either good or bad. It is good that a mean dog is tethered by a chain that restricts his movement. If he were not tethered, then he would cause certain harm to others. But a good dog that has gone through obedience school is different. Tethering such a dog means that he cannot do his “dog thing,” that is, be friendly to others.

People naturally want to touch or pet an obedient dog who knows his boundaries and sees himself as man’s best friend. But when a mean dog is untethered, he sees a person as an object upon whom he can release his aggression. People run from mean untethered dogs. They reach out their hands to pet a good dog who wishes to make every person his friend.

Not much changes in this illustration when we apply the analogy to people. Mean people are shunned. Those people who have gone through “obedience school” in their obedience to the gospel have voluntarily tethered themselves to Jesus. They are untethered from the ways of the world. Therefore, they are free to let their gospel light shine before everyone because the source of their light is Jesus. They are thus free to think within the bounds of the gospel of

freedom. People gravitate to gospel-obedient Christians who are untethered from the evil ways of the world.

On the other hand, those who are bound to the ways of the world are the roaring lions who are walking about in order to deceive the hearts of the innocent. They are looking for innocent souls who are free in Christ. Because Christians are free in Christ, they are free game to be deceived by the false prophets of the world. The freedom that makes the obedient free from the restrictions of religion also makes them the ideal target for religious roaring lions who are not tethered to the truth of the gospel.

Those who are set free from the bondage of religion must first learn how to walk in the freedom that they have in Christ. But at the same time, they must learn how to guard themselves from devouring lions. Some make the mistake of guarding themselves from being devoured by lions by tethering themselves to a legal religiosity. They feel assured that they have justified themselves before God through their religious ritual-keeping, and at the same time, escaped the lure of roaring lions.

But what they have actually accomplished is untethering themselves from Christ first in order to be teth-

ered to the meritorious works of religion. They find comfort in the traditions of their fathers and the heritage of their religion. They give up their freedom in Christ in order to self-sanctify themselves in the bondage of their own meritorious religiosity.

There is no true freedom when one is tethered to the religious traditions of the fathers. Being tethered to religious traditions, or one's religious heritage, may bring a sense of security before God. The problem, however, is that the mental tether is meritoriously man-made, not gospel founded. Most people are usually aware of this. They know that their works-oriented faith is based on subscribing to the traditions of the fathers, while they minimize the power of the gospel. When the Son of God came into the world to reveal the gospel, it was His task to untether the Jews from the religion of their fathers in order that they be tethered only to Him. This was a daunting task during the earthly ministry of Jesus. It still is today.

At the time the Word was made flesh in a barn in Bethlehem, an entire generation of people struggled with their relationship with God through the religious traditions of their fathers. Subsequently, there arose a great conflict between those of the religious heritage of the Jews and the Son of God. The Spirit-inspired records of the

confrontation that the Word in the flesh had with those who sought to base their connection with God on the tether of their religious traditions was clearly defined by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These writers revealed that there was often a heated struggle between the religionists of Jesus' ministry and the gospel that He introduced into the world through Himself. Throughout His ministry, the contention was between the Jewish leaders' theology and the gospel way of life that Jesus was living and preaching.

What the Jews at the time did not understand was that the gospel that was soon to be implemented on Pentecost in A.D. 30 would in the eyes of God be the end of both the Sinai law and all their religious traditions that were connected with that law (See Cl 2:14). Their Jewish heritage since Abraham was to find fulfillment through the cross, ascension and reign of the Messiah. Unfortunately, what they thought was the end of God's revelation to man through the Sinai law and Israel, was only the means of God's eternal plan of redemption for all men.

It took the Holy Spirit half of the writings of the New Testament in the four preceding books to explain the paradigm shift that was necessary in order for one to shift from man-made religiosity to a gospel connection with God through Jesus. Such continues

to be our challenge today. We seek to be diligent students of what Jesus taught concerning how one can disconnect from the security of human religious traditions in order to connect to God through the Son of God. This is indeed a challenging task by which we walk by faith in the gospel of Jesus and not by our sight in the religious traditions of our fathers.

At the end of the conflict between those who were tethered to the Jewish religious traditions, came the end of the earthly ministry of the in-

carne Word. Those who refused to accept the Word as the incarnation of God in fulfillment of all prophecies concerning the Messiah, crucified the Lord of glory. The cross will always remind us of our salvation through the sacrificial offering of the Lamb of God. But behind the scenes, the cross will also remind us of how stringent religious traditionalists will struggle against those who seek to be tethered to Christ alone through their obedience to the gospel.

Chapter 1

UNTETHERED OBJECTIVITY

There is nothing like writing. When an author feels unleashed from the constraints of tradition, or heritage, he feels free to reach into the inner sanctuary of his heart in order to bring to light gems that are free from the barnacles of time. And for this reason, only those who are truly free from the restrictions of imprisoning religious prejudices are worth reading. Those scribes who are cowed by the forces of opinion around them should be questioned. Intimidated scribes are rarely objective.

Selfish ambition subtly finds its way into the mind of the writer who would allow his conclusions to be warped toward a hearty slap on the back. A “humble pride” may lurk in the heart of one who has inscribed for himself words that bring satisfaction to himself alone. But when pride is coupled with selfish ambition, no writer can dig deep into the recesses of his mind in order to lay on paper with ink true objective thoughts.

Plagiarism only reveals the inadequacy of one who is either intimidated by his peers, or lacks confidence in revealing his own thoughts. Though one may unknowingly duplicate the thoughts of another, he must not be tried in a court of plagiarism.

Accusations of plagiarism more often come from those who are too frightened to pen their own thoughts that can be footnoted with another’s document. Since spoken words can quickly vanish in the wind, there are those who are quick to be policemen for plagiarists, but cowards to inscribe their own words for others to judge. Unless one is writing in the field of atomic physics, there are few revelations that can be made of anything new under heaven.

It was only when Dietrich Bonhoeffer took a moral stand against the social immorality of Nazi Germany that he wrote the modern classic *The Cost of Discipleship*. After his arrest in April 1943 by the Gestapo, he continued from prison to live unrestrained from the intimidation of those who would bring into bondage his mind. He remained free in thinking unto the death of his imprisoned body by hanging that took place in April 1945.

Bonhoeffer’s imprisonment for his moral beliefs was a blessing to the rest of the world who wanted to start inscribing from the platform of free thought. His religious heritage offered no aid in generating in his mind powerful thoughts that changed the

thinking of those who thought they were free, but were looking through prison bars. His unflinching determination to write what was right led him to his death. It was his brave stand to release free thought that unleashed on the world a host of fellow literary prisoners who were themselves imprisoned by the heritage of established theology.

For those who think they can see, the prison that incarcerates their minds is their religious heritage and the judges and lawgivers of their present religious establishment. We have found it incredibly curious to hear some say, “We think liberal, but speak conservative.” Such forked-tongue faith betrays the heart of one who is not free. The words that come forth from his mouth should be questioned. If such a person should write a thought—which rarely they do—then his words will have been “misspelled” by the bondage of his own thinking. Such people are often willing to remain mentally imprisoned because of either weakness in character or the strength of a pay check, or their eagerness to remain accepted by their religious establishment.

And so were the Pharisees among themselves. Jesus said of them, “*Therefore, I speak to them [the Pharisees] in parables because seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand*”

(Mt 13:13). The Pharisees were blinded by their own *status quo*. Because they loved their pay checks (Lk 16:14), individually they were intimidated to conform to the bondage of the religious establishment.

There were several reasons why the Holy Spirit put the saints on guard about being deceived by the smooth and fair speech of some. The fair way of saying things in a beguiling manner is the first sign post along the road of deception. There are ulterior motives. There is selfish ambition. There is the desire of smooth speechologists to reveal only that which will marshal people to their own camp. No speaker should be trusted who seeks, through smooth and fair speech, to recruit the believers to his system of theology.

There are those writers who write well. If they are truly free from the restrictions of religion, then their writings are not necessarily with “smooth and fair” words. Such gifted writers only have the ability to captivate our minds with words and phrases that clearly and distinctly reveal their precise thoughts. We appreciate those writers who are honest, and thus, leave us with exactly what is on their minds. When open-minded and uninhibited scribes write, we seek to interpret them outside our own prejudices. We seek to define the words they use by their dictionary of experiences, and not ours.

There are those who have difficulty revealing their inner thoughts with words. We appreciate their struggle. One thing is always true about writers: There are no perfect writers. But when one is intimidated to write nothing because he or she is afraid that his or her words might be laid before a court of self-appointed judges and lawgivers of the kingdom, then the religious establishment has gone too far. The movement to which they attach themselves is on its way from the word of God. It has digressed into the Dark Ages of religion wherein all were intimidated to believe that the earth was flat and the center of the universe.

When brave writers arose among us during the Middle Ages—which were truly theologically Dark—in order to remind us that we are free, they were often torched at the stake for thinking freely. This era of wicked history taught a lesson to writers for

the rest of history. Writers were taught that they should never allow their religious heritage to cage their pens, or dictate their personal studies of the word of God. If ever we move into a “dark” time again when there is no free thought, then we will step aside and allow that time to pass by. We will have no part with “Middle Age” church behavior that suppresses the power of the pen. On the contrary, we will sharpen our pencils and fill our fountains with ink in order that we never again be brought into the bondage of heritage policemen or the domination of those who would suppress the truth. We will never forget the following exhortation of the Holy Spirit:

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).

Chapter 2

THE BEREAN BIBLE CLASS

If we could for a moment extend the term “Christianity” to include all faiths that in some way consider Jesus to be the Son of God, and “church” to include everyone who in some way separates themselves religiously from all “non-Christian” faiths, then we would discover that something dis-

concerting is transpiring within the ranks of “Christianity” today. It is something that will eventually lead to the demise of true Christian faith as it is defined in the Bible. Does this sound shocking? It should!

This demise is nothing new. It was happening to Christianity by the

end of the first century, and continued into the second. In the second century the apostasy from Christian faith was so drastic that historians believe that about half of those who “believed on Jesus” had gone astray into believing that Jesus was only a good rabbi who led many away from the original Jewish faith. Those who refused to believe that Jesus was the “Christ” relegated Him to only a man who lived, and then wandered off somewhere into obscurity and died of old age. To many, there was no such thing as an incarnation and sacrificial atonement. Gnosticism also took its share of those who wanted to believe that Jesus was some mischievous digression from God.

In many ways, the same is happening throughout the world today. Christianity in general today has a weak biblical foundation. The faith of many is an open black hole that is sucking in any religious fantasy that can be imagined in the minds of religiously misguided people.

Those who have read Acts 17:11 will remember that the term “nobility” was used by the Holy Spirit in reference to those Jews in the city of Berea who eagerly considered what the evangelists Paul, Silas and Timothy related to them concerning the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies that Jesus was the Messiah. He was the “anointed One” sent from God.

And if He were the Messiah, then all those prophesied characteristics and functions of the Messiah were relished upon Him as such. The “nobility” of the Bereans was in the fact that they were seriously interested in studying these things.

The Holy Spirit of God forever wrote the epitaph of the Berean Bible students in the following words:

These [Jews in Berea] were more noble-minded than those [Jews] in Thessalonica, in that they received the word [of the gospel] with all readiness of mind and searched the [Old Testament] Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so (At 17:11).

These were rare people of faith at the time Paul, Silas and Timothy passed through the idolatrous city of Berea. Such Bible students are more starkly rare in a world of Christendom today. Most “Christian religionists” now feel that they are fine without a desire to search the Scriptures. Faith is now more often based on either tradition, religious heritage, or a concert assembly wherein the entertained are stirred into an emotional frenzy. If the assembly is so great, why would one want to complicate the assembly experience with Bible study?

We now live in a world that is characteristic of the times that pre-

vailed about thirty years after the earthly ministry of Jesus. It was in that time when there were few written Scriptures concerning who Jesus was and what He taught. Information was transferred primarily through word of mouth. Stories from the first witnesses of Jesus were handed down to eager recipients who were looking for the Messiah. When “walking Bibles” came through town and preached that Jesus was the Messiah, those who had the Old Testament Scriptures opened their Bibles—unrolled their scrolls—and searched to see if the verbal information that was spoken by the traveling evangelists coincided with the prophecies of the mission and message of the Messiah. If prophecies matched the message of the messengers, then the waters in the area splashed with people who were eager to obey the gospel.

The message eventually came to the ears of those whom the Holy Spirit considered “noble-minded” within the city of Berea. These were God-fearing Jews who loved their Bibles and hoped for the coming Messiah. They were not religionists who were content with their religious heritage. Their religious heritage may have brought them to the point of receptivity, but they would in no way sacrifice the possible fulfillment of Messianic prophecies for which they and their fathers had hoped for centuries,

in order to consider the possible fulfillment of the prophecies in Jesus of Nazareth. They would not sacrifice the Messiah simply to preserve and maintain the religious traditions of their heritage. The Bereans believed what they studied in their Bibles. They subsequently believed in the One that the apostles preached.

The Bereans were certainly the product of the faith of their fathers (See Mk 7:1-9). Nevertheless, when the message of the messengers matched the prophecies, they knew that they had to lead as “change agents” in Judaism. As the 3,000 on the day of Pentecost, religious heritage had to be sacrificed for the new Head of the new church of God’s people (See Mt 16:18,19; At 7:38). Their heritage of legal religion had to give way to the gospel of grace. New wineskins had to be found for freedom from the bondage of legal Judaism was in the air.

The foundation of their paradigm shift depended on their knowledge of the prophecies of the Scriptures that they knew. The Bereans could make a judgment concerning the fulfillment of the prophecies that was based on what they read in their Bibles. Unfortunately, this culture of Bible-oriented believers to a great extent does not exist in Christendom today. Throughout the world today there is a dearth of Bible knowledge among

those who cry out “Lord, Lord” (“Jesus, Jesus”) on Sunday morning in tune with a band (See Mt 7:21-23). The lack of a Bible-based faith is so serious that it will eventually lead to the total corruption of what is in the New Testament defined as discipleship of Jesus.

This reality takes us back into the days about thirty years after the ministry of Jesus. It was in those days after the cross, resurrection and ascension of Jesus that twisted information about Jesus was propagated throughout the world. Many of those who lived far away from Jerusalem and Palestine concluded that Christians were only a sect of Judaism. From Rome to Babylon to Ethiopia, the twisted rumors of Christ and His church went into all the world.

When one of the messengers of Christianity eventually came bound with chains into the city of Rome, those who were similar in hope as the Jews of Berea, said to the messenger, *“But we desire to hear from you what you think, for as concerning this sect [of Christians] we know that it is spoken against everywhere”* (At 28:22).

So the eager recipients **set up a Bible class** wherein the Old Testament Scriptures would be studied in the context of what the Roman prisoner claimed.

And when they [the Jews] had ap-

pointed him [Paul] a day [for the Bible class], many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning until evening (At 28:23).

This Bible scenario rarely happens today. Instead of coming together for a Bible class to search the Scriptures, religionists today under the heading of “Christianity” usually come together only for a musical concert wherein a great deal of noise is made to mesmerize the attendees. Walk into any city today with an open Bible, and usually no one of the “Christian” community in that city will show up. There are few noble-minded Bereans today in any given city of the world. However, if one would have a guitar in his hand, the crowds would come. But generally, when it is announced in brochures and over the radio that there will be a “Bible class” in town, there will be few people there.

So we are still in the days when Luke wrote to Theophilus in the early 60s. It is interesting that the social religious environment in which Theophilus lived at the time was not much different than the world in which we now live. The religion was different in those days in that most

religions were based on idolatry. In the case of the Jews, religion was based on the traditions of the fathers (Mk 7:1-9). And because the Jews' religion was based on the traditions of the fathers, its true foundation was the heritage of the Jews (Gl 1:13,14).

Theophilus stood alone with the Bereans and those in Rome who desired to attend a Bible class. By the time Luke wrote the books of Luke and Acts, false rumors were commonly aired over "Radio Rome" that Jesus was only a zealous rabbi of Palestine who inspired a small sect of believers who were going about the Roman Empire propagating their heresy. The believers of this "Christian sect" were so zealous that they turned the religious world upside down (At 17:6). Many thought, therefore, that the success of the movement was based on the zeal of deceived religionists who accepted Jesus as their "messiah." There was no consideration that the gospel revealed through Jesus was God's message to mankind for his own salvation. They did not consider the fact that the power was in their gospel message, not in themselves as the messengers.

It was in this chaotic religious world that Theophilus lived. Because Theophilus was one of some influence in either Roman politics or government, the Holy Spirit deemed it necessary to write two inspired docu-

ments to him. In the first—and we must quote in full—the Spirit-inspired hand of Luke revealed the problem that prevailed throughout the Roman Empire in reference to Jesus:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of those things that have been believed among us [Christians], just as they were delivered to us [who did not personally witness Jesus] by those [Christ-sent apostles] who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word [of the gospel], it seemed good to me [Luke] also, having an accurate understanding of all things from the very first [of the beginning of the church] to write to you an orderly [inspired] account, most excellent Theophilus, that you might know the certainty [of truth] of those things you have been taught [through the preaching of others] (Lk 1:1-4).

Theophilus lived in a religious world of confusion that is not much different from the one in which we live today. There were "Christian" religionists then who proclaimed all sorts of distorted beliefs concerning Jesus. The same people today stand in pulpits throughout the world. These are those who have little knowledge of the word of God, and thus with smooth and fair speech proclaim their imaginations about the One in

whom people are to believe and obey. Open Bible study has vacated church sanctuaries in order that many unlearned teachers are not embarrassed for their lack of knowledge of the Scriptures.

We have had the privilege of visiting many “Christian churches” throughout the world. Many of these churches sit down as the Bereans and open the Scriptures in order to test the teachers as to whether they are from God (See 1 Jn 4:1). However, when we speak of diligence in Bible study, we must confess that the number of Bible students in these days is few (See 2 Tm 2:15). In such a world, therefore, it is only a matter of time until the vast majority of Christendom has gone astray from the simple gospel that was believed and lived by those of the early church in the first century. In fact, some areas of Christendom are often now so far removed from the gospel that it is now time for a gospel restoration movement among those who thirst for the simple gospel message upon which to base their faith.

Therefore, in the religious world of Christendom today, we seek for the

Bereans. Where are all those in Rome who would set up Bible classes in order to study their Bibles? Where are all those as Theophilus who have heard so many twisted stories about Jesus that they want to hear the truth of the gospel? In view of the dearth of knowledge of the Scriptures, we call for a restoration of the gospel as the center focus of our faith.

We now live in a religious world where the word “Bible” is shunned by many people who believe in Jesus. It is as one Internet producer of Christian videos recently wrote to us, “If I use the word ‘Bible’ in my videos, the viewers of the video are far fewer than when I do not use the word.”

This is the world in which we now live. It is as one zealous person once said, “I wanted to start a church, so I had to learn how to play a guitar.” We are in a world of Christendom today that if one would “start a church,” but do so on the foundation of Bible study, few will show up at the church house doors. Those in the realm of Christendom today who do show up and huddle around the riches of the word of God are now anomalies of the faith.

Chapter 3

THE TREE OF LIFE CHURCH

For several years we have had this good friend, who in his old age as an ex-missionary, has continually encouraged the church in America to

remember her responsibility to evangelize the world. He was himself a missionary in the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America. But since those days, things have changed in the spiritual climate of his home church. He happens to live in the city where one of the first preacher/missionary training schools was born in America in the 1960s. It was a school to which young eager men and women enrolled who wanted to learn their Bibles. But in his last note to us, this school that once had over one hundred students specifically training to learn the Bible in order to preach the gospel to the world, had a new enrollment of only fifteen students. The paradigm had shifted.

We now live in a world of churchianity where Bible study is almost gone from the halls of “Christianity.” Evidence of the fact is not only in the small enrollment in Bible schools in order to study the Bible, but also in churches where gimmicks are used to attract an attendance. Those churches that maintain their attendance are those churches that have turned more to a social-orientated encounter. There is nothing wrong with focusing on relationships, for our relationships with one another (fellowship) is a serendipitous blessing of our common obedience to the gospel (1 Jn 1:3). But we must not marginalize worship for the sake of a good coffee

with one another.

Some churches have turned to focusing on an experiential assembly that is oriented toward the worshipers, and not the One who is to be worshiped. The “worshippers” are often called to assembly by the sound of an orchestra or energetic band of instrumentalists. The call of the church bell now sounds faint and in competition with powerful amplifiers. When this happens, “church” changes from believers who assemble around a worshipful appreciation of the gospel of the Son of God and the word of God, to adherents who assemble around one another for a narcissistic social encounter with one another. The assembly is no longer gospel centered, but socially centered. It is no longer focused on worship in gratitude of the God of the gospel, but a self-oriented experiential event wherein we please ourselves.

Common obedience to the gospel was the primary motivation that brought believers together in the first century. They came together to offer thanksgiving in worship. On the other hand, common relationships are often the only motives to bring people together today. Great effort is thus placed on producing an atmosphere of social development (relationships), and less on zeal for a study of the word of God and mutual worship. In fact, in some cases any Bible teaching that

might discourage the relationships or attendance of the adherents to a particular group is avoided.

This paradigm shift from the Bereans to assemblies that exalt relationships over gospel is revealed in the fact that many groups have given up the necessity for obedience to the gospel in order to be added to the body of believers. In a world of religiosity that is void of obedience to God, gone is the necessity of obedience to the gospel for the remission of sins (At 2:38). It is the majority who now affirm that one must “believe on Jesus only” for the remission of sins. Baptism is simply a choice of the believer, a choice that is often ignored. Most suffer from hydrophobia, and thus, are not willing to follow Jesus to the Jordan River.

When the preceding happens among those of faith, an interesting paradigm is established from which it is often difficult to escape. A religious box is constructed. It is similar to legal religious boxes that seek to retain adherents by conforming everyone to a legal set of ceremonies that identify the particular religious sect to which one belongs. But in the social-relational box, the rule is that there are no rules. If one would impose rules, then he or she simply does not fit the mold of the box. It is for this reason that open-Bible study classes have been cancelled because

the adherents of the socially focused religion might discover in the word of God something that imposes a divine command that might exclude someone from the social box.

The next stage of apostasy in this movement is that an identity heritage is established. The unique group finds a unique name, possibly the “Tree of Life Church,” under which banner all adherents can be identified as members. Thus the members of the Tree of Life Church identify the heritage of their group by their unique name. The Tree of Life Church thus becomes a sect—a uniquely denominated group—that is separated from all other bannered churches in town who carry their own unique names of identity.

Over time, heritage becomes the foundation and authority of the Tree of Life Church. If others move out from the Tree of Life Church to other cities, they also start churches under the banner of the same heritage as the mother Tree of Life Church. In this scenario, apostasy is identified by one who would leave the heritage of the Tree of Life Church. Therefore, the adherents to the unique Tree of Life Church will often defend their church by resorting to the authority of their heritage and not the authority of the Bible.

It is a normal practice among Tree of Life churches that there is little Bible study. The assemblies of such

churches will be characterized by a great deal of “Lord, Lord” emotionalism, but there will be few “amens” uttered when the speakers quote scriptures from the word of God. And since the preachers and movement are based on finances, preachers and teachers alike are cautioned not to speak any truth that might drive away checkbooks.

Legalists find it rewarding to judge Tree of Life churches. But in their spirit of judging, they become the same as that which they condemn. It is always true that those who are most cultic in their beliefs and behavior are the most critical of cults. The same is true of heritage-defined churches.

Chapter 4

BOXES AND FREEDOM

When Jude wrote his short letter in the middle 60s, he was not defending either a legal or heritage box of faith.

Beloved, while I was giving all diligence to write to you about our common salvation [in Christ], I felt it necessary to write to you, exhorting that you earnestly contend for the faith [of the gospel] that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jd 3).

In the philosophical world today the phrase “think outside the box” is often used. It is used to encourage people to think outside the constraints of the norm, that is, to think outside the confinement of either heritage or traditions. When considering our social norms, one certainly has the freedom to think outside the old wine-skins of the past. But when we con-

sider the truth of the gospel that was once and for all time delivered to the saints as the foundation of our faith, “thinking outside the box” can often infer that there are no constraints on either belief or behavior in reference to living the gospel. We must not forget what Jude wrote in the next verse after the preceding comment:

*For certain men have crept in [the body of believers] unnoticed, who were long before marked out for this condemnation, **ungodly men who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (Jd 4).***

Now connect the word “faith” in Jude 3 with the word “grace” in Jude 4. Jude was writing about the truth of God’s grace. His subject in verse 3 was the faith of the gospel of grace,

not an outline of doctrine. Paul used the phrase “truth of the gospel” in order to focus the minds of the Galatian and Colossian disciples on the revelation of the Son of God (See Gl 2:5,14; Cl 1:5). The incarnation, atoning death, resurrection, ascension, kingdom reign, and Jesus’ coming again compose together the “truth of the gospel.” If one would either deny or question any truth of the gospel, then he or she loses the power of the gospel to transform one’s life.

When we speak of Christianity, we must conclude that gospel behavior is motivated by the truth of the gospel. The “certain men” about whom Jude wrote were those who misunderstood or marginalized the gospel of grace. These were those about whom Paul questioned, “*Will we continue in sin so that grace may abound?*” (Rm 6:1). Grace is not a license to sin. And because it is not, then there is a box of gospel behavior outside which we must not test the grace of God.

We must consider what Jude wrote in the context of what Paul said in Galatians 5:1: “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.*” The “yoke of bondage” about which Paul exhorted the Galatian disciples not to be brought into bondage, were those religious legal rites from which Christians have been set free in their obe-

dience to the gospel of grace. These were those “doctrines and commandments of men” that “certain men” seek to bring into the gospel of freedom wherein Christians must walk. In doing this, they are preaching another gospel (Gl 1:6-9). Therefore, when we speak of thinking “outside the box,” we are exhorting ourselves to determine what should not be a box of legal religiosity in which one seeks to justify himself before God on the basis of his perfect performance of law.

For example, some Jewish Christians sought to bring into the fellowship of the disciples the religious rite of Jewish circumcision. They were adamant about this because they believed that one could not be saved unless he was circumcised. These were those “certain men” who taught, “*Except you are circumcised after the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved*” (At 15:1). Circumcision as a part of the Sinai law had become a part of Jewish heritage. But when the Sinai law was nailed to the cross (Cl 2:14), all those who obeyed the gospel were made dead to that law (Rm 7:4). They were thus made dead to the necessity of circumcision.

After the cross, circumcision was relegated to being simply a religious rite of the Jews. Under the Sinai law, it was a law of God that all Jewish males be circumcised on the eighth

day after birth. But the cross turned this law into simply being a religious rite of the Jews. Gentiles were not obligated to be circumcised. The law had become, as Luke wrote, only the “custom of the Jews” (At 15:1).

When one comes into Christ through obedience to the gospel, he or she must make some critical decisions concerning his or her past religious beliefs and behavior. What one may have considered “law” before obedience to the gospel, may now be only a “custom.” In the book of Galatians, the Holy Spirit argued persuasively that Christians not be brought into the bondage of old religious “boxes.” Religious rites that may have been allowed before one’s new birth must never be allowed to subsidize the truth of the gospel (See Cl 3).

Some disciples in Colosse had some difficulty with this matter. So Paul argued, “*If you then were raised with Christ, seek those things that are above*” (Cl 3:1). “*Set your mind on things above,*” Paul continued, “*for you are dead [to the ways of the world]*” (Cl 3:3). “*Therefore, put to death your members that are on the earth*” (Cl 3:5). If one were a Jew coming into Christ in the first century,

then there were a host of doctrines and commandments of the fathers that had to be put away in order to live in the freedom that we have in Christ (See Mk 7:1-9). Those who are set free from the religious rites of their past must never again be brought into the bondage of their former religion.

One certainly has the freedom to carry on with his or her former religious traditions. However, under no circumstances does one have a right to bind on the consciences of others those practices he may deem to be in the realm of Christian behavior. We are sure that the early Jewish brethren carried on with their circumcision. However, they could not bind on Gentiles this former law that had now become only a “custom of Moses.” Some Jewish brethren in the first century tried to do this, but they met head on with the condemnation of the Holy Spirit who judged that their actions were endangering the freedom that all have in Christ. In fact, in no uncertain terms the Holy Spirit said, “*If you are circumcised [according to law], Christ will profit you nothing*” (Gl 5:2). Binding religious laws as a matter of salvation is preaching another gospel (Gl 1:6-9).

Chapter 5

FALLEN

We remember receiving a phone call from a young man who was somewhat distraught about a piece of literature of ours he had read. He wanted us to explain what we meant by “apostasy,” for “his church” had never referred to such. It was something quite unknown to him. If one was once saved by the grace of God, then he could not understand how one could be an apostate.

When we use the word “apostasy,” we are referring to both doctrinal matters and gospel matters. John addressed those who were gospel apostates, for they denied that the Son of God had come in the flesh (1 Jn 4:2,3). Paul even prophesied “*that in the latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons*” (1 Tm 4:1). But in addition to apostasy from sound doctrine, there is the apostasy from the fundamental principles of the gospel. Some simply grow indifferent to the gospel they obeyed. They have become indifferent because their faith in the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, kingdom reign and final coming have become irrelevant matters of their faith.

As a group, when Christians lose

their first love, it is an apostasy without emotional pain, for it involves the majority. Lukewarmness often takes place over decades, not years. Once it is in its final stages, there is usually no turning back. As a group, the Christians in Ephesus lost their first love, though they retained their doctrinal purity (Rv 2:2). But they had fallen into the apostasy of losing their motivation by the gospel (Rv 2:4). The angel to the church mandated that John write in reference to the Ephesian Christians, “*Remember from where you have fallen, and repent*” (Rv 2:5).

The church in Laodicea simply cooled. “*I know your works,*” Jesus said of them from heaven, “*that you are neither cold nor hot*” (Rv 3:15). The problem with being neither excited about living the gospel, or becoming totally indifferent, is that one feels comfortable in his or her state of indifference. If one is content in such a state, then the motivational fire of the Lord in his heart has cooled. In such a state of mediocrity, Jesus judged the Laodicean disciples: “*Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth*” (Rv 3:16).

The majority of the disciples in

Ephesus and Laodicea had followed after the consensus, and eventually the majority created in their minds a concept of religiosity that was “fallen.” The majority vote kept them on the path that would eventually lead to their candlestick of influence being removed.

It is frightening that in matters of faith, the creation of a new religion often begins as a zealous call for a restoration. Such is a noble plea, one that is surely taken from the prophets of Israel who were called out of the idolatry of Baal worship to the old paths of God’s ways. The Lord pled with apostate Israel, “*Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it and you will find rest for your souls*” (Jr 6:16). But the majority of the people responded, “*We will not walk in it*” (Jr 6:16). They had actually gone from belief in God to unbelief.

We have noticed in the history of the prophets of the Old Testament that the prophets always showed up too late. The apostasy of the majority had gone so far that the people as a whole could not turn back. God sent the prophets, therefore, more to judge the people than to turn them from their apostasy. He knew that it was too late. But He also wanted the people to know that where they were headed was their own fault, not His. The

pleading prophets, nevertheless, were raised up in times when the majority of Israel was on the way out and into captivity. The pleas of the prophets, therefore, were only futile efforts to turn a people from the consequences of their spiritual demise.

We wonder that maybe God sent the prophets to an apostate Israel only for our benefit, “*for whatever things were written before were written [in the Old Testament] for our learning*” (Rm 15:4). And then we recall what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “*Now these things happened to them [Israel] as an example*” (1 Co 10:11). God wants us to rehearse continually the points of Israel’s apostasy unless we find ourselves going through the same door on our way from God. If this was the reason for the call of the noble prophets of God in times of old, then we are listening. We are learning. We are into our Old Testament lest we follow Israel’s example into apostasy.

The church throughout history has gone astray on many occasions. We have church history books that are loaded with illustrations of how church went wrong. We are also listening and learning from our past, lest we are doomed to relive the examples of the fallen as those in Ephesus and Laodicea.

In view of Israel’s slow demise into apostasy on many occasions, and scores of church history books that

have mapped out so many examples of the same, we would be less than naive not to believe that the church again could move into ways of creating a god after our own desires and a religion that pleases our indifferent behavior in living the incarnational gospel of the Son of God. We have reasons for believing this.

Our postulations are not simply speculations conjectured from hypothetical situations. Fifty years of experience must not be ignored because we have lived through so many situations, as well as witnessed trends that appear in a vanishing moment. Trends take decades to develop, and thus, only those who have lived through trends in apostasy have been around long enough to know that we have lost our first love and have need “to remember from where we have fallen” (Rv 2:5). The fact that there are few among us who sense the loss of our first love, or the indifference of lukewarmness, is evidence that very few of our leaders today realize that we have “lost our first love.”

Since we now live in an era of little focus on the gospel, we know that we are in trouble. Now do not miss our point. Most religions that fall under the umbrella of “Christianity” focus on Jesus, the Son of God. But the problem is a matter of priorities. It is a matter of what we believe is the primary function of our faith by

which we feel justified before God. When faith becomes either heritage (traditions) based, or experientially founded, then the truth of the gospel becomes a secondary foundation. If a particular movement is legal based, it too is on its way from the primary foundation of God’s grace.

Both heritage and legal religions are based on the self-sanctifying efforts of the adherents. The legalist finds comfort in law, whereas the traditionalist finds comfort in obedience to the heritage of the fathers. The adherents of both systems of religion find contentment in the flow of the majority, and thus, they justify their existence by the behavior of the majority at any one time in history.

And then we must add what many consider to be the most important restoration of modern times. This movement falls under what is claimed to be a true return to Pentecost. The movement is known primarily as Pentecostalism, but in definition it is a movement to experiential emotionalism. The experiential restorationist finds comfort in his own feelings. This is a self-sanctifying movement that finds its foundation in the emotional experiences of man. But it too would be categorized with the legal and traditional religionists. All three “systems” of religion are self-righteous oriented. They focus on the performance of the individual as a foun-

dation for approval in the eyes of God. And thus, all three are self-sanctifying religions that take our minds off the gospel of God's grace as the primary means by which we are justified before Him of all sin.

Gospel is grace oriented. Gospel produces a faith in the righteousness of God that was revealed at the cross. Gospel promotes faith in the total sanctification of the cross. Gospel says that we are totally sanctified by Jesus' blood, and thus justified by His blood as opposed to our performance of either law or traditions, and especially our experiential emotionalism. Gospel says we are justified before God on the basis of Jesus' performance on the cross, not on the basis of our performance of self-justifying good works or perfect law-keeping, faithful keeping of our fathers'

traditions, or the emotional outburst of ourselves. The gospel focuses our attention first on Jesus, not on ourselves.

Because the gospel takes our minds off ourselves and places our focus on the Lord Jesus Christ, He is able in our lives *"to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us"* (Ep 3:20). The gospel of God's grace through Jesus stirs us out of indifference. It lifts us out of the pits of lukewarm religiosity and spurs us on to restore our first love that was lost. We must call for a restoration of the gospel as the total focus of our behavior. When we start walking in gratitude of what He did for us, we will stop walking alone on the merit of our own energies.

Chapter 6

HERITAGE AUTHORITY

It is right and according to the word of God to call for a restoration of the authority of the word of God in matters of faith. However, some who make such a plea often make an unfortunate mistake. While viewing the Scriptures as a catechism of doctrine by which to call for a restoration of the faith of the "old paths," they assume that the identity of faith is based on their ability to ascertain and imple-

ment "sound doctrine" in all matters of opinion as to how we must implement our faith. In doing this, we often fall victim to the same hermeneutic that identified the Jews' religion of the Pharisees (Gl 1:13). They believed that not only is the law binding, but also the numerous traditions they had attached to the law in order to implement the law.

During His earthly confrontation

with the leaders of the Jews' religion, Jesus pointed out that the problem was not with the Sinai law, but with the added traditions that the religious leaders thought were necessary to surround the law itself (See Mt 15:1-9; Mk 7:1-9). There is indeed nothing wrong with individual interpretations of the law, which are more often opinions. But when the interpretations (opinions) become the heritage of the believers by which the law must be interpreted and implemented, then we have a problem.

In our efforts to contend for the law of our faith, we must be careful. The zealous student often seeks for authorities outside the law in order to confirm his interpretations of the law. In doing this, he often believes that his assertions are authoritative because of the footnotes of his writings from other authors who agree with his deductions. The more bibliography one stacks at the end of his book, the more authority he assumes that his writings must have in the field of theology. His footnotes, therefore, are used in an effort to substantiate his interpretations as truth.

When footnoted interpretations become the norm of biblical studies, then a problem invariably develops. The problem is that footnoted interpretations become a part of the catechism by which the doctrine of a particular religious group is identified.

This was the road down which the Jews theologically traveled. When they came to Jesus on the day of the Mark 7 confrontation, they met the author of the Sinai law itself. His pronouncement was penetrating: "*All too well you [religious leaders] **reject the commandment of God** [the Sinai law] so that you may keep your own tradition*" (Mk 7:9).

The religious leaders of Israel had allowed the centuries of codified interpretations and opinions of their heritage to become "case law." By the time Jesus arrived, they could not distinguish between the Sinai law and their law. By the first century, Paul referred to their religion that was founded on the law, plus their case law, as the Jews' religion (Judaism) (Gl 1:13). They had finalized their apostasy. Their doctrinal purity was obedience to the Sinai law, plus all the other restrictions of law they had added to which the adherents must also be obedient. In doing such, they produced a religion. Some tried to do this very thing with the gospel. But they ended up with another gospel (Gl 1:6-9).

Some of those who are sincere in their efforts to restore the authority of the word of God in matters of faith often fail to see the danger that brought the Jews into bondage when Jesus came with a message of freedom. His message was not a freedom

message unless they were already in bondage. They were in the bondage of their own religion. It is worth quoting again Paul's warning in reference to going back under law: "*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).

Now consider for a moment the preceding statement as a matter of historical significance in reference to the Jews' problem with theology and obedience. In reference to justification before God, Jesus' message would have no freedom if the people to whom He came were not in "bondage." The Jews had "entangled" themselves in a quagmire of theology by which they believed that obedience to such would deliver them justified before God. This was the same quagmire of theology that Jesus confronted in Mark 7:1-9.

The mistake that the religious leaders made by the time of the coming of Jesus was that they were preaching Sinai law plus all their interpretations and applications. Their counterparts today, for example, would be those who obey the law, "This do in remembrance of Me," plus certain catechisms by which the law of the Lord's Supper must be carried out. Should the Supper be served before the ceremonial sermon, or after? Should men, but not women,

serve? Women can serve from left to right, but not front to back. And then we need not go into all the confusion concerning what constitutes "fruit of the vine" and the "bread."

What complicates the issue is when "Jewish authorities" are footnoted in one's argument as to how the Supper is to be served. But more important than the authorities one may footnote in his defense, there is the heritage of the particular religious group that has "performed" the Supper a certain way throughout their history. Their heritage, therefore, has become law that must be obeyed in order to comply with the mandate, "This do in remembrance of Me." The problem with theological heritage keepers is that they are quick to judge those of a different heritage law, but cannot see that they are guilty of the same.

We are urged to carry the apostasy of heritage keepers into the realm of sectarianism, something about which legal-driven sects are almost always unaware. For example, it is true that names of "churches" promote sectarianism. While some say they do not, they fail to recognize that even names within a family of religious groups are always used to identify one group of sheep to be separate from another group. The group that meets on North Main is identified with a name that separates it from the

group that meets on South Main. The identity of each group by a particular name is sectarianism. The sheep inadvertently separate themselves into groups by being categorized under their favorite names.

Some with a sectarian spirit will go so far as to select a particular name from the Scriptures, and subsequently, affirm that their selection is “biblical.” However, another group will do the same, but will select a different “scriptural” name. They too will affirm that their selection is correct. Both groups will maintain their separation from one another that is simply based on different names. In doing this, they encourage sectarianism. They encourage the division of Christians by encouraging different groups to assemble under different favorite names. When the favorite names become the heritage of each particular group, then the division is permanent.

Both groups have failed to understand that the Holy Spirit never intended to name the disciples, other than a reference to Christians only (At 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pt 4:16). And when the Holy Spirit used the reference “Christian” in the two notations in Acts, it was probably first used derogatorily by unbelievers. Nevertheless, the Spirit used the derogatory use of the name to identify disciples in the early 60s to whom both Luke and Peter wrote.

We must keep in mind that the Spirit knew that names that are applied to the groups of different Christians would promote sectarianism. For this reason, we assume that the Spirit refrained from using any particular reference to the disciples as a unique mark of identity. If there are those who feel uncomfortable with this, then they have identified themselves to be sectarian. And when the name has become the identity of the heritage of a particular group of disciples, then the rise of heritage authority has captivated a particular group of disciples who seek to remain separate from everyone else.

But it is more than a name when we are referring to apostasy. As time carries on, every religious group begins to cluster under their favorite name and assortment of religious traditions that have now become the identity of their heritage. We would identify sectarian traditions as religious rites or rituals, customs or codes, that lie outside the word of God. When we behave as the Jews, and begin to identify and footnote the particular marks of our identity, then the simple faith that we read about in the New Testament becomes very blurred. We begin interpreting what we read in the New Testament through the glasses of our own religious prejudices.

Throughout a few generations, the traditions that identify a particu-

lar sect become the heritage of their faith. Religionists are proud of their heritage, and in order to be proud, they must be able to specifically identify their heritage in the midst of other heritage groups in the religious community. Their heritage defines who they are, and thus of necessity, they must assign a unique name to their heritage lest others become confused as to which group they belong. At this state of an apostasy, the authority of the Scriptures fades away. Bible study no longer defines the group that originally set a course for defining who they are by a call for the authority of the Scriptures in all matters of faith. Heritage has become the final authority of the faith of the adherents. The Jews progressed to this point when Jesus came to them. They rejected the commandment of God in order to maintain their heritage (Mk 7:9).

Several years ago we heard one brother of a particular sect say about another brother of the same sect, "I guess he is no longer with us." What the judge was saying was that the one on whom he had cast judgment was no longer maintaining the unique points of identity of their heritage. Being "with us" meant that one must conform to the legal status of the sect that is now based on heritage more than gospel. "With us" meant with our sect. And to be of one's particular sect, he or she must walk accord-

ing to the traditions that identify the particular sect.

As a side note, the brother who "was no longer with us" was preaching the gospel, but outside the particular heritage of the group he had supposedly left. The judge meant that it was not "according to the law" that one should step outside the fellowship of the "heritage group" in order to preach the gospel to another group. Paul's custom of preaching in the synagogues of the Jews would be wrong according to the judge (See At 17:1,2). Aquila and Priscilla in the Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath would mean to some Christians that they are "no longer with us" (At 18:24-28).

We offer the example of the Jewish apostasy to illustrate what happened with the religious leaders of Israel, which thing is also happening today. What the religious leaders of Jesus' day were doing was grievous. It was so grievous that Jesus used the word "woe" in His condemnation of what His contemporary religious leaders were doing. Jesus said of the sectarian Jewish leadership,

But woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men, for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in (Mt 23:13).

When judgments are made in reference to conforming to heritage, then we know that apostasy has taken away those who, generations before, did not set their course to establish another religious sect. Therefore, the leading fathers of any restoration must be careful not to establish a legal-oriented foundation upon which apostasy can arise.

Our constitutional mandate is laid out clearly in the books of Romans and Galatians. In extracting le-

galistic Jews from the Jews' religion, the Holy Spirit established the gospel of freedom as the foundation upon which we must base our faith. Our call, therefore, must always be for a gospel restoration movement, as opposed to a legal restoration. Efforts to legalize grace will always create sects. Legalizing grace establishes those principles ("laws") upon which a system of theology is produced that leads to sectarianism.

Chapter 7

GOSPEL AND LAW

Any conclusion that we might make concerning the restoration of the gospel to be our center of reference for faith and obedience must stand on the following statement of Paul in reference to law: "***Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of law***" (Rm 3:28). In other words, we are justified of sin before God by faith on the merit of the cross of Jesus. We are not justified by any meritorious performance of law or self-sanctification through our own supposed atoning works.

Just in case we might have misunderstood this conclusion, by the time Paul came to the final statements of his argument in Romans, he added, "***And if by grace, then it is no more***

by works [that is, meritorious law-keeping and good works]" (Rm 11:6). And as an added note on this subject, Paul wrote to the Ephesians,

For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works [of merit], lest anyone should boast [in his own works] (Ep 2:8,9).

This is the message of the gospel that was revealed through Jesus Christ. This is the foundation upon which we must call for a gospel restoration.

Heritage authority is directly opposed to the gospel. In fact, since heritage authority is established on the consensus of the majority to obey the traditions of the fathers, then the gos-

pel of grace has no opportunity to motivate the hearts of those who are in bondage to their own religious heritage. When heritage has moved gospel out of the hearts of the adherents by the adherents' trust in their own performance of the traditions of the fathers, then it is difficult to find one's way back to faith in the grace of God. When we add to this the absence of Bible study among those who trust in their heritage, then only disaster is in the future.

*My people are **destroyed** for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge [of Me], I will also reject you so that you will be no priest to Me. Seeing you have forgotten the law of your God, I will also forget your children* (Hs 4:6).

The word "destroyed" in this statement of God through Hosea is in the past tense. By the time Hosea showed up on the scene, **Israel was already gone**. There was no turning back.

When the people of Israel forgot the law of God, they did not cease being religious. On the contrary, the problem was that they based their faith on their own religiosity, not on the law of God. Hosea, therefore, was a preacher who came to pronounce judgment, not to give the people an opportunity to repent.

When a religionist finds comfort

in the heritage of the faith of his fathers, which faith is not based on the word of God, then he is in a state where it is difficult to turn back to God. The reason is that repentance would involve a return to faith in God's grace as opposed to one's own performance of the religious rites of one's religious heritage. We must not forget that if one's faith in his forefathers' religious heritage is stronger in his life than the gospel of God's grace, then one is in a very precarious situation in reference to what Jesus said in John 12:48.

This is also true of those who have established a meritorious legal foundation upon which to build their faith. This was the problem of the Pharisees and scribes during Jesus' earthly ministry. By the time Jesus arrived, they had laid aside the commandment of God in order to honor their own religious heritage (Mk 7:8). In fact, when the commandment of God was presented to them, their stern religiosity prevailed over the message of the gospel that Jesus was delivering to all Israel. Jesus said of them, "*All too well you reject the commandment of God so that you may keep your own traditions*" (Mk 7:9).

In the books of Romans and Galatians this is precisely what Paul argued against. At the time Paul wrote the two letters, there were Jewish legalists coming into the fellowship of

the disciples with the legal religiosity of their former years in Judaism. In the two letters, therefore, Paul concluded that if there is justification through meritorious law-keeping, then the gospel means nothing. It means nothing if it must be subsidized by the religious performances of man.

The gospel is dead if it must be subsidized by the self-sanctifying obedience of religious rites. It has no power in such situations. It was because of this legal attack against the gospel that Paul sternly encouraged those who lived by the gospel not to be brought again into the bondage of meritorious law-keeping and good works (Gl 5:1).

When we refer to gospel, we are **not** talking about meritorious law-keeping and self-sanctifying good works. The gospel says, "*For by works of law no flesh will be justified [before God]*" (Gl 2:16). But the legalist would establish a system of legal acts of obedience, and then perform accordingly in order to be justified before God on the basis of performing correctly his laws of obedience. But the gospel is not a system of perfect law-keeping.

For example, the gospel says, "*God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth [of the gospel]*" (Jn 4:24). The legalist would say that we must establish a system by which we can

assure ourselves that we are performing the laws of "true" worship.

The gospel says that Jesus is coming again to take "*vengeance on those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (2 Th 1:8). The legalist would take the declarative statement of Mark 16:16 in response to the preaching of the gospel—"*He who believes and is baptized will be saved*"—and twist it in the text into an imperative command. He would thus make the shift of emphasis from baptism being a response to the gospel to a matter of legal obedience on the part of the one who believes.

It is true that there are commands in the New Testament to be baptized (See At 2:38; 22:16). But these commands are based on the response of those who believed the gospel of Jesus. There was no command to be baptized that was not based on belief in Jesus. If one did not believe on Jesus, then there was no need to be obedient to the command to be baptized (See Mk 16:16).

If baptism were simply obedience to a legal command, then we would go from emphasizing one's belief in the gospel to emphasizing one's performance of the "law of baptism." We would forget that obedience in baptism is imperative because it is a natural response to belief in the gospel.

Our response to the gospel is based on our knowledge of God, and what He did for us through the gospel of His beloved Son. We thus obey the gospel in baptism because we are knowledgeable of and believe the gospel. If one did not believe the gospel, then certainly he would not be baptized (See Mk 16:15,16).

Legal obedience in “getting baptized” is reassuring in knowing that one has followed Jesus to the Jordan River, but it often ignores one’s response to knowing the heart of God that was revealed through the good news of Jesus. If one does not know the heart of God as revealed through the gospel of grace, then he can legally be baptized according to command. But he is obeying a law without understanding the heart of God that was revealed through the incarnation and the cross. He thus comes out of the water having obeyed legalities, **and not because he has responded to the love of God that was revealed through the incarnation and the cross.**

It is a subtle difference, but it is a difference. Gospel and legalism simply stand against one another, and subsequently, produce two different individuals on the wet side of the waters of baptism. Gospel focuses our minds on God, and what He did for us through the cross. Legalism focuses our minds on ourselves as to

whether we have performed correctly the law of God. Through obedience to the gospel we have been drawn to Christ (Jn 12:32). Through obedience to law we are often running from punishment because of what would happen to us if we were not obedient.

For example, the gospel-obedient person needs no command to show up at the next assembly after coming out of the waters of baptism. He or she simply wants to be around other gospel-obedient people. The gospel obedient person needs no command to remember through the Supper why he or she went to the cross and grave with Jesus. He or she wants to be with Jesus on the cross and in grave in order to experience the resurrection.

The motive of the legalist is to mark off a check list of accomplishments according to law. The motive of the gospel obedient is to follow the instructions of the Father in response to the cross and resurrection. One walks in question as to whether one’s performance is perfect and complete. The other walks in gratitude, knowing that his or her performance is never perfect, and thus, must by faith trust in the grace of God.

The one who lives the gospel, therefore, is made perfect through the cross, whereas the legal performer is constantly seeking to make himself perfect through obedience. It is im-

perative, therefore, that the legal performer create steps to salvation to be performed, and acts of worship to perform in order to be assured that he or she has perfectly performed all the steps and acts in order to feel good before God. This is the person who needs to read again the comforting statement of the Holy Spirit: *“Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith [in the work of God through the gospel] apart from the works of law [by which we would seek to justify ourselves through our own performance of law and works]”* (Rm 3:28). *“Therefore, it [our salvation] is of faith [in God’s performance] that it might be by [His] grace”* (Rm 4:16).

Legal obedience cancels gospel response. On the other hand, gospel response nullifies legal meritorious obedience. It is for this reason that the legalist can never understand what Jesus meant in Matthew 5:48: *“Therefore, you are to be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect.”*

This statement was made in view of the revelation of the gospel that would be revealed on the cross. It would be then that those of faith would be made perfect through the cross, and not through their perfect obedience to law. We can never perfectly obey, but we can always be perfectly accepted by God through the grace of His Son, whose blood, per-

fectly cleanses us of all sin.

Law-keeping never makes one perfect. We know this in our own lives. Law always presents the dilemma of what Paul spoke concerning his own life: *“For without law, I was once alive. But when the commandment came, sin revived and I died”* (Rm 7:9). Law brings with it the reality of sin, and thus death because of sin. Gospel, on the other hand, brings life through the perfect cleansing of the blood of Jesus. It is for this reason that gospel brings life.

Does our faith in the sacrificial performance of the Son on the cross nullify law in our lives? Certainly not! We establish law in our lives because we trust in His performance, and not in our own (Rm 3:31). For this reason, true faith never sits idle in reference to studying the word of God.

Some define their faith by their avoidance of law. This is a “faith only” salvation that inevitably leads to one’s lack of focus on obedience to the commandment of God. Some willingly set aside the law of God in order to be justified apart from obedience. But this is a failure to understand that saving faith is always a response to the Father’s instructions. Obedience to the Father’s instructions in reference to our salvation is never meritorious, and thus, never optional. Obedience to God’s commands is never legalistic obedience. **Obedient**

faith in reference to our knowledge of God's instructions (law) can never be marginalized in reference to our salvation.

On the other hand, the religiosity that cursed the Israelites with destruction was their willing ignorance of the law of God, and subsequent disobedience of the law. They were destroyed because they had become ignorant of the true God of their origins (Hs 4:6). And because they exchanged the true God of heaven for Baal gods that they had created after their own imagination, they subsequently established their own righteousness to please their Baal gods. Though the Baal gods were eradicated from the minds of the Jews by the time of the arrival of Jesus, they had established for themselves the gods of their own righteousness (Rm 10:1-3). And in doing this, they rejected the righteousness of God.

When one by obedient faith trusts in the grace of God for His salvation, he seeks to establish the will (law) of God in his life. On the other hand, the "faith only" individual who discards obedience to law will eventually cease studying his Bible because he trusts only in his faith. This system of religion resulted in Israel's destruction for they forgot to continue to study the law of God.

The one who has faith in the grace of God is driven to know God

and His directions concerning salvation. True faith drives one to study the will and work of God in the affairs of man in order to bring His people into eternal glory (See Rm 15:4; 1 Co 10:11). The diligent believer is driven to know as much as possible about the gospel plan of salvation of this God who loved him so.

This was the meaning behind Paul's exhortation of 2 Timothy 2:15. The correct translation of this passage is the following: "*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*" If one is not motivated by the gospel, then he will not be diligent, especially in his Bible study. He will be ashamed because he knows he should be, but is not, a diligent respondent (workman) to the grace of God.

We must never forget that legalism leads to a failure in Bible study. Once the legalist has developed his outline of doctrine, he feels that there is no need for more Bible study. The "faith only" religionist ends up at the same demise because his trust is in his own faith and not the instructions of God. If one is saved by faith alone, then there is no need to know the will of God. It is always inherent in a "faith only" theology for one to eventually terminate one's Bible study. The "faith only" person grows paranoid about discovering in the Bible

something he or she **must** do in order to be saved.

But when one's faith is in the grace of God, then it is different. Faith in the grace of God inspires one continually to know more about this God who so loved the world that He sacrificed His only begotten Son. Therefore, Bible study, or lack thereof, will be the judge as to whether we are legalists, "faith only" adherents, or gos-

pel-appreciative saints who cannot satisfy our thirst for information about the gospel. We must always keep in mind that the grace-driven student studies without fear of discovering new truth to be obeyed. He has no fear because he understands that he was always saved by grace on his journey to discover more truth through his personal study of the word of God.

Chapter 8

HAVE TO — WANT TO

It seems that no matter how many times we read the following statements in the New Testament, we have a difficult time understanding the true nature of the gospel of God's grace:

- *"By the works of law no flesh will be justified in His sight" Rm 3:20).*
- *"We conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of law" (Rm 3:28).*
- *"Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rm 5:1).*
- *"You are not under law, but under grace" (Rm 6:14).*
- *"A man is not justified by works of law, but by the faith of Christ Jesus" (Gl 2:16).*
- *"For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any-*

one should boast" (Ep 2:8,9).

Our difficulty may be in our own desire to do our own thing. When we approach God, we want to do it our way. But this is not the way it is. Our relationship with God is not based on our way, but His way. In fact, we can never come before Him on the merit of our way. Unfortunately, because we cannot come before God on our own terms, we become religionists.

Religion is defined as our meritorious way by which we would earn our acceptance by God. Religion, therefore, becomes a system of rules or religious rites that we presume will obligate God to establish and maintain a relationship with us. If we violate our self-imposed rules to establish this relationship, we then develop some system of self-sanctification by

which we can cleanse ourselves of the violations of our rites and rules. After we have performed the atoning works, then we can once again feel accepted by God. This is religion. But gospel is entirely different.

If one were formerly a legal-oriented Jewish religionist, it would be quite difficult to digest the preceding statements of the Scriptures. As many believing Jews in the first century, there are many today who were born again out of a legal religiosity by which they sought to self-sanctify themselves into the grace of God. We too have sought to stand justified before God on the merit of our own self-imposed legal systems by which we have struggled to feel comfortable before God. We have deceived ourselves by trusting in ourselves.

Religion is deceiving because we feel good about keeping our religious rites, rules and ceremonies. When we obey the religiosity of our heritage, we content ourselves that our earthly fathers would be pleased with our obedience to the religious heritage that they had handed down to us. The problem with this is that we are seeking to please the wrong father.

If there are occasional infractions of our system, then with self-appointed works of sanctification that we would perform, we seek to restate ourselves in the grace of God. This is a system of saved/lost—lost/

saved. There is no peace of mind in this system of religion simply because we are establishing our faith and feelings on our own performance, which performance in religious matters is always flawed.

In a self-sanctifying system of religion there is no confidence in God to keep us saved. Everything depends on our own performance of either law or our self-imposed works of self-sanctification in order to atone for our misbehavior. Our salvation depends on ourselves. In some cases, we base our salvation on our obedience to the creeds of our religious heritage. We deceive ourselves into thinking that if our earthly father would be pleased with us, then certainly our heavenly Father would also be pleased.

The Jews' system of self-sanctification and self-justification was a system of faith that was based on the heritage of their fathers (Mk 7:1-9). The result of any such systems of religiosity is still the same today. Such systems are riddled through and through with guilt because any rational and honest person truly confesses up to the fact that there is no system of law by which any person can live perfectly before God. And when there are infractions against law, there can never be any self-atoning works by which we can wash our slate clean of sin.

To believe we can cleanse our

own sin is an effort to put God in our debt. Paul spoke of this system of religion: *“Now to him who works, the reward is not credited according to grace, but according to debt”* (Rm 4:4). Our efforts of self-sanctification reverse the grace of God because we seek through good works to obligate God to forgive us. But we forget that He has already forgiven those who have responded to His conditions through obedient faith.

Therefore, the Holy Spirit was very clear. **No one can be justified before God on the basis of keeping God’s law perfectly.** And, no one can perform one good work in order to obligate God to forgive us of our sins. Understanding these two principles constrains us to have faith in the grace of God.

It is our faith in God’s grace that brings the peace of mind that passes all understanding (Ph 4:7). This was the peace of mind that Jesus left with us when He left this world for heaven: *“Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be afraid”* (Jn 14:27).

A. “Have to” religion:

This brings us to the difference between religion and the gospel of grace. All religions are man-made

systems of religiosity by which we would seek to tether ourselves to Christ on the merit of our own performance. In religion there is always the feeling that one is working for something. He is working with all his might to hang on to his tether with Christ. The following statement is often mentioned in prayers that are offered: *“If we have been found faithful.”* So we work to be found faithful. Religion is often revealed through those who do not partake of the Lord’s Supper because they have not been *“found faithful”* at some time during the preceding week. Because of guilt they feel that they are not worthy to partake of the Supper. This is religion.

The fact is that we can never be *“found faithful”* on the merit of our performance of either law or works. And if one would refuse to partake of the Lord’s Supper in remembrance of the gospel of grace, then he misunderstands the gospel of grace. He has let go of his tether to Christ in order to hold on to his own.

If we are religiously inclined in this way, then a spiritual problem is revealed when we do partake of the Supper. If we partake, and thus feel that we have been *“found faithful”* because of our performance in the past week, then we feel self-qualified to be in fellowship with God. We become arrogant about ourselves, for we

think that we have meritoriously earned the right to partake of the Supper. This is religion.

Religion is a system of “I have to.” The religionist obligates himself to be “found faithful” by his successful performance of self-imposed religious rites. He obligates himself into believing that he must keep law perfectly in order to save himself. He must perform perfectly, and when he does not, he must make up for his infractions of law through self-sanctifying good works. For the self-sanctifying religionist, faith is all about one’s performance of law and works in order to be “found faithful” in the eyes of God. When he self-judges himself not to be “found faithful,” then he questions his faith. This is religion.

The legalist’s view of law is that he must meritoriously keep law perfectly in order to be “found faithful.” The psychology of the legalist is that he often remains in a state of guilt because he continually questions whether he is keeping the law perfectly. If some misfortune comes in his life, then he often complains to God. He complains to God that he has kept all the law, but wonders why he is being punished. In order to feel good, he does good works to atone for those areas of the law where his obedience is weak.

B. “Want to” faith:

On the other hand, faith in the gospel of grace means that we “want to.” Paul begins to explain this by saying, “*Where then is boasting [over law-keeping and works]? It is excluded. By what law? Of Works? No, but by the law of faith [in the grace of God]*” (Rm 3:27). So where does law stand in reference to our relationship with God? Paul answered, “*Do we then make void law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish law*” (Rm 3:31).

This is the faith of the one who says, “I want to.” Because we have faith in the grace of God to save us, **we want to be obedient children of our Father.** If we seek our Father’s favor through works, then we are trying to set aside His grace, or at least marginalize it in our efforts to measure up to what we have established as our standards of faithfulness.

But if our faith is in the fact that we are already saved by His grace, then we work because of our gratitude for our salvation. We thus walk by faith in His grace, and not by sight in our meritorious performance of a perfect attendance (2 Co 5:7).

We thus have a choice as to whether we would walk in religion which dictates “I have to” keep His law in order to justify myself, or walk

by faith in the grace of God which inspires us to say, “I want to” walk according to His law because He has already saved us. One walk is a walk of religion and bondage. The other is a walk of freedom and peace of mind. And for those who have experienced the walk of freedom, Paul’s exhortation is that we not detour from this walk of freedom (See Gl 5:1).

We must not forget that we are “*justified **freely** by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” (Rm 3:24). He “***freely** gives us all things*” (Rm 8:32), because “*Christ has made us **free***” (Gl 5:1). Therefore, “*we must know the things that are **freely** given to us by God*” (1 Co 2:12). And in the end, Jesus, because of grace, will say to each one of us, “*I will **freely** give to him who is thirsty of the fountain of the water of life*” (Rv 21:6).

If it is all free, then why would we be driven to work meritoriously for that which is free through the grace of God? It is not that we “have to” perform in order to be rewarded with that which is free. We must by faith accept the free gift of His grace. But it is not that we have to work in order to be worthy of that which is free.

If by faith we accept His grace, then we “want to” work because we

have been saved by His grace. We must remember this truth: “*For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, **it is the gift of God**; not of works, lest anyone should boast*” (Ep 2:8,9). We have chosen, therefore, to walk the walk of gratitude, and not the walk of guilt, despair, and discouragement. We have chosen this walk, not because we have to, but because we want to.

When one is first delivered out of the bondage of religious rites and rules through his obedience to the gospel, for some time there is often a spiritual battle between freedom and bondage, grace and works, faith in God or faith in one’s own performance of past religious rites and rules. This struggle to fully appreciate our freedom from the bondage of guilt is often a lifetime struggle. We have the New Testament Scriptures today because the early Christians were also struggling to grow out of their past religions. But we must remember that our heroes of the faith, as the apostle Paul, made it. And for this reason, he was sanctioned by the Holy Spirit to inscribe the following words concerning his victory: “*Be imitators of me even as I also am of Christ*” (1 Co 11:1).

Chapter 9

PERSECUTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Is there a conflict between law and grace? Depending on one's approach to law, there most certainly is. Paul's statement of Romans 7:9 should be a clue: "*For without law, I was once alive. But when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.*" Because of the conflict between law and grace there will always be a conflict between those who seek to live according to the gospel and those who seek to live according to a religion of meritorious law-keeping.

We do not know at what time during Jesus' early ministry that He began to reveal the gospel of grace. We do know that when He delivered the message of the sermon on the mountain early in His ministry, He began revealing the first principles upon which gospel living would be founded. Also in the sermon on the mountain, He began to speak to His disciples concerning the adverse reaction of religionists who would come upon them if they chose to live the message that He was bringing into the world.

At the time He delivered the message on the mountain, Jesus was into His ministry long enough for multitudes to be following Him. Unfortunately, the multitudes did not fully un-

derstand the paradigm shift He was introducing into their faith (Mt 5:1; see Lk 14:25-35). Sometime during the first year of His ministry "*He went up on a mountain.*" It was then that He began to reveal a great conflict that would soon arise in the religious world concerning what He was about to introduce into the world.

At the end of what is commonly referred to as the Beatitudes, Jesus revealed that there would be great conflict in the religious world between those who would follow Him through their obedience to the gospel, and the religious world that would oppose the gospel that He would reveal. Jesus later warned His immediate disciples, "*If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you*" (Jn 15:18).

It is interesting to note in the preceding statement that Jesus used the word "world" in reference to the religious world of the Jews who hated Jesus so much that they eventually cried out, "Crucify Him. Crucify Him." So without mentioning any specifics in concluding the Beatitudes, Jesus forewarned the multitudes,

Blessed are those who are persecuted

for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you for My sake (Mt 5:10:11).

Jesus brought a final note of comfort to His eager audience by recalling the righteous prophets who had gone before them. *“Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Mt 5:12).*

What was coming in the future was a conflict between those who had created their own righteousness and those who would be imputed with the righteousness of God through their obedience to the gospel. Those who created their own righteousness would eventually be intimidated by the righteousness of God that was revealed in the lives of the early obedient disciples. And for this reason, those who lived according to the standard of their own self-righteousness would persecute those who would live only by the standard of the gospel of grace.

The conflict was coming in the lives of those who would live according to the righteousness of God. The self-righteous would put Jesus on the cross because they refused the gospel He preached. Those who would live

according to their motivation by the gospel would likewise be persecuted as Jesus. And thus, the persecuted would also have a cross to bear (Lk 14:27).

In the fullness of time when Jesus arrived on earth, the self-righteousness of the Jews had reached its zenith (See Gl 4:4). The religious leaders of Israel had established their own religion (Gl 1:13). As Israel during the days of the prophets, specifically Hosea, the Jews had become ignorant of the righteousness of God (Hs 4:6). Paul explained that the same religious environment existed at the time Jesus came into the world:

For I testify of them that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God (Rm 10:2,3).

Herein is explained why the Jewish religious leaders nailed Jesus to the cross. He intimidated their works-oriented religiosity. Through their legal system of righteousness, they presumed that they were self-justified before God. The faith that Jesus introduced was not based on one's confidence in his own self-sanctifying righteousness. It was based on the righteousness of God. This meant that one

was righteous because of God's grace, not because one had either performed law perfectly, or sanctified himself through good works in order to put God in debt to save him. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had truly forgotten what God said through David:

*The Lord looked down from heaven on the children of men to see if there were any who understood and sought God. They have all gone aside. They have all together become filthy. **There is no one who does good, no, not one** (Ps 14:2,3).*

Paul reminded his readers by quoting in Romans this very statement of David concerning the spiritual condition of man when Jesus came into the world (See Rm 3:10,11). In the context of what Jesus said in the sermon on the mountain, the Holy Spirit wanted us to connect the dots: "**There is none righteous, no, not one**" (Rm 3:10).

There is no one who is righteous before God on the merit of his own performance of law, or supposed self-sanctification through good works. But the religious leaders of Jesus' day presumed that they were righteous according to the righteousness that they had religiously constructed for themselves in ignorance of the righteousness of God. They were so steeped in

their own self-righteousness that they could not recognize the righteousness of God that was revealed through Jesus. In fact, Jesus said of them, "*For John [the Baptist] came to you [religious leaders] in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him*" (Mt 21:32).

It is true that those who live the gospel today are often not recognized by the religious world. It is difficult for self-righteous people to recognize those who live by the gospel. Self-righteous legalists must judge others according to the legalities of their own legal systems, not according to their understanding of the gospel of grace.

Self-righteous religionists persecuted Jesus during His ministry. They will do the same today to anyone who would live by the motivation of the gospel. Gospel intimidates the religionist, for religion is based on the meritorious obedience of those who are in the bondage of the rites and rules of religion. Those who would lead in a gospel restoration will always be persecuted by those who have built their faith on a legal-oriented restoration of self-righteousness.

If one would live in the freedom by which Christ has set him free in obedience to the gospel, then those who are not of the gospel, and do not know the God of the gospel, will persecute those who are identified by the gospel. Those who live according to

the gospel of freedom will always be labeled liberal because they do not conform to a legal system of self-righteousness. Those who presume to be legally righteous will always consider those who live after the gospel of freedom to be liberal according to the legal standards by which they define their religion. Legalists will presumptuously assume that they are self-justified before God through their meritorious law-keeping, and thus by their own standards, will judge those who live according to the gospel of grace.

Those who seek to establish their own righteousness according

to a religion of meritorious law-keeping will always have difficulty understanding those who establish law in their lives according to their response to the gospel of grace. Because of this difficulty on the part of the legal self-righteous, Paul had to clarify this point in the following statement: *“Do we then make void law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish law”* (Rm 3:31). Those who have lived long in a system of legal righteousness have some difficulty understanding this statement of gospel truth.

Chapter 10 GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

In referring to the subject of baptism in obedience to the gospel, we can be more specific concerning the self-righteous persecution of those who would be righteous according to God's righteousness. A self-righteous religionist will often deny that one should be baptized for remission of sins, even though there are numerous clear statements of such in the Scriptures (At 2:38; 22:16). But there is a reason for this objection.

A. Self-righteous legalist:

First consider the legal-oriented religionist. This person cannot under-

stand why some would question those who seek to be baptized. Since he believes that one is subject to law on the merit of one's own performance of law itself, then he cannot understand why there would be those who would question those who want to obey the law. He does not understand the argument of the self-righteous religionist, because he asserts that the religionist is seeking to deny obedience to the law.

Legal religionists will always be in debate with one another over matters of what they consider law. They will debate because each is approaching the law legally, and not according

to the gospel of grace. They debate as to which laws must be obeyed. They debate that the commands to “believe on Jesus” and “be baptized” are laws from which a choice must be made in order that one come into a saving relationship with God. They even debate as to which examples in the New Testament that they have made law should be obeyed. Their debates are endless because each one has established a rule book of law that defines which opinions are salvational and which statements of command are optional.

Though the New Testament is used to establish unique outlines of law that must be obeyed, the outlines of all legalists are invariably different, and often in conflict with one another. Depending on the hermeneutics by which each determines the laws of his outline in the camps of the legalists, there will always be conflicts between outlines of law.

Since all aspects of faith must supposedly fall under law, then legal-restorationists will constantly be in conflict with one another as each makes his own legal outline of law according to his own heritage, or interpretation of the Scriptures. The Jews had a solution to iron out such conflicts. They established authorities called the scribes to settle disputes when there were conflicts in reference to determining that which is of law.

As the religious policemen, the Pharisees made sure that everyone complied with the decisions of the scribes. Theirs was not necessarily a system of religion without contradictions, but it was truly a system of religion in which they tried to be as consistent as possible (See Gl 1:13).

B. Self-righteous religiosity:

Now consider the self-righteous religionist affirms that any obedience to law is meritorious. He has read enough scriptures on the subject of our justification by faith through grace that he is convinced that no “works” (obedience) whatsoever should marginalize grace. If there were any action on the part of man in reference to his own salvation, then such should surely be contrary to our salvation by grace alone.

Since his position is usually defined as “salvation by grace only,” he has a difficult time understanding the requirement of any commandment that is given in reference to our salvation. To him, therefore, baptism as a law would be a work of merit if obeyed in order to be saved. His conclusion is that since we are not meritoriously saved by works of law, then we are saved by ignoring all law, including baptism that would give the pretense of meritorious salvation. However, he does not realize that he

becomes self-righteous in his rejection of law in order to establish his own law that one is saved on the merit of faith alone. And herein is revealed the fact that his theology is contrary to the gospel.

C. Gospel living by faith:

Now we need to view baptism from the gospel side. Paul's argument to the "faith only" religionist was not the dismissal of law through faith and grace, but through faith "*we establish law*" (Rm 3:31). **Faith in the grace of God is the motivation to establish law in one's life.** It is the impetus.

Faith energizes our hearts to respond to the heart of God that was revealed through the gospel of His Son on the cross and resurrection from the dead. If there is no response to the gospel, then it is as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. The unresponsive person really **does not know God** (2 Th 1:8). He does not know the heart of God that was incarnate in the flesh of man in order to be offered as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity.

If one is ignorant of the heart of God that was exposed on the cross, then he will create his own religiosity—his own self-righteousness—in order to feel justified before God. His "faith only" relationship with God will drive him to guilt that creates

some meritorious work ethic to relieve himself of guilt. Because he trusts in his "faith only" salvation, he does not seek to obey the gospel of God by being buried with the heart of God that went to the cross and grave for his sins. He will not be raised up to rejoice in newness of life as the Son of God was raised from the dead. He will not because he has deceived himself by confusing meritorious works of law with responses to the heart of God. He thus misses out on what Paul wrote of himself: "*I want to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being like Him in His death*" (Ph 3:10).

All this consideration about baptism is simply legal business in the mind of the "faith only" religionists. He feels that a response to the heart of God is a step into the realm of meritorious works of law. On the other hand, the legalist will always be baptized in order to comply with legalities. He will find a law, and then obey that law. At least he is being obedient to law, though he may not fully understand what it means to be baptized in response to the gospel heart of God.

The gospel respondent, in agreement with those who are legally obedient, will be baptized. However, his obedience in baptism is motivated by the crucified heart of God for his sins.

A young child can be baptized according to law. But in order to be baptized in response to the gospel, one must be of the age when he or she can intellectually and emotionally respond to the heart of God that was crucified on the cross of Calvary. It goes without saying that the baptism of babies is a mockery of the heart of God on the cross. Parents cannot respond to the heart of God on behalf of their babies.

And so, there will always be a conflict between those who would seek to establish their own righteousness that is void of the law of God, and those who seek to respond to the gospel of the cross. And for this reason, self-righteous religionists will always persecute those who seek to be righteous according to the righteousness of God. Legal religionists will always persecute those who seek to live in response to the gospel. Those whose emphasis is on grace will always be persecuted by those whose emphasize is on meritorious law-keeping.

The deception of the “faith only” self-righteous religionist is that he presumes that he is righteous before God on the merit of his faith only. He has convinced himself that his faith will wash away his sins (See At 22:16). Unfortunately, this system of righteousness always leaves one in doubt concerning the “saving

strength” of his faith. He can believe that he is saved, but his belief is based on the merit of his faith. He thus establishes a religion of self-righteousness that is based on the merit of his own faith. Instead of having faith in God’s declaration of his salvation that is based on his obedience to what God requires of one to be saved, he seeks to declare his own salvation that is based on the merit of his faith alone.

The hypocrisy of the preacher of the “faith only” system of righteousness is that he proclaims that we are all saved by “faith only,” and yet he will continually harp every Sunday that the people must tithe according to law. And if they do not tithe according to law, then the people are “robbing God.” Their faith is weak.

Some also assume that their “speaking in tongues” is a manifestation of their faith. They subsequently judge others to have little or weak faith if they do not “speak in tongues.” Their own “speaking in tongues,” therefore, makes their faith meritorious. They make the judgment of others: No tongues, inadequate faith.

The hypocrisy of such a theology is self-evident. However, as the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, some are often so steeped in their self-righteous religiosity that they cannot see the contradictions of their theology. Nevertheless, it is quite hypocritical for one to self-proclaim himself saved by

“faith only” on Saturday night, but then feel that according to law he must show up in attendance on Sunday morning lest he break the law of the assembly. Likewise, it is hypocritical to affirm that one is saved by faith apart from obedience to the gospel, while at the same time he seeks to self-righteously validate his faith by meritorious works as “speaking in tongues.”

At the same time, we will not let the self-righteous legalist off the hook so easily. The self-righteous religionist establishes a law of assembly, quoting endlessly and out of context Hebrews 10:25. The legalist will bark Sunday after Sunday not to forsake the law of attending the assembly. If one does not attend, or in some way must miss a designated “appointed hour” of assembly, he has broken the law. He is judged that his performance of the law of the assembly is dysfunctional, and thus he must “go forward” before the church and repent of his negligence.

Those legal religionists who find themselves in the quagmire of guilt will go on year after year, assuming that in their self-sanctifying attendance they are justified before God. They hope to pull out a perfect attendance chart at the final judgment in order to guarantee their entrance through the pearly gates.

Gospel is not about attendance

charts. Those in Hebrews 10 who customarily failed to show up in attendance were those who were struggling with their response to the gospel of Jesus. In fact, the entire book of Hebrews addressed this problem. The problem was not the violation of some law of attendance. The problem was that some were turning away from the gospel of Jesus. They were no longer motivated by the reigning King Jesus who was functioning in heaven as their High Priest and King (Hb 7:24-26; 8:1). They were falling away from the gospel priesthood and reign of Jesus. The Hebrew writer reminded them, and us, concerning what happened in the latter years of Israel when the nation fell away to the extent that it was not possible for them to repent. He wrote, “*For it is impossible ... if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame*” (Hb 6:4-6).

It would be impossible for them to repent because they would be content with the self-righteousness of the Jewish religion to which they returned. The ceremonial religiosity of Judaism appealed to them, so much so that it made it impossible for the gospel to once again have an appeal to their hearts.

People who want to walk in the bondage of their own self-righteous rules will always seek to return to the

bondage of Egypt. In the following statement, Peter referred to some former Christians who eventually made their way from freedom in Christ back to the bondage of Egypt:

For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning (2 Pt 2:20; see 2:21,22).

The last state is worse because the gospel of grace no longer had any appeal to their hearts to motivate them to escape the bondage of the world.

We must not think that religion does not have a tremendous appeal to the hearts and minds of those who seek to either narcissistically please their own flesh in the realm of religion, or to take glory in the security of institutional religion. When it seems that everyone is moving in the direction of a "big church" with an energetic concert of entertainment on Sunday morning, then it is time to be cautious. It is time to read again that the gate unto eternal glory is very narrow (See Mt 7:13,14). We must not forget that Jesus leads us out of the security of institutional religion and into a realm of faith wherein we must trust in the power of His resurrection (See Ph 3:8-11).

We must not forget that it was the religious majority who put Jesus on the cross. It was the religious majority who persecuted the early Christians. And, it was the religious majority upon whom God brought down judgment in A.D. 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. Therefore, before one joins the religious majority, he should take another look at whether the majority is living the gospel of King Jesus.

We must never forget that any form of theology that affirms that one is saved by faith alone is a theology of self-righteousness. It is not difficult to come to this conclusion. **If one declares that he is saved solely on the basis of his own faith, then he has meritoriously declared his salvation. His faith is the meritorious condition upon which he declares his salvation.** The problem is in one making a personal declaration of one's own salvation. Though the word of God would state that one is baptized for remission of sins (At 2:38), one's declaration of having remission of sins on the merit of his own faith is self-declared righteousness.

If one states that he is in Christ because of his faith alone, then he has meritoriously self-declared himself to be in Christ on the merit of his faith. The word of God states that one is baptized into Christ (Rm 6:3; Gl 3:27). But if one declares that he is

in Christ on the merit of his own faith, then he has meritoriously declared himself to be in Christ on the basis of faith. This is self-righteousness.

If one through faith alone lays claim to those spiritual blessings that the word of God declares are received through God's declaration, then one has set aside the declaration of the conditions of God to receive all spiritual blessings (See Gl 3:26-29; Ep 1:3). He has done so in order to receive all spiritual blessings in Christ by making his own meritorious claim to the blessings on the basis of his faith alone. This is self-righteousness.

Self-righteous declarations to possess those things that God states are received on the condition of responding to the gospel, are meritorious declarations that are based on the condition of one's faith alone. On the other hand, spiritual blessings that result from one's response to the gospel are never self-righteous. They are never self-declared. They are not meritoriously received. They are not because they are declared blessings by God in response to the conditions of the word of God. **Obedience to God's instructions is never self-righteous because one is simply being obedient to God. His conditions for salvation are never conditions to which we can meritoriously lay claim.**

Self-righteousness is not the re-

ceiving of God's blessings when we comply with His conditions to establish a covenant with Him. When God makes the declaration that we have remission of sins upon our response to the condition of obedience to the gospel, then we are not declaring for ourselves our own remission of sins on the basis of our faith. It is God who makes the declaration of the remission of our sins when we go to the cross with His Son, to the grave of water, and then rise with Him as His Son rose from the dead (Rm 6:3-6). It is then that God declares we have washed away our sins (At 22:16).

Therefore, one has a choice as to whether he will put his trust in his own self-declared remission of sins based on the merit of his faith alone, or on God's declaration of the same when one is obedient to the gospel. It might be good to conclude this chapter with another reading of how self-righteous declarations led Israel away from God.

*For I [Paul] testify of them [the Jews] that they have a zeal for God, **but not according to knowledge.** For they being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God (Rm 10:2,3).*

Does this sound familiar?

Chapter 11

THE INCARNATIONAL SON

At this point in this book we must become personal, that is, personal in reference to the life of Saul the Pharisee, who later became Paul the incarnational apostle. Philippians 3:1-11 is truly an inspirational text wherein Paul revealed his own incarnational journey by which he sought to live the incarnational journey of Jesus.

If a passage could be written of one being in heart and soul tethered to the Lord Jesus Christ, this would be the passage. And since Paul instructed those in Achaia to be imitators of him as He was of Christ (1 Co 11:1), then it is incumbent on us to dig deep into this explanation of how he, as John the Baptist, lived after the incarnational example of the Son of God. His life was indeed an incarnational example that answers the question concerning what one should be and do in order to imitate the God who existed in spirit, but lowered Himself to be man in the flesh.

In Philippians 2, Paul had just explained in this letter that as disciples of the incarnate Son of God, we must live the mind of Christ. ***“Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God”*** (Ph 2:5,6). *The*

New International Version probably better translated this verse: ***“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped”*** (Ph 2:6).

God the Son did not covet the nature of Deity when considering the value of those whom He had created after the image of God (Cl 1:16). The very fact that He emptied Himself of the nature of God proves forever that God was never after the nature of man. God is spirit (Jn 4:24). The Son of God sacrificed spirit for flesh (Jn 1:14).

The extent of his transformational journey will never be fully understood by us. Nevertheless, in some way Paul exhorts us to have the mind of the incarnate Son of God. In some way, we too must make this incarnational journey in our own lives. Philippians 3:1-11 is Paul’s personal testimony as to how he made the journey. His life was such a strong testimony to incarnational living after the incarnational journey of Jesus, that the Holy Spirit here allows him in Scripture to give us an example of how to so live.

“To write the same things to you indeed is not tedious” (Ph 3:1). It is not that we need a second opinion on

incarnational living. The fact is that we need to be told what the truth is twice or more. We need to reread this context with prayer and fasting. The reason is obvious. *“For you it is safe”* (Ph 3:1). It is safe to stay close to Paul and Jesus because of the dogs of religious leadership: *“Beware of the dogs. Beware of the evil workers. Beware of the false circumcision”* (Ph 3:2). These were those religionists who would profess to be Christian, but by their behavior they would deny the incarnational Son of God. The world is full of such people. John warned us with the following words: *“For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess that Jesus Christ is coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist”* (2 Jn 7).

These religious “dogs” presented themselves as people of great sacrifice and faith. They presumed to lead people with the example of their “persecutions for their faith.” Paul used a harsh term to define such people. However, we do not accredit the word “dogs” to have originated from Paul. It was the Holy Spirit who directed the pen of Paul to inscribe the word.

The Spirit was serious because He realized that we are as sheep without a shepherd. The Spirit knows that we are too eager to follow any religious charlatan that may come along who presumptuously assumes that he

has been miraculously validated for the leadership of the church.

We once visited an “elder” of such a group that had innocently been led astray by one who boasted of his great struggles in propagating his message around the world. We were given a 290-page book that was written by this worldwide false apostle. The book was entirely about the supposed miracles that the prophet claimed to have experienced in his journeys. His miraculous deliverance supposedly validated him to lead the church. The entire worldwide network of churches that the self-appointed apostle had established was based on his personal testimonies of miraculous deliverances that were written in his autobiography.

By revealing the exact opposite of what the aforementioned false apostle professed, the Holy Spirit allowed Paul to begin his testimony of what he sacrificed for Christ. The results of Paul’s life were entirely different. Here is why: Paul wrote, *“We rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh”* (Ph 3:3). In other words, Paul wrote, *“If I have to boast, I will boast of the things that concern my weakness”* (2 Co 11:30).

When men start boasting concerning their sufferings for Jesus, they are seeking to call people after themselves, and not after Christ. Though Paul used his sufferings for Christ as

an argument against the false apostles in Achaia, he reminded them and ourselves that boasting in the many sacrifices we might have endured for Jesus is simply foolishness (See 2 Co 11:1). It is foolishness because in publishing such sufferings one is actually trying to draw people to himself and away from the incarnational suffering Savior.

We must keep in mind that Paul was successful in using his incarnational living according to the gospel, not as a validation of the truth that he preached, **but to reveal the sincerity by which he believed and preached the gospel**. If one boasts in order to validate his message as truth, then he is a false apostle and evil doer.

Think for a moment. We are not called Paulites today. Neither were those in the first century called such, though some sought to follow the personalities of Paul, Cephas and Apollos (1 Co 1:12). If either Cephas or Apollos used their sufferings to validate the truth of the gospel they preached, then we could be called either Cephites or Apollosites. This would be true if the message these men preached originated exclusively from them and was validated by their sufferings. But because the message originated from God, the early disciples were called after Christ alone. Even though Paul wrote most of the letters of the New Testament, we are

still called after Christ, for it was Christ who was crucified for us, and it was into the name of Christ that we were baptized (1 Co 1:13).

So Paul reminded the Philippian “flesh boasters” that “*if anyone else thinks that he may have confidence in the flesh, I far more*” (Ph 3:4). In other words, one should never enter into a debate over sacrifices with the incarnational living apostle Paul (See 2 Co 11:16-32). Paul had to give only a brief survey of who he was and what he had done as a religious leader. This he had before Jesus knocked him off a horse on his way to continue his persecution of the disciples in Damascus (Ph 3:5,6; see At 9:1-19).

Every self-proclaimed religious leader who through pride seeks pomp and the opportunity to empty the purses of the poor, should read this: “*But what things were gain to me, those things I have counted loss for Christ*” (Ph 3:7). This is incarnational leadership according to the God who became flesh on our behalf. These are the thoughts that God expressed through Jeremiah:

But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on the earth. For in these things I delight (Jr 9:24).

Institutional religion is sustained by a hierarchy of leaders who often seek position, pomp and power in order to receive the offerings (tithes) from the purses of the attendees. But those who would lead the disciples of Jesus must be able to say, “What things were gain to me in the world, I have counted loss for Christ.”

But let us suppose an institutional church was looking for a replacement preacher for “the pulpit.” Their former preacher had moved on, and now they were looking for someone to take his place in order to sustain the institution.

(Here is an idea that we reaped from an insightful writer, though we have written our own respective letter of the supposed applicant.)

A deacon returned one day from the post office with a letter from a potential candidate for the “office.” In the business meeting, the deacon read the letter of the applicant. If we could suppose an applicant might write to an institutional church, it would probably be something as the following:

Dear sirs,

I was once a great preacher in the brotherhood of the religion in which I was formerly involved, I went about speaking at lectureships and addressing many

great religious leaders. But then I had a blinding experience. Since then I have suffered greatly, especially from poor eyesight that constantly hinders me. I have been in and out of prison, beaten by the authorities, slandered, and on trial more than once. I have forgotten how many times I have been arrested. I am basically homeless. People have forsaken me throughout my ministry. Some religious leaders have followed me from city to city in order to persecute me. And finally, most religious leaders have threatened me with death over and over. I once was a popular leader among the religious leadership of Jerusalem. But since my experience in Damascus, I have been banned from the pulpits of any institutional religion. I receive no more invitations to be a guest speaker at lectureships. In fact, all that I can do now is to go from house to house and meet with small groups of disciples in their homes. At one time, the persecution became so severe that the leaders of the institutional religions of one city ganged up on me and took me outside the city. They stoned me and left me for dead. Nevertheless, I have continued on faithfully preaching the message I have believed, praying that the One in whom I believe will come soon and relieve me of all this suffering.

I would like for you to seriously consider my application, for at this time I am destitute and sitting in prison.

*Yours in Christ
The apostle Paul*

Chapter 12

THE INCARNATIONAL LIFE

In Philippians 3:7 the Holy Spirit allowed Paul to begin his personal testimony of living the incarnational life of the gospel. His description of his journey in Christ validates why the Spirit allowed him to write to those in a similar situation in Achaia: “*Be imitators of me even as I also am of Christ*” (2 Co 11:1). In his own way, Paul lived the mind of Christ.

So he begins by reflecting on his previous life as a religious leader in Jerusalem. “*What things were gain to me [in my former religious life], those things I have counted loss for Christ*” (Ph 3:7). **The life of a disciple of Jesus is not an opportunity for either financial gain or notoriety.** Ambition for such things is contrary to the incarnational example of the Son of God. They are opposed to the “mind of Christ.” We can understand why Saul was so hesitant in succumbing to the goads that constantly pricked him while he persecuted those in Judea who lived incarnationally. As Saul the religious leader of Judea, he enjoyed all the pomp and power such a leader could enjoy in the religion of the Jews (Gl 1:13).

Jesus said to Saul on the Damascus road, “*It is hard for you to kick against the goads*” (At 26:14). Ev-

ery time Saul imprisoned or beat a disciple, there was a goad that pricked his conscience as a stubborn cow is goaded with a stick to remain walking in a straight path. It took a special appearing of Jesus to convert this goad-pricked persecutor. But Jesus knew that once convinced with a vision from heaven, the hardheaded Saul would become the tenderhearted saint who would open the door for the gospel to the Gentiles.

Saul’s problem was that he knew that if he became as those whom he persecuted, he would have to begin living as they lived. So after the Damascus road experience, he tarried blind in Damascus for three days until a disciple came to him and said, “*Why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord*” (At 22:16). He was from that day forward, the Jewish official named Saul who became the incarnational Paul who lived as those he once persecuted. He reminded the Philippians, “***I count all things loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things***” (Ph 3:8).

It was not that Paul simply gave up a great deal for Jesus. True, there

was the actual sacrifice of losing all the pride, pomp and purse that he enjoyed as a leading religious persecutor of the “sect of Christians.” That was the real and actual. But in Philippians 2:5, we must remind ourselves that incarnational sacrifice involves not only sacrifice of things, but also a paradigm shift in one’s mind. Paul had introduced his statements here with the exhortation, “*Let this mind be in you*” (Ph 2:5). **Incarnational living after the gospel of Jesus starts with the mind, but it must end up in the heart.**

Therefore, there was a mental paradigm shift in Paul’s thinking concerning those things he had previously enjoyed as a leader in institutional religiosity. His standard of living came down, so far down that he at times went without food (See 2 Co 6:5). He was graphic in reference to the things he sacrificed: “*I count them [the things I previously enjoyed] refuse [dung] so that I may gain Christ*” (Ph 3:8). Unless one is willing to forsake that which is of this world, he will continually be frustrated in his quest to gain Christ (See 1 Tm 6:10). One may act out in his life the mind of Christ, but unless the idolatry of money is conquered in one’s heart, he or she will never “gain Christ.” Paul remembered what Jesus said, “*Whoever of you who does not forsake all that he has, cannot be My*

disciple” (Lk 14:33).

We are our own judge of how we will live incarnationally for Jesus. But the fact remains that our standard of living will come down in order that we share with others who are in need (See 1 Co 8:1-4; 3 Jn 6-8). All that we formerly consumed on our own lusts will be shared with others who are struggling to survive both physically and spiritually.

So we wonder how this was accomplished in the life of Paul. Before Saul became Paul, Saul was filled with religious self-righteousness. He eventually realized, however, that in order to discover the righteousness of God, there had to be a major shift from religion to grace. As Paul, he desired to ...

... be found in Him [Christ], not having my own righteousness that is from law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness that is from God by faith (Ph 3:9).

Saul was a religionist who conducted himself strictly according to the rites and rules of Judaism. However, once he was truly convinced and converted, all this changed in his life. In his masterful document against his former religiosity, he informed the Galatian disciples, “*For you have heard of my behavior in the past in Judaism, how beyond measure I per-*

secuted the church of God and tried to destroy it” (Gl 1:13). And indeed he tried, but the power of the resurrection that proved Jesus to be the Son of God, conquered him (See Rm 1:4).

In the Philippian letter, Paul answered a shortcoming that is often asserted by many. It is true that the power of the gospel is unto our initial salvation (Rm 1:16). Upon the basis of one’s faith in the resurrected Jesus, he or she is obedient to the gospel for the remission of sins (At 2:38). One is raised with Christ from the waters of baptism in order to walk in newness of life (Rm 6:3-6). It is a new life because one has come into the realm of the continual cleansing blood of Jesus (1 Jn 1:7). However, the power of the gospel goes far beyond one’s initial contact with the blood of Jesus when one’s sins are washed away (At 22:16). In Philippians 3:10 Paul counted all his previous accomplishments and possessions as refuse in order that he do as he wrote, *“I want to know Him and the power of His resurrection.”*

The power of the gospel of Jesus’ resurrection goes far beyond being raised from the waters of baptism. The Colossian disciples evidently did not fully understand this. They did not fully understand that this power motivates life change. Paul needed to correct and encourage them with the following words: *“If you then*

were raised with Christ, seek those things that are above” (Cl 3:1). If one sets his *“mind on things above”* (Cl 3:2), he or she will put to death worldly behavior that is *“on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire,”* etc. (Cl 3:5). He or she will *“put on the new man, who is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him who created him”* (Cl 3:10).

The power of the resurrection is revealed in the transformed life. The power of the gospel, therefore, does not cease at the waters of baptism. The power continues on as the primary motivation for one to count the things of the world to be loss for Christ. One is saved by the blood of Christ at baptism, but it is in thanksgiving of this salvation that one lives the gospel of Jesus. It was the cross and resurrection of Jesus that empowered Paul to lead the incarnational life. It was the power of this gospel that continued to motivate him to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ (2 Pt 3:18).

But there is a stipulation. People seem to have an eager desire to have a “personal relationship” with Jesus. However, they often fail to understand what this means. In Philippians 3, Paul surveyed through **what he had to do in order to come into the realm of God’s offer to have a personal relationship with us through His incarnate Son.** God initiated the offer

of a new covenant relationship, which is personal. However, in order to connect with this covenant relationship, Paul explained the stipulations. “*I count all things loss*” was not just a recollection of his life. It was his personal life of gratitude for that which he received in Christ. In other words, our lives must reflect the incarnate life of the Son of God. We must walk in gratitude of what He did for us. In this walk, we are walking in the light of His relationship with us, and thus, He continues to cleanse us of all sin (1 Jn 1:7).

Paul continued: “*I want to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being like Him in His death*” (Ph 3:10). We have encountered few who wanted to have a “personal relationship” with Jesus’ sufferings, and then “*count all things loss*” for Jesus. The word “fellowship” in this verse is the Greek word *koinonia*. This is joint sharing, joint partnership and identity. This is incarnational living with the sufferings of Christ. We are partners with Jesus in His sufferings. If one is not suffering with Christ, then he should possibly reconsider his “personal” relationship with Christ. It may be that he is walking outside the realm of God’s personal relationship that He extends to us through the sufferings of His Son.

We have discovered that most of

those who seek a relationship with Jesus often do not understand what they are seeking. If they would understand how Paul came into this realm of relationship, then they might think twice. In any relationship with the incarnate Son of God comes also fellowship with His sufferings. Therefore, “*all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*” (2 Tm 3:12). Nevertheless, “*rejoice, in as much as you are partners of Christ’s sufferings*” (1 Pt 4:13). This is exactly what Jesus said at the conclusion of the Beatitudes and introduction to the sermon on the mountain (Mt 5:10-12). “*Rejoice and be exceedingly glad*” (Mt 5:12).

If one who seeks to have fellowship with the sufferings of Jesus as did Paul, then the following rehearsal by Paul of his godly living in Christ Jesus might encourage some to reconsider what is involved in establishing a relationship with the incarnate and ascended King Jesus:

But in all things approving ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in turmoil, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings (2 Co 6:4,5).

Many of those who seek this relationship with Jesus often want it on their own terms. And thus, this is the

birth of religion. The religionist seeks a relationship with God that is based on his own religiosity. The religionist seeks to establish a relationship with the Son of God on the basis of his performance of religious rites and rules that he would establish for himself that would bring him a sense of closeness with Christ. And thus, in his religiosity he establishes a self-sanctifying system of religion by which he can judge himself to be performing correctly in reference to his own religious rites and rules. But in establishing a relationship with the sufferings of Jesus, one, as Paul, can willingly do as James wrote, “*Count it all joy when you fall into various trails*” (Js 1:2).

Religion on our own terms is a system of self-deception. It is decep-

tion because the religionist has established his own conditions for his relationship with Jesus, which fellowship usually excludes all suffering for Jesus. Paul, on the other hand, understood the incarnational journey of Jesus into the flesh of man, and then to the suffering of the cross of death. It was this journey that Paul sought to follow, for he concluded, “... *if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead*” (Ph 3:11). And therefore, “*I affirm, brethren, by the boasting in you that I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily*” (1 Co 15:31). It could be that we should wake up each morning with the thought on our minds, “To what will I die today ... to pride ... to selfishness ... to greed ... etc.”

Chapter 13

THE WRONG CALL

In order for one to call himself out of religion, and especially the heritage of religion that was handed to him by his forefathers, there must be a paradigm shift in mind and heart. But in order to generate a paradigm shift in a restoration from religion to gospel, a very important decision must be made. This decision involves the “what” and “who” unto which one must be called for direction in his move.

A. Tethered to God through His Son:

One must make a decision to untether himself from the bondage of heritage authority in order to be tethered to God only through Christ. This means that the gospel is the only means by which we can approach God. There can never be two tethers in our relationship with God. One cannot be tethered to the religion of

one's past, and at the same time, seek to be tethered to God through the gospel of His Son. It must be one or the other. Christ can have no competition in a restorational paradigm shift.

In their preaching of the gospel, this was the choice the early disciples presented to the Jews who in the first century were in the bondage of the Jews' religion (Gl 1:13). It took Saul the persecutor some time to make the choice to be Paul the apostle, but he eventually made his way out of religion and into Christ. And of those things he counted sacred in the Jews' religion, he wrote,

I count all things loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things. I count them refuse so that I may gain Christ (Ph 3:8).

One can be, therefore, tethered only to Jesus. *"For there is only one God and one mediator [tether] between God and men, the man Christ Jesus"* (1 Tm 2:5). There is only one Lord (Ep 4:5). Peter was very specific about this matter: *"There is salvation in no other [than Jesus Christ], for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"* (At 4:12). **It is only through Jesus that one can be tethered to God.** This leaves religion

outside the realm of establishing a relationship (covenant) with God. Salvation is not through meritorious religiosity, but through Christ alone.

Unfortunately, throughout history there have arisen numerous misguided efforts on the part of sincere people to establish a relationship with God, which relationship has been obscured by the influences of their religion. In their desire to establish a gospel relationship with God, some have been diverted by religion in the wrong direction. After a few decades, they ended up back where they started. They left sectarian religiosity in order to establish a direct relationship with God, but because they based their paradigm shift on the foundation of their forefathers' religion, they missed their desired destination. They circled around and ended up being that from which they fled. They left sectarian religion, but constructed a sectarian movement that inherently produced different sects within the movement. **Restoration within a particular religion is a disguised reformation movement.** Reformation movements always lead to the birth of more religious sects.

B. Restoration of the gospel of Christ:

A common slogan that unfortunately leads to sectarianism is the call

that we must restore the “New Testament church.” When living in the midst of religious confusion, this sounds like a noble call. It sounds like a call for restoration that is away from the sectarian denominationalism in which most of the “Christian” world lives. But it is a call that has embedded within it flaws of human reasoning. This may not at first be noticed, but the results of many misguided restoration movements throughout history have proved that restorations that are not based on the gospel eventually lead to the establishment of more religious sects.

In making a call for the restoration of the “New Testament church,” we often have our favorite Old Testament passages that were originally stated in the context of an Israel that had gone beyond repentance and repair. Nevertheless, we quote proclamations as, “*Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths*” (Jr 6:16). At the time this plea was made, Israel was beyond restoration, for the people replied, “*We will not walk in it*” (Jr 6:16).

The calls of the prophets for repentance were vain when they were initially stated because God had already doomed Israel to go into captivity. The same calls in reference to restoration today are misapplied because the premise upon which we seek our noble goal is flawed.

The outcome of our call for restoration is often unsatisfactory because we misapply the call of the prophets for Israel’s repentance. We unfortunately use the prophets call for repentance as proof texts in order to call for restoration today. But we miss a critical point. **A call for repentance is different than a call for restoration.**

Our use of the Old Testament pleas to Israel is out of context in reference to our plea to all religious groups today. The prophets pled for a return from going after Baal. All of us today believe in the God to whom the prophets pled for Israel to return. Using their pleas for repentance to the God of heaven is out of context in reference to our plea today to those who are stuck in religion, but believe commonly in the one God of heaven. We call for restoration from religion, not to the one true and living God in whom we all believe.

When the early disciples went forth to preach the gospel, their gospel call was not a plea to restore “the old paths” of the Old Testament. Those paths were nailed to the cross by the gospel event (Cl 2:14). The preaching of the gospel by the early evangelists was a call for a paradigm shift, not for a restoration to the “old paths” of the Sinai law. Their call was for a paradigm shift from self-justifying law-keeping to the grace of the

God who sent His only begotten Son into the world. The early evangelists, therefore, called on the world to believe on this Son. We would settle for no less today. Theirs was a paradigm shift from Judaism to faith in the crucified Christ. Today, it is still a paradigm shift, but a shift from religion to the gospel.

C. Call to gospel, not sectarianism:

A call for the restoration of the “New Testament church” is misleading, if not sectarian. It is misleading in that it sets up everyone who would be a theologian with the task of determining what characteristics of the church we read about in the New Testament should be restored. And once this church is supposedly restored on the foundation of law, it is unfortunately assumed that salvation is in this restored biblical church. Church thus becomes the savior, not the Christ in whom we are saved as the church. We subsequently find our security in church rather than Christ.

In our efforts to restore today what we read in the New Testament, our focus must first be on the gospel, not on the dysfunctional response of the early disciples to the gospel. In the midst of a catalog of dysfunctional behavioral and doctrinal problems in the early church of the New Testa-

ment, each “church theologian” today is left with the daunting task of determining what examples and doctrinal beliefs of the early disciples must be restored.

In order to make a correct decision to determine what is “binding” today in our call for restoration, we have often progressed through a host of hermeneutical gymnastics in order to bind today those behavioral responses of the early disciples who were struggling out of legal Judaism or pagan idolatry. When we cannot come to a common outline of binding their examples in our misguided call for restoration of the “New Testament church,” we often fuss over our hermeneutical gymnastics. In our debates with one another over “issues,” **we inadvertently become sectarian in our relationships with one another.**

The call for a “restoration of the New Testament church” inherently results in sectarianism among all those who have the noble desire to “speak where the Bible speaks.” However, we forget about “being silent where the Bible is silent.” We are not silent for each sect among us determines to carry on with their own hermeneutical conclusions and practices from the authority of “examples” and “necessary inferences.” Or, in setting aside any New Testament examples or inferences, we simply de-

pend on our favorite religious performances or works in order to express our faith. Even worse, some just assemble around a favorite personality who can woo their loyalty Sunday after Sunday.

When a group eventually agrees on the “identifying characteristics of the church,” the claim is often made that the “New Testament church” has been reestablished in our time. Once the form of this identity is inscribed on outlines and written in books and tracts, then it is usually propagated throughout the world as a mission message that is to be preached. The preaching of the “restored church” usually places the messengers (missionaries) in conflict with other institutionalized churches among the nations who are preaching that they too have “restored the church.” In our zeal to duplicate a form of identity of the “biblical” church, Christ is often marginalized and the “doctrine” of the catechism for the church is capitalized.

Unfortunately, the fallacy of both the call and the hermeneutic to restore the “New Testament church” is that we are seeking to restore the wrong foundation upon which we would be the New Testament church. We obscure why the New Testament church existed in the first place. In our obsession over binding and loosing according to our theological hermeneutics, we lose sight of that which should

bring people together as church. We forget that we should first be preaching Jesus Christ, and then the response that people should make to this gospel message.

We must be clear. It is not our task to restore the “New Testament church.” **Nowhere in the New Testament is this plea made.** But if this is our plea, then we are left with the task of determining which “New Testament church” we would seek to restore. Should it be the “New Testament church” in Corinth? Should it be the “New Testament church” in Ephesus at the time the disciples in Ephesus had lost their first love? Which “New Testament church” must we restore?

Because we confuse ourselves with the dysfunctional behavior of some churches we read about in the New Testament, we cast off that which we do not want to restore and set out on a hermeneutical journey to pick and choose what is worthy to become the major points on our outline of the “identity of the New Testament church.” For example, we choose the example of the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week by the church in Troas (At 20:7), but we discard fasting for missions by the church in Antioch (At 13:1-3). We make our contributions into the collection plate on Sunday morning, but refuse a contribution to a homeless person on Mon-

day morning who shows up at our door. Many other examples could be listed. In our efforts to restore “the New Testament church,” we often become quite inconsistent with ourselves in our efforts to have biblical authority in all things that we do.

D. Inherent sectarian restorations:

When we call for a restoration we must be careful in establishing the foundation upon which we base our call. If we are not cautious, we may end up with some unfortunate conclusions that inherently cause us to divide from one another.

In our picking and choosing what we consider to be the “New Testament church,” we saddle ourselves with an inevitable sectarian conclusion. We will often go to battle with ourselves over determining which behavioral examples of “the New Testament church” should be binding, and thus, be restored. We leave ourselves with the daunting challenge of sifting through a catalog of examples of the early disciples we read about in the New Testament. We diligently sift hermeneutically in order to determine what we should restore in reference to the early disciples’ response to the gospel.

Our hermeneutic for determining that which should be restored

is often inherently sectarian. We find ourselves fighting legal battles over the example responses of those, who in their obedience to the gospel, were venturing out of the bondage of legal religion. In our misguided call for a legal restoration, we subsequently legalize the examples of the early Christians’ deliverance from the bondage of legal justification. **We often develop a systematic theology of law from the examples of those who through faith in the grace of God were set free from the bondage of systematic theology.**

Any systematic theology is inherently sectarian. Here are some illustrations of deductive applications of examples that have become a part of someone’s theology that has led to sectarianism within their restoration movements: Some have concluded that there should be only one cup used during the Lord’s Supper (Proof text: Mt 26:27). Some have concluded that only wine can be used as the fruit of the vine in the Supper (Proof text: Deductions). Some have concluded that contributions could be made only on the first day of the week (Proof text: 1 Co 16:1,2). Some have concluded that individuals must be baptized the same hour of the night (Proof text: At 16:33). Some have concluded that assemblies of the church must be autonomous from one another (Proof text: ?). Some have concluded that

members must place their membership with a particular autonomous group (Proof text: ?). Some have concluded that all singing must be congregational (Ep 5:19). Some have concluded that their group must have a specific name in order to label their uniqueness, and thus separate themselves from all others who do not conform to the dictates of their accepted church law.

This list of differences goes on, depending on where one is and with what group he or she is associated in fellowship. The call to restore the “New Testament church” sometimes forces on us a system of hermeneutics to understand and apply the New Testament in a way that inherently divides us from one another. It is inherently divisive because it is a call for the restoration of the wrong subject.

E. Unity efforts:

In such a scenario of embedded division, sectarian groups will inevitably arise. In order to establish some harmony among those who are inherently divided because of the way in which they have understood the Bible, a superficial unity is often established between those who discover that they must come to some common deductive conclusions.

In such cases, differences are of-

ten debated among the sects of misguided restorations. But for the sake of not having “division in the church,” agreements are made upon which a great number of the dissidents can come to a common understanding on what is binding and what is a matter of opinion. These are often legal matters of agreement that subsequently become the identifying characteristics of the movement, or those who would be identified as a part of the restoration movement for unity.

It is at this point that the movement as a whole becomes sectarian, and thus the movement is separated from all others who have followed the same system to determine their own behavior and theology in seeking to be the church of the first century. Unfortunately, the restoration movements that was initially started to produce unity, inadvertently encouraged the adherents to circle around and become that from which they fled.

Ecumenical movements are somewhat different. They are efforts to restore unity among different existing religious groups. Because these movements are efforts to produce some semblance of unity in a community of sectarianism, the adherents to such efforts must first realize that all ecumenical movements are orchestrated by men who come together in order to speak in peace with one another. Unfortunately, in order for re-

ligious leaders to speak peace in the same room there must be theological compromises, or at least theological temperance. In such environments the authority of the Scriptures is often set aside. But this does not necessarily have to be.

Simply because there is an effort to be together for the sake of peace among different religious groups does not mean that we should leave our Bibles at home. If we forget the word of God in our efforts to be together, then we have doomed ourselves to create religion. True unity must be based on something greater than our forbearance of one another's theology. Unity must be based on our common understanding of the gospel. If we come together for unity that is first based on the gospel, then there is hope.

We have, fortunately, witnessed some ecumenical efforts on the part of many religious leaders who want to lay aside their theological deductions in order to unite on the gospel alone. There is some hope for these movements. In one such meeting where we were invited to speak with the leaders of such a movement, the question was asked by one of the leaders, "How can we be united when we all believe so many different doctrines?" Our response was, "When we understand the gospel correctly, and agree to be united on the founda-

tion of the gospel alone, then many of the theological differences we have with one another simply fade away or become points over which we feel there should be no argument. At least they become points that should not keep us away from one another."

We are in contact with thousands of church leaders who have grown weary of division over senseless issues. These leaders seek unity that is based on the gospel more than the preservation of their religious heritage, or the uniqueness of their particular group. Theirs is a thirst to respond to the gospel alone in order to present before the world a oneness in Christ that is based on Him (Jn 17:20,21).

Admittedly, these are independent churches who have already released themselves from the shackles of traditional religions. They have left the sectarianism of traditional religion, but in their "restoration," they became sectarian among themselves because their initial move was not based solely on the gospel. Nevertheless, these independent church leaders realize where they are. In the midst of so much evil in their communities, they have come to the conclusion that in some way they must work together. They now seek to work together in their communities in order to be united on the foundation of the gospel. We would write and

confess that this is indeed an exhilarating time in history where such restorations to the gospel are taking place.

F. Gospel foundation only:

Our quest for unity must not be based on catechisms, but on the gospel of Christ. If we call for a restoration of a correct catechism, then we often bind on ourselves the task of choosing a supposedly correct catechism upon which we must all agree, which catechism will supposedly bring us all together in unity. And in order to establish the correct catechism, we must bind on ourselves a hermeneutic by which we will all understand the Bible alike, and subsequently, come to some common conclusions. These are legal restorations that usually produce division because they are not based primarily on the gospel.

Inevitably, our hermeneutic of legal restoration of necessity involves deductive conclusions, and inherent in deductive conclusions is division. Deductive conclusions are subject to the minds of men, and thus, we are often left to the mercy of those among us whom we consider to be our scholars to make the correct deductions. We subsequently submit ourselves to a hierarchy of authorities to whom we give the right to hand down interpre-

tative dictates to the laity.

God did not clone our minds to come to the same conclusions through a deductive system of reasoning. Our hermeneutic of “deductivism,” therefore, is inherently flawed with human reasoning. And since we are independent in our thinking, our deductive process of reasoning often leads us to different conclusions. We subsequently become different sects if we seek to bind our conclusions on one another as the catechism of “our church.”

However, there is hope in all sectarianism. There is hope if we once again refocus on the gospel as the foundation of our unity. There are no deductive conclusions to be made about the gospel. What is revealed as gospel in the New Testament is revealed in clear statements as historical facts. No interpretation is needed. If we all refocus on the foundation of the gospel, then we may not all have to start a restorational journey from the same sect. Nevertheless, if we persistently focus together on the gospel of Jesus, then we will eventually end up together on the same path.

The path of almost everyone originates out of some past religious heritage. But if we continue to focus on the gospel, our paths will inevitably converge, regardless of our religious origins. It is simply the beauty of the gospel to produce that which

we all crave, that is, brotherhood in Christ. We seek to answer the prayer of Jesus as He prayed to the Father: *“That they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be one is Us”* (Jn 17:21).

We must be warned, however, that as restoration movements age, they inherently become the heritage of the people. And when the deductive conclusions of a legal restoration become a part of heritage theology, then the deductive interpretations become a part of the authority of the heritage. We have thus doomed ourselves to eventually decline in numbers as new generations arise who are not attached to the heritage of the fathers, specifically to some of the deductive interpretations of the fathers.

These things are now happening in the religious scenes of many nations with which we are familiar.

Unfortunately, those who are trapped within what have become heritage movements have a difficult time understanding the reason for the decline of their heritage churches. Respect for the catechism of doctrine of the heritage is simply diminishing.

Because the heritage was originally identified by a legal catechism of deductive interpretations, the older generation is now quite unsettled in witnessing the decline of their religious heritage that they have sought to pass on to their children. They are having difficulty understanding that legal restorations inherently divide or are doomed to failure as succeeding generations interpret the Scriptures according to their own cultural needs. But as Paul wrote to the Corinthians—we use his statement somewhat out of context—we would say, *“And yet I show to you a more excellent way”* (1 Co 12:31).

Chapter 14

THE RIGHT CALL

The problem that eventually leads to a decline in any movement, whether restorational or ecumenical, is the original call upon which the movement was initially based. Legal restorationists often make a call for restoration that is based on what we would consider a catechism of law. This is done in order to establish a

doctrinal identity for those who seek to be identified with the movement. Those who identify with the catechism are allowed to be in fellowship with the movement. Those who find flaws in the catechism are considered to have left the movement.

The inherent nature with this system of identity is that we become se-

rious students of law, but often overlook the cause as to why the early church came into existence. In our call for legal restoration, therefore, we often marginalize Christ by seeking to exalt the law of the “New Testament church.” We do so by seeking to identify legally the church in the New Testament. Our favorite books become Acts and the epistles, and not Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, with the coronation of the Lord Jesus Christ in Revelation. The primary subject of our sermons is based on law, not the Lord Jesus Christ. We often become judges of one another in order to make sure that each one of us conforms to the catechism that identifies who we are.

We are thus intimidated to conform to law, rather than focus on Christ and live the gospel which we have obeyed. But if our obedience was not initially in obedience to the gospel of Christ, but to law, then we easily carry on with law-keeping without focusing on Christ. We thus become a church of the right laws, but often have a minor focus on Jesus.

However, when we follow the message of the early disciples, we discover something that is quite different than what is often preached today among those who seem to believe that they have a copyright on restoration. We are encouraged, therefore, to take another look at the message that was

preached among Jews and Greeks in the first century. The result of the message was so phenomenal that it was proclaimed that the Christians had turned the world upside down (At 17:6).

It is the gospel that has carried disciples throughout the centuries unto this day. Our primary task, therefore, is not to restore the New Testament church by focusing specifically on the legal form of the church, but to continue the proclamation of the gospel that has resulted in the existence of the New Testament church every century since the Pentecost of Acts 2. If our focus is on preaching the gospel, church is always the serendipity of our message. **The church of Christ will always exist when Christ is always preached.**

A. Preach the gospel:

Remember when Jesus said, “*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature*” (Mk 16:15)? The message of the early evangelists was the gospel, not the “law of the church.” Their message to those who obeyed the gospel led to a transformed life. They were transformed in response to the gospel reign of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rm 12:1,2; Cl 3:1,2).

The gospel was not a catechism to identify the church. It was a message that had the power to save and

change lives. When the gospel was preached, the church of the saved was the result. The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the message and the cause. The church is the body of individuals who are saved and transformed by the gospel.

Unfortunately, we have often reversed the focus of the early disciples. We make the identity of the “church” the message, and the gospel of Christ an afterthought. In fulfilling the great commission of Jesus we have been guilty of going into all the world and preaching church first and then mentioning Jesus on the side.

In preaching “church” as our central message to the religious world, not only is our message often sterile of the gospel of God’s love through Jesus, it also encourages an appeal “to join the church of **our** choice.” So in order that the preacher seemingly guarantees the “right choice,” proof text upon proof text—precept, upon precept (Is 28:10)—are accumulated under each point of a multiple-point sermon outline in order to identify the right church. The preacher thus proves that he is a messenger of a legally-defined New Testament church, and not a preacher of the gospel. He is getting the egg before the chicken, forgetting that the gospel produces the body; the body (church) does not produce the Christ.

B. Preaching the resurrected and reigning Lord Christ:

We must remember in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost that which cut the people to the heart was the gospel message of the resurrected and reigning King. *“This Jesus God has raised up”* (At 2:32). *“Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this same Jesus whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ”* (At 2:36). This message keeps the chicken before the egg.

After the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus was no longer just the good Teacher from Nazareth. He was no longer just Jesus who walked with the disciples on the roads of Galilee. He was no longer just the brave Teacher who stood up and taught in the temple and the synagogues. **He was now the resurrected, raised and reigning King Jesus at the right hand of God** (Hb 8:1). This was the gospel message that cut the people to the heart on the day of Pentecost (At 2:37). This was the message that turned the world upside down. This message will do the same today if we once again restore **gospel preachers** among us.

We seem to miss this point, especially among those who only want to know Jesus simply as the good teacher with His disciples on the road to and from Galilee. Such is brought

out in the request of many who seek a more “personal relationship with Jesus,” which often translates into a “mere” relationship. At least it gives the appearance that if one behaves correctly he or she can have and maintain a “personal relationship” with Jesus. But this often becomes self-righteous religiosity because our thinking and behavior are based on self-appointed merits by which we seek to establish and maintain a relationship with Jesus.

One often concludes that if his or her relationship is to be “personal,” then one must bind on oneself “personal works” to perform in order to “measure up” to what he or she thinks Jesus would expect of us. When one fails in his or her own self-imposed standards of expectation, then he or she feels emotionally unworthy. He or she often questions why God is not accepting one’s performance.

This is performance-oriented religion. It leads to a lack of confidence in the sanctifying power of the blood of Jesus because our confidence is focused on our own self-imposed performance. And when our performance fails, we first blame God.

It is certainly a noble desire to feel close to Jesus. But our meritorious behavior is somewhat misguided if we seek such a relationship that is based on our own performance of self-imposed works. It is somewhat misguided because the object of our rela-

tionship is no longer the man Jesus whom we seek to know according to the flesh in the records of the gospel. The man Jesus is now King and Lord over all things.

Paul certainly knew Jesus as a man while Jesus was in the flesh, for he was acquainted with the events of Palestine during the ministry of Jesus. A few years after the beginning of the preaching of the gospel, he even persecuted those who followed the Nazarene called Jesus. He persecuted these followers even unto death because he believed that Jesus was only a rebellious leader of a sect of Nazarenes.

But Paul’s understanding of Jesus changed from Jesus the man to Jesus the resurrected and reigning Son of God. After the gospel of the ascension of Jesus, he once wrote the following words to some who possibly still considered Jesus to be only a renowned teacher from of Galilee:

*Therefore, from now on we know no man according to the flesh [including Jesus]. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know **Him thus no more**” (2 Co 5:16).*

If we are preaching that people must have a personal relationship with Jesus according to the flesh, then we are limiting the gospel message that we must establish a gospel covenant rela-

tionship of peace with the reigning King Jesus. Our relationship must go beyond what we would consider a personal relationship with Jesus in the flesh, for we no longer know Him “according to the flesh.” We are preaching an earthly message because we are seeking to attach people to a concept of Jesus while He was yet in the flesh. But now we do not know Him as such.

What the people understood from the message of Peter on Pentecost was that it was no longer Jesus according to the flesh. It was the resurrected and ascended Jesus who was reigning as Lord and Christ. And being at the right hand of God and reigning on David’s throne meant that the resurrected Jesus is now King and Lord over all things (See Mt 28:18; Ep 1:21-23). He is now as Isaiah prophesied of Him:

*For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given. And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called **Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace** (Is 9:6).*

The church of Christ came into existence in the first century because people believed in the gospel message of the reigning King Jesus. If we would speak of personal relationships with this King, therefore, we must seek out how we would establish a

covenant relationship with King Jesus who is now reigning over all things. **He is now Lord and King!** He is the One before whom all of us will eventually give account.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that everyone may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad (2 Co 5:10; see Jn 12:48).

Jesus is now the King about whom He spoke when He taught His disciples. He is the King with whom each one of us must make peace before He comes again with His mighty angels (See 2 Th 1:6-9). Whatever relationship one might seek to establish with this coming King, it must be a relationship of reverence, awe and submission. We must establish a covenant with this King before He comes. In order to do this, we must obey the gospel of King Jesus in order to come into the realm of His grace (Gl 3:26-29). This is what those who were cut to the heart on the day of Pentecost realized, and thus were willing to do what Peter instructed: “*Repent and be baptized every one of you*” (At 2:38).

We preach Jesus the Christ and King. This was the message of the early disciples. Some have had difficulty understanding Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 1:17 when he referred

to this message: ***“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.”*** Those who are of a legal heritage have reversed the order. They would conclude from their catechism of identity that evangelists must first be sent to baptize legally, and then the baptized believer must be discipled in matters of knowing Christ. This is revealed in the preaching of those who preach church in meetings with little mention of Christ.

This was the reverse order of what Jesus instructed the disciples to do in His great commission into all the world. Before His ascension, He said to them, ***“Going, therefore, disciple all nations, baptizing them ...”*** (Mt 28:19). People were first to be discipled to Christ, and then baptized.

This is the correct order of what Peter preached on Pentecost. It was the order of all the evangelists who obeyed the commission to go into all the world and ***preach the gospel***. It was the order of what Paul preached in Corinth upon his initial arrival in the city. He later wrote to the Corinthians, and all those in the province of Achaia, ***“For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received”*** (1 Co 15:3). And that which he received was a risen Christ who died for our sins and was resurrected to reign as King of kings (1 Co 15:3,4). This is the gospel order that we must preach as we go into all the world.

When Philip encountered the eunuch on his way back home to Ethiopia, he preached “Jesus” to him (At 8:35). It was only later, and after hearing this gospel message, that the eunuch said, ***“See, here is water! What hinders me from being baptized”*** (At 8:36). And herein is the difference between preaching a legal catechism of restoration, and the gospel of the incarnate Son of God who lived on earth under the name of Jesus. This Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected, and is now reigning as the King who will come again. It is, therefore, as Paul wrote, ***“We preach Christ crucified”*** (1 Co 1:23).

Our message to draw people to the cross is the good news of the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, coronation and consummation in the final revelation of King Jesus from heaven. It is this message that cuts people to the heart. It is this message to which people gravitate away from institutional religiosity to a relationship with the One who is now reigning over all things. This is the power of the gospel to change the lives of those who realize that they will eventually give account of themselves before a returned King (Jn 12:48; At 17:30,31). King Jesus is the right and only mediator through whom we must call all men in order to reconnect with the King who is over all things (1 Tm 2:5).

Epilogue

We close this book with the appeal that the gospel makes to the heart of every person. Consider a powerful metaphor that Paul used when he reminded the Corinthians of the power of the gospel:

*Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received **and in which you stand** (1 Co 15:1).*

The word “stand” is metaphorically used by Paul to explain the confidence that one receives from the power of the gospel. He did not use the word “sit.” He did not use the word “lay.” He used a word that portrays one standing erect with confidence.

The gospel is our confidence to remain brave in the midst of the emotional storms that come our way in life. The gospel is the enabling power that encourages us to remain strong when bullied. When we feel rejected, the gospel informs us that we are accepted by God Himself. When we are put down, the gospel of Jesus lifts us up again to a standing position. When theologians intimidate us through intellect, our confidence is in knowing the simple gospel message of Jesus, being assured that we are saved by the

gospel. When we have low self-esteem, the gospel stands us up on a pedestal before Jesus, reassuring us that we are blood-bought children of God. When we fear because of a lack of confidence in ourselves, the gospel of an ascended King Jesus instills within us self-assurance to face every trial that comes our way. When it seems that the world is falling apart, the gospel of the coronation of King Jesus is reassurance that all things are still under His control, and thus, will work together for good for those who love Him.

Young and old need to hear this message. It is this gospel message of reassurance that Paul preached, and in which he remained confident throughout his life. Until the end, therefore, every gospel-obedient person can repeat with confidence the following words of Paul:

To this gospel I am appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher. For this reason I also suffer these things. Nevertheless, I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that day (2 Tm 1:11,12).