

“Light from the Word” Articles

From the Silver Lining

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Exhortation

Exhortation within the brotherhood is worthy of sincere attention. The Word instructs believers to “exhort one another daily, while it is called today; lest any of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13). To exhort is to urge someone to pursue a particular course of conduct, to make improvements in his attitude and walk of life. Apparently if believers confine their learning to their own efforts and interpretations there is danger of self-deception and failure to clearly discern good from evil. A great responsibility is placed upon each member of the body of believers to take a personal, sincere interest in the spiritual maintenance and growth of his brethren. It is clearly prophesied in the Word that the need for an active and supportive relationship within Christ’s body, the church, will become even more essential as the end of the age approaches. “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Heb. 10:25).

The Apostle Paul gave specific instructions to Timothy and Titus as younger church leaders to exhort and correct, with authority and longsuffering (patience), in the spirit of the true doctrine (2 Tim. 4:2, Tit. 2:15). It is a basic scriptural principle that shepherds of a flock (watchmen) are called upon to be vigilant and to sound the warning regarding the specific dangers of their respective age and culture, because Satan persists in devising cunning methods for corrupting God’s people (Eze. 33:7-9, 1 Pet. 5:8). God cared for His people Israel in the time of David by providing men with “understanding of the times” (1 Chron. 12:32) and He instructs spiritual teachers to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) by the inspiration of His spirit (John 16:13).

Through the years our ministers and elders have presented the gospel message and scriptural warnings through the avenue of preaching. The Apostle Paul wrote, “it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (1 Cor. 2:21). Preaching (prophesying) consists of Spirit-inspired, extemporaneous proclamation of spiritual truth from a biblical text which results in “edification, and exhortation and comfort” (1 Cor. 14:3).

Paul acknowledged that along with his duties of leadership and preaching he also was called upon to be a teacher (2 Tim. 1:11). This form of exhortation (teaching) often includes review of the scriptural passages on a particular subject prior to expounding a message directed to meet a specific need. It is another form by which the Holy Spirit provides instruction through the servants of the Lord who function as His mouthpiece. Topical Bible presentations, under the authority and direction of the church, offer helpful instruction in the application of scriptural principles to practical godly living. They also assist the believer in recognizing false doctrines and unwholesome worldly attractions.

Each year the elders gather in conference. They search the Scriptures and prayerfully seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to determine what standards should be established, warnings sounded and exhortations articulated within the church. This is in accord with the scriptural approach begun by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15). Great effort is made to retain a sound scriptural basis to the deliberations and conclusions of these conferences and to share them through various avenues with the entire brotherhood. The Word indicates that the church benefits when exhortations from the leadership are inspired by the Spirit and then humbly received by the brotherhood. In Antioch, the believers “rejoiced for the consolation” provided by the letter delivered from the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:31). The Hebrew believers were told of the great blessing they would receive if those with the rule over them could watch for their souls (exhort) with joy and not with grief (Heb. 13:17). Submission brings this joy; gainsaying brings grief (Tit. 1:9). A gainsayer is one who contradicts or rejects the authority which he is under.

Recently the elder body felt directed by the Spirit to prepare and distribute a written exhortation regarding modern movements within Christianity which have the potential of undermining the love, peace

and doctrinal unity of our brotherhood. This booklet, entitled “Winds of Doctrine,” has as its stated purpose “to identify and warn against beliefs and practices which are unscriptural and potentially deceptive to the true believer.” It seeks to underscore the biblical basis for our doctrine and to help individual believers understand more thoroughly and defend more effectively the precious truths which have long been embraced by our forefathers. These truths constitute a priceless heritage of tried and tested spiritual wisdom.

This article also describes the consequences which usually follow when groups of believers forsake their established patterns of basic beliefs and adopt modern scholarly approaches for discerning truth. Ultimately a questioning of the inerrancy of the Bible creeps into these movements, in spite of the noble objective of making the gospel more appealing to the masses in order to draw them to Christ. Emphasis on individual liberty results in an unwillingness to submit to God-ordained church authority. Carried to the extreme, Jesus is ultimately welcome in individual lives only as a Saviour, not as Lord. Separation from the world and from false religion is diminished and eventually the church loses its visible distinction, which is essential for its effectiveness in reaching lost mankind.

If these various forms of exhortation are given sincere attention, the convictions of the brethren may become more firmly and unitedly based upon the sacred Word of God. Likewise, the enemy’s efforts to bring confusion and deception will be thwarted. “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving” (Col. 2:6-7).

Spiritual Separation

Today there are vast numbers of churches, religious groupings, parachurch ministries, denominations, movements and persuasions which consider themselves as Christian. These groups include almost every conceivable variety of beliefs, with markedly different degrees of emphasis upon the Bible. Even among the groups known as evangelical or fundamentalist, who claim the Scriptures as the foundation for their beliefs, there are innumerable differences in doctrinal interpretations.

The question arises as to how we should relate to other individuals who profess Christianity, particularly those who appear to be sincere in their love for the Lord. Although there were no apparent denominations in Bible times, perhaps it would be of benefit to carefully consider some of the scriptural teachings regarding the relationship of true believers in Christ to individuals or groups of other spiritual orientations.

The disciples of Christ had to be rebuked by Him because of their concerns with personal ambition and feelings of superiority. Following a discussion in which they had disputed who among them was the greatest, another issue was raised. *“And John answered and said Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name; and we forbid him, because he followeth not with us. And Jesus said unto him, Forbid him not for he that is not against us is for us”* (Luke 9:49-50). The point was clearly made that the disciples did not have a monopoly on the power of the Spirit. Likewise, no group or individual today has the right to claim the exclusive favor of the Lord. Even Elijah had to be chastised when he despaired and said *“I, even I only, am left”* (1 Kings 19:10). The Lord replied, *“Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel all the knees of which have not bowed unto Baal ...”* (1 Kings 19:18). The disciples had based their complaint upon the fact that these others were not following Christ and his group. In Christ’s response he emphasized that their work should not be interfered with and that since they were not against Him there was benefit to their efforts. However, He did not make any mention of forming an alliance or interacting with them in any way.

The Apostle John was very strong in his warning to believers regarding the influence of any who did not abide in the doctrine of Jesus Christ (2 John 9-11). It is clear that John sounded this warning to help prevent deception by teachers of false doctrine. This warning was surely intended to include those teaching a perverted gospel or advancing beyond what the gospel says, as well as those who did not believe in Christ at all. He even went so far as to admonish that the believers should not wish these misguided teachers well or *“bid them Godspeed,”* and that those who did were partakers of their evil deeds. In this Scripture we can see a more defensive approach in dealing with individuals with variant beliefs. This position of separation was emphasized because of the danger of being deceived through close association with those of a different doctrine. It is scriptural to be tolerant of such at a distance, but it is also scriptural to exert very definite protective measures when the danger of spiritual deception approaches one’s door. In an era when legitimacy is given to widely ranging forms of Christianity regardless of quality, it is evident that the doctrinal position of separation has been overlooked or ignored by many.

Finally, the strongest warning found in the New Testament regarding teachers of a different doctrine was given by the Apostle Paul to the Galatians, who had initially embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ through his ministry. Later, others had arisen who taught that in addition to faith in Christ, the believers must practice certain rituals of the old law such as circumcision in order to obtain salvation. It is important to note that the deception presented to these believers was not a markedly different religion, but a modification of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The reaction of the Apostle was utter dismay as he wrote, *“I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel...”* (Gal. 1:5). He then went on to prescribe drastic measures to eradicate this error: *“If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed”* (Gal. 1:9). How many true believers today are resisting altered Christian doctrines with that kind of vengeance? Instead, the prevalent trend is

to welcome spiritual interaction with other professing Christians, many of whom have made numerous compromises in interpretation and application of the Scriptures. Misinterpretation has usually occurred because of a dependence upon the wisdom of man rather than staying with the Word and accepting all teachings of Christ and the Apostles as literal truths.

The three scriptural teachings cited above (given by Christ and the Apostles John and Paul) are the foundation for our position regarding spiritual separation from other professing Christians. This is made explicit in our refraining from addressing them as our brothers and sisters, which are family titles. They denote a close kinship. The Word tells us to first do good to those who are of the *"household of faith"* (Gal. 6:10). We are also instructed to do good to all men and without question we should be kind, respectful and helpful toward our fellow men of all races and creeds. However, the word household is another family term. It denotes a structured, recognizable grouping of closely related people. We are taught to *"walk by the same rule"* (Phil. 3:16), *"be of one mind"* (2 Cor. 13:11) and to participate as a body in loving discipline of erring members (1 Cor. 5). These functions can occur in accordance with the scriptural pattern only within an organized, visible church, where believers are truly responsible to Christ as well as to each other. May God help us, by his grace, to focus on the spiritual edification and perfecting of this portion of the body of Christ, our beloved church, so that we can present a distinct example to the lost sinners of the world and serve effectively to point them to Christ. We can likewise look forward with great anticipation to the day when the entire body of Christ will be revealed at His coming, when true believers of all ages and all nations will be joined to be with Him in Heaven forever.

Nonconformity to the World

The doctrine of nonconformity finds root in the Word of God, “*And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good and acceptable, and perfect, will of God*” (Rom. 12:2). It is also written, “*Love not the world neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world the love of the Father is not in him*” (1 John 2:15).

The understanding of nonconformity is furthered by considering the scriptural definition of a believer. He is one who has come out from the world (2 Cor. 6:17). He is termed a pilgrim and stranger (1 Pet. 2:11) with no continuing city here on earth (Heb. 13:14). He recognizes that “*the friendship of the world is enmity with God*” (James 4:4). He realizes that the church and the world are two distinct entities, and that by visible nonconformity to the world, he can show that he is one with those who constitute the body of Christ.

Christian nonconformity is based on the fact that God calls His children to a life of holiness and transformation to the ways of Christ, who has delivered them “*from this present evil world*” (Gal. 1:4). The believer must avoid being pressed into the pattern of the world and hardened by its deceptive philosophies. He must be continuously aware that tremendous forces are exerted by Satan, who is the prince of this world.

Discernment of God’s perfect will is dependent upon being transformed, by the renewing of one’s mind. This involves putting off the old man which is conformed to the world, and putting on the new man created in righteousness and true holiness (Eph. 4:22-24). If one would allow himself to again conform to the world, how could he expect to discern accurately the perfect will of God?

There are two related aspects of nonconformity: inward and outward. Inward nonconformity to the world is centered within the thoughts and intents of the heart. It consists of attitudes, basic values and a general outlook on life. Some examples are: loving God’s truth rather than the wisdom of man; valuing submission to one another over individualism; defining success in terms of a life of godliness and contentment instead of wealth, status, and the praise of men. Outward nonconformity to the world is visible, and it gives a message which distinguishes the true believer from the unconverted. It consists of all aspects of lifestyle including outward adornment of the body. The child of God is to be a vessel of honor (2 Tim. 2:21), whose body is a temple of the living God (1 Cor. 3:16).

There is misunderstanding about the scriptural teaching, “*man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart*” (1 Sam. 16:17). Jesus condemned the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who were “*beautiful outward but within full of . . . all uncleanness*” (Matt. 23:27). Indeed, we must take seriously the warning that the outward things can be a false pretense, which is despised by God who sees directly into the heart of man. However, these teachings are sometimes misconstrued to justify the conclusion that the outward appearance is unimportant as long as the heart is right. Conversion, based on true faith, begins with a change of one’s innermost attitudes and beliefs. Perhaps the most significant initial changes are truthfulness, humility and submissiveness. If the conversion is genuine, there will be profound, visible changes in all aspects of one’s life (1 Pet. 4:1-4). It is undeniable scriptural truth that there must be consistency between what is in the heart and what is manifested visibly, and both are for the glory of God. “*For ye are bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s*” (1 Cor. 6:20).

There are several basic principles of nonconformity in outward appearance which are taught in the Holy Scriptures: distinction between male and female, modesty or chastity and humility or simplicity.

In Old Testament times God considered it an abomination when a person dressed in that which

pertained to the opposite sex (Deut. 22:5). The New Testament teaches that for a man to be effeminate (unmanly) is sinful (1 Cor. 6:9). No doubt the opposite is also true for a woman. God's distinctive order of creation is to be honored. "... *the head of every man is Christ; and the head of every woman is the man...*" (1 Cor. 11:3). Thus a Christian man should appear as a man with clothing that equates with his masculine gender. It is also unnatural and shameful for him to have long hair (1 Cor. 11:14). Likewise, a Christian woman should appear as a woman with apparel that reflects the feminine gender. God has also ordained that long hair is given to her as part of her feminine glory (1 Cor. 11:15).

The New Testament also provides instructions regarding proper manifestation of modesty and simplicity in outward appearance. These virtues are not exemplified in fashionable hair arrangements, jewelry, costly array or "putting on," that is, adding artificial glamour to the natural beauty which God has given (1 Tim. 2:9, 1 Pet. 3:3). Rather it is a "*meek and quiet spirit*" which is described as an incorruptible, priceless ornament in the sight of God (1 Pet. 3:4).

Special emphasis on scriptural principles of nonconformity is especially needful today. A generation ago, and before, society's standards of outward attire were more distinctly masculine and feminine and more in accord with scriptural ideals of modesty, humility and restraint. Today, few of these basic standards remain. Rather, there is a spirit of liberality and individualism which is flaunted as immodesty, sensuality, glamour, and a blurring of the distinctions between male and female.

Believers should not lower their standards of dress by conforming to the unbiblical trends of the times. They should not allow themselves to be drawn into the lure of worldly entertainments or indulgent living. If they do, they are conforming themselves to the world.

Nonconformity is biblical. The outward and visible manifestation of this doctrine might be the only message of spirituality some unbelievers will ever witness. Thus, practical holiness must be upheld for the glorious cause of Christ.

The Authority of God's Word

In these times of rapid change and instability, it is a great comfort to find the anchor of authority provided by the Word of God. Truly this eternal authority helps us to firmly “grip the solid Rock” and find peace of mind. A humble exercise of and response to godly authority is essential for the household of faith.

The psalmist wrote, *“Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth forever”* (Psalms 119:160). Further, *“The righteousness of thy testimonies is everlasting”* (144). It is by the incorruptible Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever, that it is possible for man to be born again (1 Peter 1:23).

All power and authority is from God, *“Whose dominion is an everlasting dominion..”* (Daniel 4:34). The Apostle Paul reiterated, *“For there is no power but of God”* (Rom. 13:1). The Lord Jesus said to Pilate, *“Thou couldst have no power at all, ... except it were given thee from above”* (John 19:11).

The Apostle Paul wrote, *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”* (2 Tim. 3:16). The Scripture teaches its own authority (John 10:34-35). The Bible is inerrant and infallible (Psalms 19:7). The Word also teaches that God is not a man and cannot lie (Num. 23:19, Tit. 1:2).

The everlasting and divine aspect of God's Word is plainly stated, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”* (John 1:1). The Word's enduring quality is reinforced in three of the gospels, *“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away”* (Matt. 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33).

As pilgrim believers we are compelled to submit wholeheartedly to the authority of God's Word. Obedience remains as the cardinal principle of spiritual growth. The Lord said, *“If a man love me he will keep my words: and my father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him”* (John 14:23).

The Apostle John underscores adherence to the Word, *“But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him”* (1 John 2:5). The Apostle James wrote, *“But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves”* (James 1:22). The Lord Jesus also said, *“Yea, rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it”* (Luke 11:28).

We are not to exempt ourselves from God's Word, or fail to follow its directions. Our ingrained social and personal habits must bow to eternal truths. Also, obedience to Scriptures should not be qualified by cultural differences between Bible times and modern times. This qualification could sometimes make portions of God's Word appear to be irrelevant to our lives. Rather we must become broken and crucified with Christ, so He can give us the power to conform and adjust our lives to His unchanging Word. The ongoing subjection of our flesh daily provides visible evidence of our conversion.

The Pharisees erred in adding to God's Word and substituting their own commandments for His commandments. This should not in any way be confused with a believer's aspiring to abide by New Testament standards of holiness as defined by godly leaders in today's church.

The Lord admonished the men of His time, who through their human wisdom and fleshly tradition, set aside the commandments of God. *“Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men”* (Mark 7:7). They honored God with their lips but their heart was far from Him. The Jewish religious leaders of that day had added voluminous complexities to God's law. *“Making the*

word of God of none effect...” (Mark 7:13), they handled the Word of God deceitfully. Today, we must take heed not to make the same mistake; nor should we pick and choose and follow only what is appealing and does not interfere with our fleshly preferences, but we should adhere to “... *all the counsel of God*” (Acts 20:27). “*Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation*” (2 Pet. 1:20). Rather, we should interpret the Word as a body of believers, having the same mind and the same judgment (1 Cor. 1:10). A deep sense of oneness and unity will then prevail.

Are all the New Testament Scriptures to be observed, or do we stop with the gospels? Scriptures themselves give us an obvious answer. We are to observe not only the words of Jesus, but the entire New Testament. The writings of the Apostles have divine validity also. The Apostle Paul wrote, “... *the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord*” (1 Cor. 14:37). Also, “... *when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God*” (1 Thess. 2:13). This presents clear evidence that the Apostles claimed the absolute authority of God in their writing and teaching.

How we respond to this absolute authority is not a casual matter. The Word of God is not divided into “essentials” and “non-essentials.” All the divine directions and high standards of godly living found in the gospels and in the Apostles’ writings should be humbly embraced and followed.

The authority of God’s Word is the “*scripture of truth*” (Dan. 10:21). It is through Christ Jesus, our Saviour, who is far above all principality and power and might and dominion, that God’s divine authority is most graciously and lovingly expressed.

Thy Word, O Lord forever is
The mirror where we see
Our faults and duties as they are,
Our likeness unto Thee.

Zion’s Harp #142

God's Order for the Believing Family

If we build upon the scriptural pattern of life, our homes will be able to stand against the severe pressures directed against the family today. God has established an order from the beginning, *“But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God”* (1 Cor. 11:3). When this order is not followed, trouble is inevitable. Adam and Eve both committed the sin of disobedience by yielding to Satan’s temptation. Eve also erred by taking upon herself the responsibility for making a monumental decision without even consulting her husband.

God has provided examples and instruction in His Word for order and leadership in the family, the church and the nations. He expressed confidence in Abraham as the head of his household. *“For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment ...”* (Gen. 18:19). Abraham was in control of his household. In other words he assumed the responsibility which God has assigned to a husband and father. There has been a long history of failure on the part of many men to assume this responsibility and consistently take the initiative to give proper spiritual guidance and nurturing to their families. We live in a time in which the traditional family is becoming a small minority among the many types of living arrangements. We need to be on guard so that our beloved family circles will not fall prey to the powerful forces which have destroyed so many homes in our society.

The first and most important requisites for family stability are faithfulness of a husband and wife to the Lord and reliance upon His sacred Word for direction in their lives. If we are not submissive to the authority which is over us, we will not be successful in establishing godly order in our homes. Our own attitudes and examples have a profound effect upon our children. Therefore we help them the most when we obey the Scriptures and remain submissive to those who are over us: in the church (Heb. 13:17), in the work place (Eph. 6:5-7), in the various levels of government (Rom. 13:1-7) and, above all, in our relationship to God (Heb. 12:9). One very visible example of submissiveness to God’s divine order is the wearing of a headcovering by a believing woman. God has given this ordinance as a simple but beautiful expression of the uniqueness of each member of His creation. It is seen by Him as such an important symbol that it is a mark of dishonor or shame to a woman’s head (her husband) when this is neglected (1 Cor. 11:5). The husband who has assumed his responsibility for control of his household (like Abraham) will see that the spiritual order is followed.

Parents are charged by the Word to give diligent effort to teaching their children the ways of the Lord. Specific instructions to parents include the following terms: nurture, admonish, exhort, comfort, and charge (Eph. 6:4, 1 Thes. 2:11). An analogy can be made with caring for a tree. To prune or trim (admonish, charge) is just as necessary as to provide fertilizer (nurture, comfort). Too much or too little of either could kill the tree. The father is given a special warning not to provoke a child to wrath (Eph. 4:6). This may result from unreasonable demands, but it can also be a consequence of failing to commend or encourage. There is a delicate balance to be maintained in setting high standards for a child to achieve and still providing unconditional assurance of one’s love and support. Some of the serious personal conflicts and disorders which individuals sometimes experience can be attributed, at least in part, to a lack of encouragement and support from an excessively demanding parent.

A couple of generations ago most of our families were in a rural setting and were less subject to the influences of a worldly, materialistic, and self-centered way of life. Today, we are surrounded by much greater pressures to conform to the world or be molded into its patterns of thinking. The pressures come from direct interaction with unbelievers as well as from the media. It is commonly known today that television is the avenue through which the minds of the people of our society are most heavily influenced. A recent study found that the average U.S. household spends 47-59 hours each week watching television.

The portrayal of family structure via this medium is, for the most part, a gross distortion. Parents are depicted as old fashioned and “out of tune,” fathers are seen as either workaholics who are seldom home or spineless individuals who can be easily swayed by their teenage children. Divorce and ungodly relationships are accepted as routine. If children are exposed to a diet of this type of influence, their respect for parental authority and instruction will be gradually eroded. It is a scriptural truth that keeping company with evil influences will lead to deterioration in one’s behavior: *“Be not deceived, evil communications corrupt good manners”* (1 Cor. 15:33). We have been exhorted to avoid this “window to the world” and to keep our homes as the one place on earth that is as much like Heaven as possible.

Another great challenge to the family today consists of excessive demands which are allowed to be placed upon our time and energy. We have a few years during which the nurturing and exhorting of our children is to be concentrated. These are usually the same years when the greatest efforts are being expended to become established in one’s occupation and to provide for the physical needs of the family, which is also an important scriptural responsibility (1 Tim. 5:8). Only by the grace and wisdom of God can a believing husband and wife find contentment with moderate living standards in the competitive, materialistic society in which we find ourselves. The Word says, *“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”* (Matt. 6:21). May we always see the fulfillment of God’s beautiful plan for the believing family as one of our greatest treasures here on earth.

True Brotherhood

True brotherhood implies a closeness, warmth, and unity that go far beyond what the flesh is capable of achieving. Doctrinal unity within a body of believers is a special favor from God, and can only be fulfilled among those who have been “*crucified with Christ*” (Gal. 2:20) and who subsequently walk as “*new creatures*” in Him (2 Cor. 5:17).

Christian brotherhood, which finds root in Scriptures, consists of a special and divine bond between brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. To bind is to arrange in a pattern that gives strength, to connect, hold together, or solidify. This powerful bond exists between those whose affection is in heaven (Col. 3:1-2), whose lives are hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3), and who are committed, by God’s grace, to a life of selfless devotion and obedience to God’s word. A common goal among those voluntarily uniting in true brotherhood is to pursue a lifelong, patient struggle to serve the Lord faithfully and overcome sin and evil. “*For ye have need of patience, that after ye have done the will of God ye might receive the promise*” (Heb. 10:36). The fulfillment of that promise is eternal life with Christ along with all who “*love his appearing*” (2 Tim. 4:8).

The structure of the household of faith is likened to a physical body. The Apostle Paul wrote, “*Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ?*” (1 Cor. 6:15). Also, “*So we being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another*” (Rom. 12:5). It is clear that individual believers should not live their lives unto themselves, but they are to be part of a larger entity, Christ’s body. Thus, their lives must coordinate with other members of this holy body, which makes up the visible church.

The Lord Jesus said, “*I am the vine, ye are the branches*” (John 15:5). “*As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me*” (John 15:4). This is a vivid example of spiritual unity. As members of Christ’s body, believers are also “*members one of another*” (Rom. 12:5). Christ and the church are inseparable. The church is the “*pillar and ground of the truth*” (1 Tim. 3:15).

Brotherhood implies a family relationship. God is the Father, Christ is the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4) and God’s children are brothers and sisters in faith and “*joint-heirs with Christ*” (Rom. 8:17). Earthly shepherds (elders) are given responsibility by the Holy Spirit to oversee and feed the flock of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). Scriptural authority is given to take souls into the church, and when necessary to apply loving discipline to those who fall into sin, Christ instructed the disciples, “*whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*” (Matt. 18:18). Likewise, in Hebrews 13:7 and 17, obedience to church authority is established as a responsibility of all believers. Spiritual guidance is welcomed by those with a Christ-like submissive attitude.

The brotherhood of Christ is described as “*a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people*” (1 Pet. 2:9). It is a privilege, as a believer in Christ, to be part of this high calling. Those who engage in the pursuit of heaven surely do so with the expectation that they will encounter struggle and suffering along the narrow way. Satan is trying desperately to divert the believer toward destruction. Consequently, the brotherhood must also be united in purpose (likeminded) and remain “*perfectly joined together*” (1 Cor. 1:10) in order to maintain an effective defense against the enemy. The “*shield of faith*” (Eph. 6:16) portrays a striking example of an impenetrable line of defense. The Roman soldiers would advance in a straight line, each with his shield held up before him and in close contact with the shields of his counterparts on either side. If one soldier lowered his shield, he not only exposed himself, but he broke the line of defense and endangered others. The same principle applies to the spiritual defense of the brotherhood.

The perpetuation of true Christian brotherhood requires humility, submission, obedience, and a loving concern on the part of each believer for the welfare of others (1 Cor. 8:13). God's grace is promised to the humble (James 4:6). The resultant peace and love draw the flock closer together and bring glory to God. When a flock of sheep are being stalked by wolves or other predators, those which are aware of the danger press close to others and seek the security of the center of the flock. The careless and immature animals drift away from the safety of the group and become easy prey to the enemy.

To live victoriously, God's people must be faithful in doctrine and circumspect (careful) in lifestyle. Spiritual dangers abound on every side. In this intense battle against unrighteousness, the love of the brethren must be so pure, and esteem for each other so fervent, that effective, mutual exhortation will be practiced diligently as intended by God (Heb. 3:13). Brethren will be "*able also to admonish one another*" (Rom. 15:14), which means they love each other so much they will meet this scriptural responsibility of gently correcting each other. Brethren who have the "*same care one for another*" (1 Cor. 12:25), will give and receive encouragement and warning as motivated by the Holy Spirit. They will also avoid putting a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in their brother's way (Rom. 14:13), realizing that if they wound their weaker brother's conscience, they sin against Christ (1 Cor. 8:12).

Finally, true brotherhood cannot dismiss the necessity of applying a kind and loving discipline when brethren stray or fall into grievous sin (1 Cor. 5). This noble form of love is carried out in the name of Christ, in accord with God's word. The goals are the cleansing of the soul who has fallen and the preservation of a "*glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but.., holy and without blemish*" (Eph. 5:27).

This is the wish from all my heart
For you my loving comrades;
In our alliance may the Lord
Be felt in blessed nearness.
The power of His cross and blood
Unites us in true brotherhood.
Zion's Harp #173, "Heart's Wish"

Keeping the Same Judgments

“Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing” (Phil. 3:16). “Fulfill ye my joy, that ye be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind” (Phil. 2:2).

The Christian ideal of believers maintaining a healthy sense of like-mindedness finds clear expression in I Cor. 1:10, “*Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*”

A judgment is defined as an opinion or position. If a body of believers is to be “perfectly joined together,” there must be a tremendous effort to minimize self-centered opinions and blend hearts and minds together into a unified core of biblically-based positions on the significant aspects of life.

To meet this ideal requires a breaking of the strong wills of individuals. Paul wrote “*Be not wise in your own conceits (opinions)*” (Rom. 12:16). This can only be accomplished through conversion followed by a lifelong process of a believer’s will being daily “*crucified with Christ*” (Gal. 2:20).

God’s people today face a dilemma unique to our time. Contemporary society dismisses the biblical principle of like-mindedness. Rather, it aggressively fosters the themes of diversity and individualism. “Think for yourself,” “Do your own thing,” and “Do what is right in your own eyes” represent popular viewpoints which are not only appealing to human nature, but are actually given wide respect in our society. As converts come out from their former life and enter into the household of faith, great care must be taken that their hearts are thoroughly cleansed of this destructive individualism. Believers also must continually resist the development of self-centered opinions.

Christ-like love among believers draws them into close relationships in the Spirit. God’s people are described in the Word as a “*body*” and “*members one of another*” (Eph. 4:25). They are thoroughly integrated in mind and spirit. All parts are to cooperate and pull in the same direction for the glorious cause of Christ. In graceful harmony they display an effective coordination that dispels self-centeredness and division. This holy body of Christ, the church, is to be “*perfectly joined together*” (1 Cor. 1:10), “*fitly framed*” (Eph. 2:21), and “*compact by that which every joint supplieth*” (Eph. 4:16).

As God’s children strive to keep the same judgments, a central and relevant question arises. Can all of the brethren agree in all of life’s judgments? Obviously not, because individuals must make hundreds of personal, everyday judgments, many of which are unrelated to other brothers and sisters in the Lord. Yet, the brethren should agree on doctrinal matters and on clearly defined standards which are taught by the church and are based upon careful interpretation of the scriptures under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. These standards consist of specific applications of biblical principles to various aspects of life. They provide definitions for important concepts such as worldliness, nonconformity, spiritual separation, pride, humility, sanctification, nonresistance, brotherhood, unity of spirit, and many others.

If abstract concepts are left without any uniformity of definition, then the believer’s interpretation of them gravitates toward individualism. Each believer responds only as he personally understands them based on his own experiences. Spiritual truth then becomes relative, and the church becomes divided and defenseless against Satan’s onslaughts. In matters of faith and verity, the truth should be defined and remain absolute.

In matters of doctrine and church practice there must be clearly defined judgments which are taught

consistently in the home, Sunday School and church assembly and faithfully obeyed. These truths are sometimes referred to as “the faith.” Jude exhorted, “*ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*,” (Jude 3). In this context “the faith” consists of a set of scripturally-based truths which must be adhered to by a body of true believers. It is evident that when Paul was preaching the gospel at Philippi he also taught customs, which are patterned applications of scriptural truths to specific aspects of everyday life. These teachings required marked changes in living by his followers (Acts 16:19-21).

If each believer interprets the Scriptures according to his own preference, a condition develops which is little different from the time when “*every man did that which was right in his own eyes*” (Judges 21:25). The result was not good for God’s people.

Church judgments are not rigid or suppressive when given by a “servant leadership” with deep affection and concern for the welfare of the brethren. Believers should be thankful for and not resent spiritual instruction, because the intent is to offer insights and guidance that will help on the upward road to Zion.

A great opportunity exists today for the church to present a beautiful, consistent example to an unregenerate world that is sinking lower and lower into the depths of selfishness and depravity. To do this will require Christ-like humility and brotherly love, with each preferring the other above himself (Rom. 12:10). In practical terms, this also requires submission to the kindly administered judgments advocated by the church.

Unity and likemindedness create a deep and beautiful sense of solidarity in the household of faith. They enhance strong supportive relationships among believers allowing them to be more able, when necessary, to strengthen, encourage and admonish one another. On the other hand, variance and independence can stir up a sense of alienation and cause relationships between brethren to become lukewarm, making it almost impossible for them to admonish each other in the true spirit of love and meekness.

May we wholeheartedly obey the Scriptures: “*.... let each esteem other better than themselves*” (Phil. 2:3), “*Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God*” (Eph. 5:21), “*Obey them that have the rule over you and submit yourselves ...*” (Heb. 13:17), and “*to be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment*” (1 Cor. 1:10).

Spiritual Growth

Achieving true spiritual growth is a noble motive in a believer's life. The Bible encourages believers to "*grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Peter 3:18). They are also exhorted to "*go on unto perfection*" (Heb. 6:1).

Spiritual growth is a simple, uncomplicated concept. "*Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you*" (James 4:8). How does one draw nigh to God? There is an age-old formula that never fails and is as applicable for today's modern times as it was in Bible times. Namely, engage in sincere and fervent prayer, consistent serious reading of the Word, heartfelt participation in the church (worship, fellowship, singing, and other activities) and be zealous in good works. Growth and discernment are further enhanced by nonconformity to the world so that one can better understand God's perfect will (Rom. 12:1-2).

God does not reveal himself to the wise and prudent. Rather, he reveals himself to those who are humble of heart (Matt. 11:25). The Apostle Paul stressed that he came "*not with excellency of speech or of wisdom*" and that he was determined only to know "*Christ, and Him crucified*" (1 Cor. 2:1,2).

Desire for growth must be motivated by love for Christ and the brethren (1 John 3:16). Charity is supreme. The Apostle Paul wrote, "*And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing*" (1 Cor. 13:2). Further, the believer is taught *above* all to "*put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness*" (Col. 3:14).

As one turns to the Lord in repentance and becomes converted, the warmth and holiness of God's Spirit provides a deep, "first love" relationship with Christ and His body, the church. There is danger that this spiritual well-being can fade as the lures and cares of the world become more pronounced. To help prevent this possibility, the Apostle Paul exhorted believers to attain "*full age*" and "*have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil*" through use of the strong meat of the Word (Heb. 5:13-14).

Spiritual growth aims for several basic objectives. First, spiritual growth will give the believer wisdom to recognize evil influences and strength to resist diverse temptations. Spiritual growth and maturity will result in a life of obedience that is pleasing to God. In addition, as one prospers in true spiritual growth, his life will more profoundly reflect the light of Christ, and he will be a better example to unbelievers, and a greater encouragement to fellow believers.

Spiritual growth should not be considered an end in itself, but rather a means to an end: being fruitful and overcoming temptation until life's end. Knowledge alone is not growth. Without charity, it may be a detriment (1 Cor. 8:1). Only as knowledge is applied in everyday Christian living does it constitute growth. This provides visible evidence of genuine service for Christ, who said, "*by their fruits ye shall know them*" (Matt. 7:20).

If the Bible knowledge a believer gains does not change his life by making him more humble, more obedient, and more sanctified, he has merely looked into a mirror and walked away, apparently having forgotten what he saw (James 1:22-24).

Familiarity with the Word should not lead to overconfidence. "*Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall*" (1 Cor. 10:12). "*Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits*" (Rom. 12:16).

The pursuit of spiritual growth and godly insight should not result in a highly individualistic

interpretation of Scriptures. Increased spiritual understanding by each member should coordinate with the functioning of the entire body of Christ. The church is *“fitly framed”* and *“... together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord”* (Eph. 2:21). Believers are *“builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit”* (Eph. 2:22). True spiritual growth enhances the fulfillment of the scriptural role of the church here on earth, bringing glory to God.

Some of the specific and very noticeable results of true spiritual growth are: humility, peace, contentment, and obedience. These attributes often develop most effectively as a result of enrollment in the school of experience.

Humility requires development of a proper concept of one’s self, which is neither extreme of exalting or degrading of self. *“By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches and honor and life”* (Prov. 22:4). *“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up”* (James 4:10). Humility allows us to gain wisdom (Prov. 11:2) and receive grace (1 Peter 5:5).

Paul implied that through many experiences he grew in contentment. *“For I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content”* (Phil. 4:11), and... *“godliness with contentment is great gain”* (1 Tim. 6:6). As believers walk each day in truth and light, realizing their sins are forgiven and they are at peace with God and man, they have great reason to rejoice and be glad. Contentment is a vital component of growth.

Obedience is another crucial aspect of growth. True Christian maturity cannot exclude obedience to God, to His Word, and to Christ’s body, the church. *“... but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments”* (Matt. 19:17). *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man”* (Ecc. 12:13). Thus, these two Scriptures indicate that one should abide by the standards of the Word if he claims to be growing in grace and in the knowledge of God. Moreover, a child of God has an obligation to reflect obedience by submitting to the guidance of those who are over him in the Lord (Heb. 13:7,17). Believers must also submit to one another in the fear of God (Eph. 5:21).

May our sincere desire for spiritual growth be to *“... come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ”* (Eph. 4:13).

A True Disciple of Christ

When Nicodemus came inquiring of Jesus, he acknowledged that Jesus was a great teacher. He was drawn to Him and wanted to learn more about becoming His follower. A disciple is one who learns and follows the teachings of his master. The word disciple is closely related to the word discipline, which involves structured training and correction. Jesus had an inner circle of twelve disciples who were also called apostles. They forsook their old lives and followed Him wherever He went, learning from Him and assisting Him in His earthly ministry. *“And he said to them a14 If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me”* (Luke 9:23). The disciples’ willingness to forsake all illustrates the diligent nature of life’s most noble calling - that of following the Son of God. Put into action it means self-surrender and the offering of one’s life into the service of Christ.

The initial requirement for becoming a true disciple of Christ is genuine, saving faith in His sacrificial death on Calvary’s Cross. Such faith embodies humility and obedience which compel a person to repent for his sins, make restitution and depart from iniquity. Baptism and laying on of hands complete these principles of the doctrine of Christ (Heb. 6:1-2).

A true disciple imitates his master’s example and adheres to his teachings. For the believer there must be wholehearted submission to God’s Word, viewing it as absolute, inerrant truth. Any inclination to elevate personal reasoning above biblical truth must be avoided. Instead there should be a deep hunger for instruction from the Word so that one’s life may become more pleasing and fruitful. *“That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God”* (Col. 1:10).

True discipleship requires nurturing through God’s Word. *“But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed”* (James 1:25). God revealed through Isaiah of old what kind of person He would look favorably upon, *“... to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word”* (Is. 66:2). Jesus said, *“If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed”* (John 8:31). *“Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life”* (Prov. 4:23). Prayer, reading the Word, meditation, and fellowship with the brethren are necessary for nurturing the inner man.

Inherent in discipleship is a very close relationship with fellow believers in the body of Christ. It is very important that each newly converted person becomes fully integrated into the church. This occurs smoothly and brings joy to all when there is a definite effort to achieve likemindedness. The Apostle Paul wrote, *“Fulfill ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind”* (Phil. 2:2). This relationship includes friendliness and tenderheartedness as well as great care to avoid offending or discouraging other brethren by one’s behavior. Sometimes inadequate effort is made to help individuals feel a full part of the fellowship. It is easy to drift into the habit of concentrating on those with whom one is well acquainted or those who are especially likable or of common background. Each member has a responsibility to help others draw close to the body and thus to the Lord, in the common bond of discipleship.

A true disciple of Christ does not have *“fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness”* (Eph. 5:11), but rather he reproveth them. In a culture indulging in pleasure, ease, and materialism, he sees himself as serving a higher and more soul-satisfying purpose in life. He thus focuses on *“redeeming the time, because the days are evil”* (Eph. 5:16). He seeks to *“keep himself unspotted from the world”* (James 1:27) so that his heart may be an honorable dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. He is keenly aware of the importance of portraying a consistent example, for the disciple’s life reflects upon his master. A true disciple is willing to bear the cross of Christ, whatever the cost may be.

A humble, obedient lifestyle will often draw questions from others about one's faith. Discipleship includes a willingness to give expression of this faith when interest is aroused. *"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear"* (1 Pet. 3:15). The most effective response will be gracious and sincere, rather than overbearing or high-minded. *"Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man"* (Col. 4:6).

True discipleship requires faithfulness. Being an overcomer is universally acclaimed in the messages to the seven churches (Rev. 2 and 3). The road to Zion is an uphill struggle, fraught with many dangers and temptations, *"but he giveth more grace"* (James 4:6). The diligent, well disciplined follower of Christ strives to make his *"calling and election sure"* (2 Pet. 1:10). He works out his own salvation with *"fear and trembling"* (Phil. 2:12). He recognizes that those who endure temptation will receive the crown of life (James 1:12). *"For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise"* (Heb. 10:36).

Christ-like love is a cardinal feature of discipleship. *"Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children, and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us . . ."* (Eph. 5:1-2). In fact, the most convincing aspect of the validity of a group of believers is their sacrificial love for one another. Jesus gave this characteristic profound significance when He said, *"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another"* (John 13:35).

Therefore, ye Christ's disciples, all together,
O, consecrate yourself to Him anew!
United stand; and let love's flame forever
Inflame your hearts with passions, strong and true.
Zion's Harp #191

Family Worship Time

Family worship time is a God-given opportunity to unite the family and help resist the many subtle forces which are attempting to undermine the Christian home. Ambition to obtain more than modest means often leads to excessively long hours of employment and, in some instances, causes both parents to work outside the home while children are still quite young. Children are expected to excel in school and mature rapidly so they can shoulder their responsibilities in society. Perhaps because of fear of failure, greater emphasis is sometimes placed on developing a career for life than preparing a soul for eternity. The Word gives a different perspective: *“But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you”* (Matt. 6:33).

If children are to be fully convinced that spiritual things should have first place, it will have to be proven to them by the priorities established in the home. To achieve this objective there must be concerted effort to communicate on a spiritual level and to set aside regular family worship time. For many it is the evening meal that best lends itself to a time of family communication. The family assembles around the table to give thanks to God for all good gifts including the blessing of being together. Following is a time when children should be seen *and* heard. Each should be given opportunity to speak freely of the experiences of the day to that little group of people who are to him or her the most understanding and supportive fellow human beings on this earth. Home should be a place of respite from the pressures of society. Close fellowship among those we deeply love affords a foretaste of heaven (Eph. 2:6). Family ties are strengthened by these experiences. If parents do not apply consistent determination to set aside such times in their busy lives, how often will true family communion occur on a spontaneous basis?

Innumerable after-school activities, the lure of many forms of entertainment, multiple jobs, fast food outlets and a host of other factors have made a quiet evening meal at home with the entire family virtually unknown to many households in America. If we are not on guard, this will become an accepted pattern in our homes. This is but one small example of the success which the unrelenting enemy of our souls has had in seeking to undermine the Christian home. He is trying to corrupt the simplicity of our lives in Christ (2 Cor. 11:3).

Many of us have precious memories of our fathers praying aloud at the table and reading from the Holy Scriptures. Older converts often testify that they were moved to repentance as the Holy Spirit brought to their remembrance the prayers and faithful teachings of their parents. Our sincere hope is that such memories may help awaken many others. *“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it”* (Prov. 22:6).

Are we doing our best to preserve these sacred experiences for our children? Are we relenting to the peer pressure of neighboring children who grab a bite to eat on an individual basis and in a few minutes are back at the door to play again? Or have we established godly patterns which are respected by all, and are based on deep concerns for the eternal welfare of souls. Joshua said, *“Choose you this day whom ye will serve.., but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”* (Josh. 24:15).

One of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is temperance which is defined as habitual self-control or self-discipline. We can pray spontaneously at any time without depending upon a structured schedule. However, if we acknowledge our human frailty, we will agree that much grace is needed to help us lead balanced or temperate lives which include adequate time for prayer and worship on a regular basis. The Psalmist wrote, *“it is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praises unto thy name, O most High: To shew forth thy lovingkindness in the morning and thy faithfulness every night”* (Psalms 92:1-2). Numerous scriptural teachings refer to daily communication with God and regular meditation upon His Word. Parents are instructed to teach their children the ways of the Lord continuously. Abraham was commended by God,

“For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord...” (Gen. 18:19).

Unquestioned loyalty to regular attendance at church services should be the norm of every believing home. *“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Heb. 10:25).* Reinforcement of what was learned at church and Sunday School is a special blessing of family communication on a spiritual level. Children should be asked about their lessons for the day. They will profit from the example of hearing their parents speak appreciatively of thoughts brought out in the sermons. Combined efforts to memorize Scripture and frequent reference to its application in our daily lives can be of great benefit. Parents should always be on the lookout for “teachable moments” when a scriptural lesson can be applied to everyday life. This can be accomplished without being overbearing, if it is motivated by the love of Christ.

How can we find the time for all of these things when we already feel overwhelmed with meeting the many routine pressures of life? The Word says, *“And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed” (Rom. 13:11).* We will find time for the things we cherish the most. Jesus said, *“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21).* We must put forth the time, energy, dedication and self-denial to meet our family responsibilities. By faithful obedience to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, there will be generated in our own minds deep personal convictions based upon the Word of God regarding these responsibilities as Christian parents. As this occurs, the reallocation of our time becomes of itself a simple act. The resultant blessings will rest with our children and our children’s children—should the Lord tarry.

Holy Communion

Holy Communion is one of the most sacred and precious experiences afforded the child of God while here on this earth. It was instituted by the Lord Jesus on the night of His betrayal, while He was gathered in a large upper room with the twelve apostles. *“And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, this is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, this cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you”* (Luke 22:19-20). The Lord understood human nature and saw great benefit to be derived by the church in the years to come through observance of this sacred rite.

The primary purpose of Holy Communion is to bring vivid remembrance to the sacrifice and suffering of the Savior, who paid the price for sin and brought the opportunity for salvation to lost mankind. The intense love for Christ which bursts forth in the heart of every newly converted person is referred to as his “first love.” It consists of a deep appreciation for salvation, forgiveness, and peace. The Word describes a pitiful deterioration of this awareness in the hearts of the people in the church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:2-4). Although these believers were diligent in performing many good works and resisting evil, they had lost their first love. They were warned to repent and restore that love or suffer even greater loss. Communion can be very helpful in maintaining the flame of love for Christ.

The symbols which represent Christ’s body and blood give added meaning to this sacred feast. The bread is made of a multitude of grains of wheat which were ground into flour. Each grain has lost its identity and has been blended imperceptibly into the loaf. The fruit of the vine is made from many grapes which were crushed to release their juice. They also have lost their identity and have become blended perfectly to form the final product. The beautiful simplicity of breaking the bread and sharing the cup allows the true meaning of these symbols to prevail in the hearts of the brethren as they take Communion. All thought of self is put aside, and a body of united believers is taken back to Calvary in the spirit, to behold in reverence and deepest gratitude the suffering, bleeding, and dying of the pure and holy lamb of God.

The Scripture teaches that each child of God is to make a thorough self-examination before partaking of Holy Communion. If no unreconciled sin is found and the individual is at peace with God and man, he is then free to partake (1 Cor. 11:27-32). The Apostle Paul wrote, *“Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth”* (1 Cor. 5:8).

The question is sometimes raised as to whether the church has any role in determining who might partake of Communion. Indeed certain basic standards are applied, such as not sharing Communion with children or individuals who have not been baptized. It is relevant to note that the church takes ample time and care in ascertaining who is worthy of baptism: *“Lay hands suddenly on no man”* (1 Tim. 5:22). Once a soul has brought an acceptable testimony of true conversion and love for Christ and has demonstrated commitment to a life of obedience to God’s Word, a covenant is made and baptism is administered. Implicit in this baptism is submission to church authority and loyalty to the body of believers of which the new member has become an integral part (Phil. 1:27, 3:16; Heb. 13:17). Both the church (Christ’s body) and the individual bear responsibility in keeping this feast with sincerity and truth (1 Cor. 5:8). Self-examination prior to Communion is the responsibility of the individual member, as prescribed in the Word (1 Cor. 11:28). The church’s role is to open the Communion feast only to those who are in full fellowship with and thus spiritually accountable to this body of believers.

If Communion were open to any professing Christian, individuals with markedly different beliefs and interpretations of the Word would participate. This could include professing Christians who have adopted substandard lifestyles which in many instances constitute living in sin, according to a literal

interpretation of the Word. The consequences of partaking of Communion unworthily are very serious. *“For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself”* (1 Cor. 11:29). When wayward Christians are under the jurisdiction of a body of believers which diligently applies the Word, and judges immoral lifestyles as sin, they are disciplined (1 Cor. 5). This authority cannot be exerted over such individuals if they belong to a different church or religious group. In addition to contributing to their condemnation by allowing them to share Communion, another scriptural principle would be violated: *“... neither be partaker of other men’s sins: keep thyself pure”* (1 Tim. 5:22). The Word further teaches, *“And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them”* (Eph. 5:11). There is no practical way for the church to fulfill the Scriptural ideal of a pure and holy remembrance of the Lord’s suffering in the true spirit of unity, if Holy Communion is held as an open public ceremony.

The flame of love and appreciation for Christ is renewed when brethren gather in oneness of mind and with prepared hearts to observe Holy Communion. This experience strengthens the spiritual union throughout the body of believers as well as with the Head, which is Christ (1 Cor. 10:16-17). Communion means “common union.” The deep, meaningful fellowship among believers in Christ who are of like mind and at peace with one another is truly a foretaste of Heaven. *“And (He) hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus”* (Eph. 2:6). May we truly cherish the opportunity to experience renewal of our first love by observing Holy Communion in all sincerity and humility, according to the pattern established by our Lord and Savior and His beloved disciples.

What Is Worldliness?

The world can be defined as human life and society without God. Worldliness is conformity to or affection for those things which are of the world, which is Satan's domain. The Apostle Paul wrote, "*Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth*" (Col. 3:2). Living devotedly in Christ or walking aimlessly in the world are as different as life and death. "*And you hath he quickeneth who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience*" (Eph. 2:1-2). Man finds himself in the middle of a great battle between monumental spiritual forces. "*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places*" (Eph. 6:12). The child of God must be able to recognize the "*darkness of this world*" so that he will not fall back under the power of Satan.

Believers are not to be conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2), but they are to be crucified unto the world (Gal. 6:14), remain unspotted from the world (James 1:27), and be separate from the world (2 Cor. 6:17). In order to obey these scriptural truths, it is necessary to understand thoroughly the nature of worldliness, which has both inward and outward components. The inward includes ungodly attitudes and feelings such as selfishness, envy, bitterness, evil surmisings, judging, stubbornness, respect of persons, pride, and an unforgiving spirit. Outward worldliness is a manifestation of these attitudes as words and deeds characteristic of humanity which is not under the control of the Holy Spirit. Biblical examples indicate that outward worldliness constitutes a wide range of behaviors, from indulgence in gross evils to association with unifying aspects of human life and society.

A converted person's pattern of life should differ markedly from that of his sinful past. Formerly he was "*in bondage under the elements of the world*" (Gal. 4:3). Through conversion he has "*escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust*" (2 Pet. 1:4). The child of God who is living under the influence of the Holy Spirit has no place in his life for the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21). Few would deny the need to remain clearly separate from the obvious corruptions of worldliness. Unfortunately some of the more subtle aspects of worldliness are often allowed to creep into a believer's life.

For example, it is very easy for anyone to allow his mind to become cluttered with anxiety about everyday obligations and material possessions. In the parable of the sower, the individual who receives the seed (God's Word) among thorns experiences the following consequences: "*. . . the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful*" (Matt. 13:22). Do we recognize that undue worry and concern about temporal things are dangerous forms of worldliness? The Word says, "*Be careful (anxious) for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God*" (Phil. 4:6).

Many forms of entertainment which the world offers attract huge crowds and produce great wealth for their promoters. Jesus said, "*. . . that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God*" (Luke 16:15). These activities seldom lend themselves to "*redeeming (making the best use of) the time*" (Eph. 5:16), nor do they bring glory to God. They include aimless entertainments such as fictitious dramas and frenzied athletic competitions which glorify man and can lead to worshipping the "*creature more than the Creator*" (Rom. 1:25). Perhaps the most predominant form of creature worship today is hedonism or love of self-satisfying pleasure (2 Tim. 3:4). It is exactly the opposite of denying self and seeking the welfare of others (1 Cor. 10:24). "*He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man: he that loveth wine and oil shall not be rich*" (Prov. 21:17).

Some of the outward manifestations of worldliness are motivated by pride. Personal glamour is

given high priority in the world. Great efforts are made to enhance human attractiveness with fashionable adornments and hair styles. The Apostle Paul wrote, “. . . *the fashion of this world passeth away*” (1 Cor. 7:31). God’s priorities are very different from those of the world: “*Favor is deceitful and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised*” (Prov. 31:30). The common expression “letting your hair down” describes a condition of being very relaxed and off guard. Is there something to be learned by pondering the implications of this expression? The Apostle Peter wrote, “*Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation (behavior) and godliness*” (2 Pet. 3:11).

When the believer sets his affection on the spiritual treasures which God has given to him to enjoy, he is much less likely to be drawn back into the world. Through the wisdom of God, his goals are elevated far above the beggarly elements of this world, and his life radiates with godly virtues. “*But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy*” (James 3:17).

This beautiful state can be destroyed by rekindling a friendship with the world: “. . . *know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?*” (James 4:4). Even one of Paul’s co-laborers became a backslider: “*For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world*” (2 Tim. 4:10).

As we seek to avoid worldliness it is wise to ask, “What would Jesus do?” He obviously would not partake of any of the evil works of the flesh nor would He be associated with such entertainments, fashions, or worldly pursuits that corrupt the inner man. “*Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering...*” (Heb. 10:23) and strive with all diligence for our heavenly homeland. “*For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens*” (2 Cor. 5:1).

Serving the Lord as a Single Person

Living for God as a single person is portrayed in the Bible as a special gift (1 Cor. 7:7). It is very clear that every child of God, whether single or married, male or female, young or old, is of equal spiritual worth before Christ. *“For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Gal. 3:27-28). *“And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ”* (Rom. 8:17).

Sometimes single believers struggle with feelings of discontentment, unfulfillment, frustration, discouragement and loneliness which they attribute to their unmarried state. This frame of mind can even lead to envy, bitterness and ultimately despair. A major cause of these harmful attitudes is often an inappropriate self-concept. True humility is seeing ourselves in the same realistic manner in which God sees us. It is not an elevation of self nor is it an undue degrading of self. It does not include dissatisfaction with our basic God-given traits. *“Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus?”* (Rom. 9:20). David said, *“I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made”* (Psalms 139:14). The Word explains that we only *“see through a glass darkly”* and only *“know in part.”* However, it also promises *“then shall I know even as also I am known”* (1 Cor. 13:12). Although the full realization of how God sees us as individuals will occur only in Eternity, the more intimately we walk with Christ today, the more accurately we will know ourselves as He knows us. Perhaps the most harmful source of discontentment is having self as the center of our lives rather than Christ.

Self-centeredness is a failure to yield to Jesus and to allow Him to have control of our lives. Our primary goal as believers should be bringing glory to God in all aspects of our lives (1 Cor. 6:20). If we assume that our lives cannot be fulfilled because we are unmarried, we develop an unrealistic attitude about God’s plan for us. *“For in him (Christ) dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in Him”* (Col. 2:9-10). If we claim this promise of completeness, we will not be so easily swayed when well-meaning but thoughtless comments are made such as, *“Why aren’t you married yet?”* or *“You ought to be settling down and making someone else happy also.”*

Sometimes such comments can cause single believers much anxiety. Feelings of inferiority and even guilt may follow. Such feelings, based on the fact that one is unmarried, have no scriptural justification. The best response is to quickly forgive those who make thoughtless comments and continue to claim the full measure of joy and hope which accompanies a life which is surrendered to Christ. *“Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Ghost”* (Rom. 15:13).

Another attitude which robs contentment is excessive thinking about what might be or what one wants to be. This “what if” attitude prevents a believer from living in the fulness of Christ in the present, whatever his current state may be. It can lead to such frustration that wrong solutions are considered. The Apostle Paul prayed three times for his thorn in the flesh to be removed. God’s answer was, *“My grace is sufficient for thee”* (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul could have reacted by trying to force his own will. Sometimes individuals blame the church for their difficulties. They feel that if dating and marrying other professing Christians were permitted, their problem would be resolved. Once again, the right solution is to focus on Christ and put one’s complete trust in Him. The Apostle Paul wrote, *“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus”* (Phil. 2:5). Mary portrayed a beautiful example of graceful submission when she said, *“Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word”* (Luke 1:38).

It is very important to recognize that the Scriptures offer the option to choose to be single. *“I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I”* (1 Cor. 7:8). When this

option is viewed as an opportunity and the matter is placed entirely in God's hands, harmful attitudes such as frustration and discouragement are replaced by faith and contentment. The overwhelming desire of every believer's heart should be for God's will to be done. *"Delight thyself also in the Lord: and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the Lord, trust also in him; and he shall bring it (His will) to pass (Psalms 37:4-5).*

The special gift of being single provides much greater freedom and opportunity to help others. Those who are married have a primary commitment in life to their spouses and families. Whereas, *"He that is unmarried, careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord"* (1 Cor. 7:32). This affords the single person a unique opportunity to serve the Lord in many special ways.

When God gives a gift or a calling, it should be viewed as something to be cherished and sustained (1 Cor. 7:24). If our calling is to be single, this does not carry with it any shame nor does it require any apology. Rather, all brethren would do well to adjust their perspective, if necessary, and acknowledge the godly honor which is bestowed upon this calling. Early in God's creation He observed that it was not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). God has provided fulfillment not only through marriage, but also by intimate fellowship with the brethren and, ultimately, through oneness with Christ our Savior. *"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin"* (1 John 1:7).

With Jesus Christ as the center of our lives, we can find peace and contentment as well as unlimited opportunity to serve others. Jesus said *"I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly"* (John 10:10).

Sanctification

“Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27).

Sanctification is defined as being set apart for a sacred service, a holy use. When the firstborn of Egypt were destroyed, the Israelites were set apart, for the death angel saw the blood and passed over their households. It is a great privilege to be thus called of God and marked or set apart for holy use. But with that gift also comes a very significant responsibility. “. . . unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required” (Luke 12:48).

Sanctification begins with faith in Christ (Acts 26:18) which results in an imputed righteousness. The Word (John 17:17) and the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:16) then further sanctify and purify our hearts and lives. This is a practical sanctification which involves the application of scriptural principles to all aspects of our attitude and behavior. *“Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1).* This practical holiness is not an option for the believer. *“Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).*

Where do we stand today with regard to sanctification of spirit, soul and body (1 Thes. 5:23)? Do we abhor sin or have we allowed worldliness to reenter our heart? Do we read things we shouldn't or dwell on evil thoughts? We must yield to God and not to Satan's lures: *“But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:14).* This means we should not think about how we may please our flesh. We are told the wall around the New Jerusalem separates the ungodly from the godly. *“And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth...” (Rev. 21:27).*

If we allow an evil thought to become a strong imagination, we may go on to delight in it and finally consent to it in word or deed. It has been said that we should “withstand the beginnings,” just as we most effectively deal with weeds in a garden when they are young and shallow-rooted. If these invasive plants are allowed to remain for a period of time, they become deeply rooted. They take the nourishment from the fruit and, like evil thoughts, if left unchecked they ultimately choke out all that is good (James 1:14-15).

It is very clear that the early church was truly set apart for Christ. However, through the ages of time there have been many changes in the attitudes and lifestyles of professing Christians. Years ago many took the stand of being non-combatant. The Anabaptists in Europe were persecuted for this but never took the sword. However, World War II brought a relaxation of this standard, and it became common even for “fundamental” Christians to bear arms. Historically, honoring the Lord's day by abstaining from labor and commerce was a widespread practice. This has deteriorated a great deal in recent years. We are thankful that our brethren keep the Lord's day holy and rest from their labors.

Many other churches formerly did not believe in going to movies. Gradually they relented and said their members could go to the “good” movies. Now many allow themselves to go to any of them. Entertainment becomes a refuge from a disturbing conscience. God tries to convict souls, but they drown it out by one sport after another, one movie after another. The influences of television programming and Hollywood eventually manifest themselves. Divorce was common in Hollywood many years ago; now it is common in our society. In adornment there have also been many changes. Yet the Bible says *“Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel But let it be the hidden man of the heart ...” (1 Pet. 3:3-4).* After all we are not to please the world but are set apart to glorify God. In the Word, painting the face is associated with corruption (Ezek.

23:40).

There has come to be little difference between professing Christians and unbelievers in many aspects of lifestyle. What has happened to biblically based practical sanctification which truly sets the believer apart from others? We need to prove that our allegiance is to the Lord and not the world. In Him are the true pleasures, not those that satisfy the flesh but those which satisfy the soul's need (Ps. 16:11).

We must not only pray but watch. We must watch for trends in our own heart and withstand the beginnings. We must realize that we are in a real battle, greater than the battle of Gettysburg or Bunker Hill, and better is *"he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city"* (Prov. 16:32).

Sanctification should occur in every phase of our lives, our personality, our thoughts, our lifestyle, and our outward appearance (2 Tim. 2:19-21). We are to glorify God in our body and in our spirit, both of which belong to Him (1 Cor. 6:20). *"Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work"* (2 Thes. 16:17).

Competitive Athletics

A recent study of changing American attitudes reported that sports is America's newest and most rapidly growing religion. Over the past fifty years sports has saturated American life, attracting millions of dedicated followers. The "play ethic" has mostly replaced the work ethic as a national ideal. The worship of athletic games and teams in our nation borders on idolatry.

Sincere followers of Christ are thus faced with many questions: Is devotion to Christ compatible with involvement in organized athletic competition? Are Christian ideals consistent with sports values? Do the motives of sports correspond with the mind of Christ? Do the noises and revellings of sports enhance or hinder peace of heart and mind?

Sports enthusiasts claim that athletics provide "positive" disciplines that later carry over into everyday life. Sports are thought to build character and cultivate a sense of cooperation. In reality, conceit and feelings of superiority are found among many athletes, resulting from years of crowd adulation and self-promotion. Corruption and violence are all too often associated with athletics, especially at the collegiate and professional level. Instead of relieving stress, preoccupation with sports only adds more frustration and anguish to many lives.

Admittedly, recreation and play are beneficial for growing children. Energies expended at play are preferable to those spent on destructive and/or immoral acts. There comes a time, however, when immature interests must give way to spiritual adulthood. The Apostle Paul wrote, "*When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things*" (1 Cor. 13:11).

Athletic competition corrodes Christian discipleship because the motives and general environment of these contests undermine Christian principles. The believer must not temporarily abandon these principles in the name of "sport." Athletic competition is motivated primarily by self-promotion. It arouses strong feelings of aggression, hostility, partisanship, greed, conquest, and even violence. None of these traits is Christ-like. Loyalty to one's team can become so intense that it prompts screaming, shouting, yelling, and chanting to a near war-like level. This is not the kind of environment in which a believer would want to be found when the Lord returns. Such intense desire to prevail or gain can constitute covetousness, which is idolatry (Col. 3:5). "*Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory ...*" (Phil. 2:3).

Although sometimes denied, a lust to win pervades athletic contests. A coach's job security rests on his won/lost record. Victory comes at the expense of a victim! However, Christ taught: "*For he that is least among you all, the same shall be great*" (Luke 9:48), and Paul wrote: "*God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Gal. 6:14).

Victors are subject to an enormous amount of praise and adulation, while the vanquished are left to feel inferior. The Lord's emphasis was quite different: "*for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God*" (Luke 16:15). "*He taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man. The Lord taketh pleasure in those that fear him, in those who hope in His mercy*" (Ps. 147:10-11). Also, as believers, we are taught not to compare ourselves among ourselves (2 Cor. 10:12).

A study of winning and losing attitudes in sports revealed that the most successful competitors viewed their opponents as temporary enemies. They worked up competitive animosity and intense aggression before a game. How do these attitudes compare with the Christian principles of love, humility, meekness, and gentleness (James 4:10, Gal 5:22-23)?

Even if such negative attitudes and emotions could be avoided, the believer has a much higher calling in life than to squander time in fleshly athletic competitions. His charge is to redeem the time (Eph. 5:16) and to *“have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them”* (Eph. 5:11). Satan is providing a fleshly addiction for millions of people through organized athletic competition. His motive is to distract them from thinking about their eternal destiny. The Christian’s calling is too high for such indulgences, especially since the fields of unbelief are white unto harvest and the laborers are few (John 4:35, Luke 10:2).

When comparing the motives of sports enthusiasts with the mind of Christ, it is important to remember that He sought for himself no reputation (Phil 2:7). He exemplified selflessness and servanthood. His central message was one of reconciliation, not retaliation (Matt. 5:39,44).

In view of Christ’s virtuous example, it seems a contradiction for us, who propose to exemplify His life, to engage in or purposely witness a mode of behavior that conflicts with Christ’s teachings. Fleshly determination to subdue an opponent and to win the idolatrous praise of men does not even remotely resemble holiness (1 Pet. 1:15-16).

The Apostle Paul drew a lesson from those who strive to achieve; he said they must be *“temperate in all things”* (1 Cor. 9:25). He also went on to conclude, *“now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible”* (1 Cor. 9:25). Are competitive sports worldly or godly? Someday we will have to give an answer - have we been friends to the world or friends of God? (Jam. 4:4). *“Set your affection on the things above, not on the things of the earth”* (Col. 3:2).

Teaching Children to Respect God

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10). A proper respect or reverence for God is a key element in developing true faith. This can be nurtured only if those who teach this principle exemplify it by their attitudes and actions.

The mind of a young child is quite subject to being shaped and directed. Believing parents must seize the initiative and make concerted effort to exert godly influences during this time of great potential. indeed. The Word says “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” (Prov. 22:6).

True respect for God requires understanding of one’s relationship to his Creator as well as recognition of God’s supreme authority over all of humanity. These concepts cannot be taught as abstract truths. They must be conveyed spontaneously and prayerfully as a part of everyday experiences. They are best understood through simple examples, just as Christ taught by parables and by His own actions. The key to teaching is to reduce the complex to a simple level so that it can be understood. Parental attitudes toward other authority figures as well as toward those who are subject to themselves should impart to a growing child a beautiful picture of godly order and loving submission. This will be of great help in developing a child’s respect for his parents. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honor thy father and mother: which is the first commandment with promise; that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth” (Eph. 6:1-3).

Many today consider man as only a soul-less animal. To such individuals there is no absolute, God-directed moral order: also, the origin of man is mysteriously evolutionary, and man has no eternal destination. Such viewpoints suggest that life is meaningless.

Rather, the Bible teaches that a child should learn to see himself as a special creation of God, uniquely made in His own image (Gen. 1:27). If a child believes that he has been created for the purpose of serving God and someday devoting all his talents for the glorious cause of Christ, his self-concept and reason for existence will take on a special meaning. His sense of self-worth and his awareness that he must submit to God’s moral order will add a positive, disciplined quality to his life. It will motivate him to learn to pray and draw close to God, especially as he observes this consistent pattern in his parents.

Children will respect God if they are taught about His power (Ps. 147:5) and His abundant grace (II Cor. 4:15), as well as His receptiveness to prayer and supplication (Phil. 4:6). Parents’ diligent reading of Bible stories and conveying of their own spiritual experiences to their children will enhance their comprehension of the love and mercy of God.

A mother has a special gift of influence over her children. Born with an instinctive bond of love for her offspring, a mother should fully exercise her honorable God-given role as keeper at home (Tit. 2:5). “And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” (Deut. 6:7). It would be far better to adapt to a more modest standard of living than to relegate this golden, one-time opportunity to a “substitute mother” while pursuing a career. It must also be recognized that motherhood is a most demanding role and that parenting should be a mutual responsibility in which husband and wife faithfully support each other.

Children must develop a deep appreciation and respect for the unchanging Word of God. If the spiritual aspect of a father’s life is truly paramount, he will surely strive to place more emphasis upon God’s Word which deals with the Eternal than upon material things which will pass away. Jesus said

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21).

Active participation in the church provides many valuable learning experiences for children. Respect for godly order and submission to one another are prominent features of a unified, loving body of believers. As a child observes consistent obedience to truth, he will become aware of the Holy Spirit’s work in the lives of the believers. Observance of scripturally based church traditions and common patterns of lifestyle will provide a sense of identity with a loving, trustworthy support group. A most beneficial experience consists of seeing the transforming power of God in the life of an acquaintance who turns to the Lord in repentance. This helps develop respect for God’s life-changing power.

Cultivating a child’s respect for God is not easy. Our society is ignoring more and more the existence of the laws of God. The insidious forces of Satan are spreading many influential themes (such as evolution, relativism and individualism) which can undermine a child’s respect for authority. An alert parent must work diligently to arm a child against these vain philosophies (Col. 2:8).

Sincere efforts to teach children to respect God and love His Word will never be regretted. Such teachings will serve to keep their hearts tender and make them more willing to turn to Christ in true repentance when they come under conviction. Then they will be able to rejoice in the wonderful promise “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps. 23:6).

Offense and Judging

The New Testament gives specific instructions for dealing with many aspects of life. There are also decisions which must be made by believers in areas which the Scriptures do not address directly. Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8 are devoted to several important principles which are to guide us in meeting these situations, both with regard to our own personal choices as well as our reactions to choices made by others, which may differ from ours. These two chapters deal with some of the greatest tests of true love within the brotherhood. We are instructed to adhere to three basic principles as we make such decisions: 1) we must *“do all to the glory of God”* (1 Cor. 10:31); 2) we must esteem our brother so highly that we will seek to please him in our actions and likewise respect his opinion (1 Cor. 10:33; Rom. 14:3,10); and 3) we must strive for the things which keep peace in the church (Rom. 14:19).

It is clear that there will be some variation in what is considered acceptable within a group of believers. *“For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs.” “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike”* (Rom. 14:2,5). However, this is not a license to abandon the principle of likemindedness! These teachings refer to areas where no doctrinal position exists in the Scriptures and no specific standard has been established in the church.

The Holy Spirit revealed to the Apostles and elders that positions were to be established on certain issues and these were communicated to the churches (Acts 15), just as occurs in our brotherhood today. This is for the purpose of maintaining peace and good order in the church and to assist the believer in applying the truth of God’s Word to everyday life (1 Tim. 3:15). This submission to godly order will help keep us from again becoming *“a friend of the world”* (James 4:4).

When the Apostle Paul wrote, *“there is nothing unclean of itself but to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean”* (Rom. 14:14), he was obviously referring to those areas of life where the Scriptures are silent and no church standard exists. He certainly was not declaring that any act *is* all right if *so* viewed by the individual. This would be condoning relativism, a great deception of our time in which individuals establish their own personal moral standards based upon circumstances and their own thinking, rather than on the Word of God (Prov. 14:12).

“Weakness” in these chapters refers to a sensitivity of conscience about a certain matter which is not defined in the Scriptures as either right or wrong. It sometimes includes a feeling of need to have clear-cut universal patterns on such matters. “Strength” implies a faith that it is acceptable to participate in such a matter; and this should always be accompanied by a heartfelt attitude of charity and humility (1 Cor. 8:1-2). The Word does not praise or criticize either the weakness or the strength if each approach honors the Lord (Rom. 14:6). All of us experience both qualities to varying degrees, but when strong, we are to be very considerate and supportive of the weak (Rom. 14:21-23; 15:1-3).

The test of true love among brethren consists of the ability to deal with these areas of life without judging, grieving or offending each other, all of which are displeasing to God. Judging is determining on a personal basis that another has erred; this is especially serious when a person’s motives are faulted. Grieving someone is to cause him severe distress. Offending is bringing spiritual harm to another person by causing him to stumble. The directives in these chapters clearly involve more than just minor annoyances or hurt feelings.

Individuals can misuse their weakness or strength about an issue as they relate to one another within the church. One who feels freedom of conscience on a matter may assume a superior or condescending attitude toward the weak. This attitude will make it very hard for him to defer to another’s conscience, even when offense is involved (1 Cor. 10:29-33). *“Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth”* (1 Cor. 8:1). The

brother who feels he must abstain may demand that others defer to his convictions simply because he wants to have his own way. He might also conclude that anyone who doesn't share his opinion on a matter is in error, which then becomes a form of judging (Rom. 14:13)

Humble obedience to God's Word will keep the love of Christ flowing within the body of believers. Exhortations are given against extremes in observance of unnecessary restrictions (Rom. 14:17, Heb. 13:9) as well as for the need to keep one's "*conscience void of offense toward God, and toward men,*" (Acts 24:16). Leaders were given to the house of Israel and to the church to provide guidance and help resolve conflicts. Of the priests it is written: *And they shall teach my people the difference between the holy and profane... and in controversy they shall stand in judgment ...*" (Ezek. 44:23-24). Of the New Testament leaders it is written that they should "*rule well*" and "*labor in the word and doctrine*" (1 Tim. 5:17), but never as "lords" who might lay unnecessary burdens upon the people (1 Pet. 5:3; Acts 15:28). No presumed strengths on the part of an individual should ever justify exemption from church-defined, biblically-based standards of godliness.

Offense and judging are easily avoided if we adopt the "*mind of Christ*" (Phil. 2:5). Unspeakable joy on earth and eternal rewards in Heaven await those peacemakers who are motivated by genuine, sacrificial, Christ-like love, and who always esteem their brethren higher than themselves (Matt. 5:9; Rom. 12:10; Phil. 2:3).

Secular Humanism

In recent years secular humanism has become one of the most influential false beliefs in our land. Today it is Christianity's greatest rival! This article is intended to expose the fallacy of humanism and describe how it may influence individual believers and ultimately the church.

Humanism is a system of beliefs which essentially becomes a secular (worldly, temporal) "religion" to those who espouse it. However, true followers of God would not think of it as a religion. Humanism is a philosophical view which emphasizes the centrality of man, his dignity and worth, his capacity for self-realization through reason, his autonomy (complete freedom from restraint), control of his own destiny, his capacity to solve the world's and society's problems without any external help (such as God), and his capabilities as a rational being, possessing the source of truth and right. Secular humanists go so far as to declare that man cannot rely on some deity to save him; they claim that man must save himself. Man exalts himself above God!

Secular humanists believe that man is basically good, not evil as stated in the Bible (Matt. 19:16-17; Rom. 3:23). Most deny faith in God as Creator of the universe and Revealer of all truth; whereas the Bible teaches that man must have faith to please God (Hebrews 11:6).

Secular humanists believe that the universe is self-existent and that man is the product of evolution rather than divine Creation. Because they discount life after death, they believe that self-satisfaction and the pursuit of happiness are the only realistic and meaningful goals of mankind. Having rejected the Bible, secular humanists believe that ethics and morality come from human experience and ideas, not from God. As a result, they recognize and accept variant sexual activities and immoral lifestyles as being valid even though condemned by the Bible. In addition to this, some of them even accept abortion, euthanasia (mercy-killing) and suicide as being legitimate alternatives for mankind.

With the eye of faith, one can easily discern how these beliefs conflict with God's Word. One can also recognize the effect they have had on our society, particularly on such matters as public school prayer, abortion, and pornography.

It is well to consider some of the areas in which this philosophy may influence our children and even the brotherhood. The educational system today is heavily tainted with humanistic ideas. Thus, children are exposed in varying degrees to these unbiblical viewpoints, including the false teachings of evolution and situation ethics (the belief that the particular situation one finds himself in determines the appropriate response rather than application of the absolutes of God's Word).

Educators today often place primary emphasis on human reasoning, which sometimes erodes a simple faith in the Bible and in God. Schools are simply a reflection of society; if distortions of the truth are taught there, it is because society has allowed and willed it to happen. Television programming has also had a major role in fostering humanistic lifestyles and attitudes through its emphasis on and portrayal of immorality, violence and other evils. When man, rather than God, becomes the measure of all things, man deteriorates to a lower and lower estate because there are no absolute standards to uphold. Perhaps more importantly than ever before, every effort must be made by parents, Sunday School teachers and ministers to counteract these evil influences with scriptural truth. Jesus said, *"I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil"* (John 17:15).

Humanism has precipitated a general decline in respect for authority. This too has made its presence felt in the church. Humanistic thinking challenges all authority—including God, the church, and its leadership. Biblical references to the importance of submission to spiritual authority are abundant (Eph.

5:21, Heb. 13:17; Rev. 22:14). The humanist considers such submission as degrading. He also views the biblical description of the role of the godly woman to be demeaning, since she is taught to be subject to her husband and a keeper of the home (Col. 3:18, Eph. 5:22, Tit. 2:5). It is no coincidence that the advancement of the women's rights movement has paralleled the increasing impact of humanistic thinking on society.

Humanistic influence has insidiously caused some believers to follow their own personal preferences with regard to observance of doctrinal teachings and church traditions. Humanistic influence has resulted in some believers exalting their own views above the consensus of church leadership. Further, humanistic inclinations have undermined a healthy sensitivity toward the weaker brother's conscience. The Bible teaches that man should not rely on his own understanding (Prov. 3:5), because he can sometimes deceive himself (Prov. 14:12). The believer should hold fast to scripturally-based conclusions drawn by the church leadership (Acts 15, 2 Thes. 2:15). Humanistic attitudes can mislead one to conclude that if he prays about something and feels no conviction about doing it, he has the liberty to ignore church counsel; when in fact the matter in question may be a doctrinal precept or church tradition. "*Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit...*" (Col. 2:8).

We must stand firmly on the truth of the Word of God. The Lord Jesus said, "*If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*" (John 8:31-32).

Absolute Truth Versus Relativism

Relativism is a way of thinking which maintains that the basis of all judgments is dependent upon circumstances, personal experiences and cultural forces. It asserts that no moral standard is absolute. According to this theory ethical “truths” are based on the viewpoints of the individuals or groups holding them and the circumstances in which they are being applied. Thus, basic issues which are considered right and good by one person or group may be wrong in the eyes of another person or group. Consequently, truth becomes subjective as individuals look to themselves rather than to God in seeking a basis for their judgments and beliefs. On the other hand, belief in absolute truth recognizes the existence of a source of wisdom from a higher nature than man himself.

The conflict between absolute truth and relativism has existed in varying degrees since the beginning of time. Seeking truth via the reason and experience of man finds root in the flesh while seeking truth via the Word of God finds root in His divine revelation.

A well-known proverb teaches that men should look to their Creator God for truth: “*Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding*” (Prov. 3:5). Indeed, “*it is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man*” (Ps. 118:8).

It has been a major error of mankind to trust in self, to rely heavily on personal experience, to do what “seems right,” and to depend upon one’s own understanding. Although this tendency was born in Eden, it has expanded with great force in our present age. This is due largely to the fact that growing numbers of people no longer believe in the Bible as the ultimate source of absolute truth. Skeptics challenge its infallibility and inerrancy. Even professing Christians have fallen prey to methods of Bible interpretation which lead to twisting of various passages to suit their own cultural and/or fleshly preferences. A popular perception is that the individual should determine his own religious convictions independently of any church or historical system of beliefs.

Relativism lends itself to individualism, which makes it very appealing to human nature. Choices are based on self-interest rather than submission to authority or concern for the common good of a group or society. This destroys loyalty, commitment and any sense of responsibility to an accepted set of standards. Such attitudes are flourishing in our society and are beginning to infiltrate the church.

The Word of God teaches obedience to His truth, denial of self, and submission to one another within the body of believers (Matt. 16:24; John 14:15; Eph. 5:21). The Word of God also establishes the church as the “*pillar and ground of the truth*” (1 Tim. 3:15). It places all believers under an ordained spiritual authority which must consist of faithful men who are sound examples of selfless servanthood, guided by the Holy Spirit to uphold and preserve doctrinal truth (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 9:19; 2 Tim. 2:24-25; Jude 3). Unless these scriptural principles are embraced as absolute truth and taught with all diligence in the home and the church, it is only a matter of time until we too will become victims of relativism - who are “*lovers of their own selves,*” as the Apostle Paul declared (2 Tim. 3:2).

Relativism in society has resulted in man’s world-view (how he sees life) becoming man-centered as opposed to God-centered. A dangerous situation arises when a believer unknowingly adopts a vision of life that is mixed: partially man-centered and partially God-centered. “*A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways*” (Jam. 1:8). “*No man can serve two masters*” (Matt. 6:24). When relativism begins to influence religious beliefs and attitudes, it becomes extremely dangerous. Believers must be on guard against this subtle but powerful influence.

Relativism is so pervasive today that one can easily become desensitized to its influences. The

institutions of government, law, education, theology, and publishing once rested firmly on God-centered principles. The effects of relativism and mancenteredness have seen these institutions come to rest on an unstable foundation of secularism. Selfish thinking is rapidly overwhelming proper concern for the common welfare and long term needs of society.

The absolute truth of the Bible is the anchor of the believer. *“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God ...”* (2 Tim. 3:16). It comes only by divine revelation from Him. The Word is changeless, inerrant, and is man’s primary source of truth (Rev. 22:18-19). God’s truth *“reacheth unto the clouds”* (Ps. 108:4) and is *“forever ... settled in heaven”* (Ps. 119:89).

Spiritual truth does not emanate from man’s imperfect intellect but from Almighty God. The Psalmist perceived this clearly when he wrote, *“The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean enduring forever: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether,”* (Ps. 19:7-9).

Believers can rejoice greatly that they have been delivered from the instability and deception of relativism. It is a privilege to serve the unchanging God of absolute truth and to have sound standards on which everyday moral decisions can be based. *“He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he”* (Deut. 32:4).

Eternity

The most important question that any human being can ever ask is what he must do to be saved (Matt. 19:16). Although many other things often seem much more pressing, such as concern about financial disaster, loss of health or threat of war, none of these come close in significance to one's eternal destiny.

It is very difficult to comprehend eternity because we mortals are limited in our perceptions and understanding. The eye can receive certain rays of light and the ear can detect a certain range of sound waves. However, this does not mean that there is no more to reality than what can be perceived by these limited human senses. Even man is able to detect many additional signals such as radio waves, x-rays, etc. by means of instruments designed specifically for this purpose. The Word makes it very clear that the spiritual is just as real as the physical; and God has made it possible for spiritual things such as eternity to be discerned. *"But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God"* (1 Cor. 2:9-10).

Even with the help of the Holy Spirit, man's perspective is greatly limited in comparison with God's. *"But, beloved; be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day"* (2 Pet. 3:8).

The Bible is the greatest source of help in explaining what is truly everlasting or eternal. God is described as without beginning or ending. *"Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God"* (Ps. 90:2). His Word of truth is *"settled in Heaven"* and *"shall not pass away"* (Ps. 119:89; Matt. 24:35), and His Son, *"Jesus Christ (is) the same yesterday and to day, and for ever"* (Heb 13:8).

The mercy, love and righteousness of God are without end. *"But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children"* (Ps. 103:17). *"The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee"* (Jer. 31:3).

From the beginning God has always been willing to pour out His love and mercy upon all those who seek him sincerely and serve Him faithfully. David shared words of great wisdom with his son shortly before his death: *"And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts: if thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off for ever"* (1 Chron. 28:9).

The purpose of life is to prepare for eternity by obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thes. 5:9). The opportunity for preparation ends abruptly at death, when our eternal destiny is unalterably sealed. It is clear that *"... where the tree falleth, there it shall be"* (Ecc. 11:3). When Abraham was begged by the rich man in Hell to send Lazarus with water to cool his tongue, Abraham replied that there was a great gulf between them which could be traversed by no one (Luke 16:24-26). It is an inescapable fact that there will be endless joy for the redeemed in Heaven while the lost will suffer an everlasting punishment.

The Apostle Paul often spoke longingly of his goal of being with the Lord. He said, *"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain"* (Phil. 1:21). Old Testament prophets spoke of the day when everlasting joy would replace the sorrows of this life. *"And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away"* (Is. 35:10). Jesus said, *"Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in*

Heaven” (Matt. 5:12). The Apostle John wrote, “*And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life*” (1 John 2:25).

Many times in this life it appears that those who serve self and Satan have many successes and pleasures. This was also observed by the Psalmist, but he looked beyond life to the eternal outcome. “*When the wicked spring as the grass, and when all the workers of iniquity do flourish; it is that they shall be destroyed for ever*” (Ps. 92:7). Too often we have excessive concern for the physical dangers and materialistic uncertainties of this life. Jesus made clear the distinction between those things which have consequence only for this life as compared to the eternal. He said, “*And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell*” (Matt. 10:28).

God provides opportunity for everyone to prepare for eternity. We are called upon to “*lay up ... treasures in Heaven*” and “*fight the good fight of faith*” (Matt. 6:20; 1 Tim. 6:12). Eternal life is promised to those who “*... by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality*” (Rom. 2:7). All of this must be prefaced by faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ and is ultimately fulfilled by faithfulness to Him until life’s end (Eph. 2:8; Heb. 3:14).

A believer must be prepared to die at any moment. When he is prepared to die, he is free to live and can joyfully proclaim the words of David of old: “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever*” (Ps. 23:6).

Humility of Mind and Matter

Humility stands out as a prime virtue of the men and women of God who throughout history have been most useful in His service. True humility consists of a beautiful scriptural balance in one's attitude about himself. It is far removed from pride or self-exaltation, but likewise it does not imply self-condemnation. It is perfectly portrayed in the selflessness of our beloved Savior, who did not focus upon himself, but sought to fulfill the Father's will and serve others.

Many times in the Word, humility is a result of an individual's own actions in humbling himself. One of these examples involves the prayer of Solomon when he dedicated the house of the Lord in Jerusalem (2 Chr. 6). By this time in history God's people had seen many of His mighty works, and had been recipients of both blessings and wrath. When wrath fell upon them, in every case it became necessary for them to humble themselves before God, and it was this alone which moved His heart. God acknowledged that he had accepted the King's prayer by a miraculous sign: *"The fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the house"* (2 Chr. 7:1). The Children of Israel were deeply impressed by this manifestation of God's might. With faces bowed to the ground, they *"praised the Lord, saying, for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever"* (2 Chr. 7:3).

Then in the night, the heavenly Father revealed Himself to the King, and told him his prayer was acceptable. God spoke of what would happen if calamity fell upon the land and the people, and He very clearly explained what would move His heart. *"If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land"* (2 Chr. 7:14). Once again, man was told that the sacrifices acceptable to God are a broken spirit and a contrite heart (Psa. 51:17).

Solomon's father David also learned, sometimes painfully, the significance of humility. A prime example was David's sin in numbering the people of Israel (2 Sam. 24). Against the commandment of God and the advice of his own counsellors, the King persisted in counting Israel. In verse 14 he cries, *"I am in a great strait"* (God gave him three choices of punishment, and David chose three days of pestilence, committing himself and his people into the hand of the Almighty. The foolishness of their king cost the people seventy thousand men who fell before God's wrath. Much later the church at Philadelphia was told of the key of David (Rev. 3:7), and perhaps nothing reveals this key more clearly than David's reaction in his dire straits. David cried out in the anguish of his soul, *"Lo, I have sinned; and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me and against my father's house"* (2 Sam. 24:17). This humbling of himself moved the heart of God, and He accepted this sacrifice. The key of David was humility!

Pharaoh was confronted with God's question: *"How long wilt thou refuse to humble thyself before me?"* (Ex. 10:3). The land of Egypt was devastated and its firstborn sons lost because the leader could not be humbled.

A multitude of scriptural references give clear testimony to the importance of our voluntarily humbling ourselves before God and man. Believers will benefit from reading and carefully pondering these examples: Deut. 8:2, 16; Prov. 6:3, Jer. 13:18, Matt. 18:4; 23:12; Jam. 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:6.

Humility finds expression through many avenues in a believer's life. These include resisting the exalting of one's personal opinion above the accepted practices of the church and avoiding a lifestyle that knowingly brings distress to a weaker brother or sister.

Humility is extolled in Scripture as a virtue with untold benefits. Proverbs 15:33 explains that humility comes before honor. While we should not be seeking honor as such, yet all of us wish to be respected by our fellow men and above all, approved by God (2 Cor. 10:18). The Apostle Paul spoke of “*serving the Lord with all humility of mind*” (Acts 20:19) and God certainly honored him as one of His most useful servants.

The soul of man was created to live forever, but not on this earth. Only by taking advantage of the simple plan of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ and His shed blood can we have hope of eternal life. And the greatest examples of a life of humility are those recorded of our Savior’s life on earth. He did not exalt himself, even though He was the Son of God. He put on no airs, rather He was gracious, loving and gentle.

Every believer should be highly desirous of God’s grace, the most powerful force on earth. Thus, it is of paramount importance that we put ourselves in the proper position to receive this great favor, for “*... he resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble*” (Jam. 4:6). We should strive to be “*clothed with humility*” (1 Pet. 5:5) in all aspects of mind and manner. Humility is in no sense an indication of weakness, indeed true strength is found therein.

So I’ll strive to be more humble,
Evermore be meek and kind;
Humbleness shall rule my actions,
Meekness dwell in heart and mind.
In my manner and my being
All my neighbors may be seeing
That it is God’s Spirit’s might
Leading me in truth and right.
Zion’s Harp #186

Abiding in the Vine

The infinite wisdom of the Almighty is clearly manifested in the Scriptures and is portrayed in the examples chosen by the Saviour to reach man-kind with His message. He used simple illustrations from everyday living to enable humans to relate to the divine. When He was with farmers, He spoke of sowing fields, to the housewives He spoke of baking bread and cleaning houses. To fishermen, His message was about catching fish, and to the husbandman the parallel was about tending and pruning vines. Through it all, He delivered the timeless message that the relationship between God and man was intended to be intimate, personal, and enduring, surviving beyond life on earth, to be continued in the presence of God eternally.

The Spirit of God inspired the Psalmist to write, *“Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord and in his law doth he meditate day and night”* (Psa. 1:1-2). The exemplary life and ministry of Jesus carry out the same theme - remaining close to God, the supreme power of the universe.

In his 15th chapter, the Apostle John records the words of our Lord as He spoke using the illustration of a grapevine. Jesus makes it perfectly clear that He is that vine, and faithful believers are the fruitful branches. The vine is the main part of the plant, and usually quite long-lived. The branches produce large quantities of fruit if tended with care. God is timeless. He spans countless generations, and His truth endures forever (Psa. 117:2). As the vine is the source of all nourishment for the plant, feeding successive generations of branches that bear the fruit, so is the relationship between God and His children.

The plan of God is clear from the first recorded words of the Bible. Man was put on earth in the image of God, to dress the earth, care for its creatures, and produce an increase (Gen. 2:15). In the same way the generations of man, each in their own time, are intended to bring the fruit of increase to their Creator in its season. Everything believers need for fruit bearing is contained in our Lord, the true vine, and in what He has done for us (Col. 1:19-20). Nothing has been overlooked or omitted that is necessary for that result.

The vine is the source of all spiritual truth and strength. The branches must be carefully pruned and shaped so that they can bear much spiritual fruit (John 15:2-3; 7-8). They must also remain firmly attached to the vine, their lifeline to nutrients vital for growth. Through the vine, into the branches flows the sap, which is the lifeblood of all plants. These nutrients feed the clusters of fruit right up to the time of ripening, when they are harvested. At that time the husbandman rejoices over a work well done, carefully reflecting on the wonderful plan that made this miraculous process possible.

The plan is simple, yet beyond our full comprehension. We may learn ever so much on earth, yet we will not approach knowing the mind of the Almighty (1 Cor. 2:16). Enough understanding is given, however, so that we can each fulfill our part in the marvelous work of fruit bearing. It is clear that it can be done in one way only, and that is by abiding in the vine. When humans follow the way of the cross unto salvation, they then become intimately attached to their Lord, the true vine. Like the branches, they cannot bear fruit of themselves; only if they remain connected to the vine will they find the nourishment vital to growth and bringing forth fruit to perfection.

Our Heavenly Father is the husbandman of the vineyard. However, just as He directed man to labor in the natural course of life, He likewise intends for us to labor in His vineyard in the spirit (1 Cor. 15:58; Col. 1:10; Heb. 6:10). Jesus ordained the establishment of the church, and He prepared the entire way so that those who came after Him could fulfill this, even though they were fragile men. Jesus Christ, the vine

is “*the same yesterday, and today, and forever*” (Heb. 13:8). One generation of fallible humans follows another, each in its time tending the vineyard. The fruit, however, should not vary from one season to another. Jesus told us we do not garner grapes from thorns nor figs from thistles (Matt. 7:16). The responsibility of all who are intimately bound to the vine is to produce much good fruit. This is what God, the great husbandman, expects of His children.

The plan of God for life on earth and also for the eternal salvation of man is complete. Jesus kindly exhorted the people of His day, “*Abide in me, and I in you*” (John 15:4). The same eternal message is relevant today! Times have changed, and the course of history has resulted in a culture which is much different from that of Jesus’ time. Yet vines still bear grapes in exactly the same way, and although methods in vineyard-keeping are somewhat different, the vine still endures, and the same good fruit is borne on the branches.

A tremendous comfort can be derived from the immortal message that Jesus spoke in His parable of the vineyard, exhorting all to abide in Him. After nearly twenty centuries the heart of man can leap for joy when hearing the eternal truth: “*As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you; continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love*” (John 15:9-10).

The Believer's Relationship with Christ

We are taught in the Word that God is “*rich in mercy*” and because of the “*great love wherewith he loved us,*” He gave His only Son, Christ Jesus to die for us, that we might be made alive in Him (Eph. 2:4-5).

A beautiful relationship is established with Christ for each individual who comes to Him in true saving faith: “*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works lest any man should boast*” (Eph. 2:8-9). “*But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name,*” (John 1:12). This genuine saving faith leads to repentance and conversion (Matt. 3:8; Acts 3:19) and the individual is “*born again*” as explained by Jesus to Nicodemus (John 3:3-8). A blessed condition of righteousness is imputed by God to every soul that truly believes in Him (Rom. 3:22; 4:11). However, this cloak of righteousness is not endowed upon a sin-filled heart. Rather, by the miracle of conversion, a heart is cleansed: “*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new*” (2 Cor. 5:17).

The relationship between a believer and Christ is compared with that between a branch and a vine (John 15:1-11). Christ in His great love seeks this intimate union with every person who comes to Him in sincere faith. He wishes to share the unspeakable glory which He derives from His relationship with God. In His high priestly prayer, Christ entreated the Father on our behalf. “*And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be perfect in one; and that the world may know that Thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me. Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world*” (John 17:22-24).

Christ also described His relationship with those who would follow Him in faith as that between a good shepherd and his sheep. He exemplified the fierce loyalty of a true shepherd, including a willingness to lay down His life for His sheep (John 10:15). He made it clear that no man could snatch away His sheep as long as they hear His voice and follow Him (John 10:27-28). The Apostle Paul reiterated this truth when he wrote, “*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God; which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Rom. 8:38-39). The only force not mentioned was self, and that ability to choose to reject Christ remains within every human being as long as he lives.

The relationship between Christ and His body of believers (the church) is compared to that between a husband and wife (Eph. 5:22-32). The church is to be sanctified and cleansed by the Word. The believers are “*members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones*” (Eph. 5:26, 30).

All of these examples clearly represent an extremely close and beneficial relationship, through which the child of God draws His spiritual lifeblood. When this true fellowship with Christ exists, it is also exemplified as a blessed fellowship among the believers in the church, walking together in the light (1 John 1:6-7).

The primary purpose of a close relationship with Christ is to enable the believer to bring forth abundant fruit, to the glory of God (John 15:2, 5, 8). One's motive for bearing fruit must be love for Christ, not to gain acceptance or earn favors from Him or from fellow human beings. True love for Christ is manifested by sacrificial love for the brethren and obedience to the Word. “*And this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment. And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him*” (1 John 3:23-24).

Jesus said, *“If ye love me, keep my commandments”* (John 14:15). The proof of sincere love for Christ in bearing fruit and doing good works is evidenced by an attitude of giving all glory to God for every accomplishment. Even the most effective and sacrificial giving of self for others should be viewed only as *“reasonable service”* (Rom. 12:1).

Another important purpose for a very close and abiding relationship with Christ is to avoid being drawn away by Satan. Mature sheep huddle close to each other when threatened by a predator. Those who are immature and careless often drift away from the flock and are easy prey. A close relationship with Christ is manifested by a strong bond of fellowship within the brotherhood (Rom. 12:5, 1 Cor. 10:17; 1 John 1:7). If the believer sins willfully and continues to condone this abuse of grace, he can become blinded and again fall away from Christ (Heb. 10:26-31). This will not occur if the child of God remains in the safety of the hand of the Good Shepherd and follows His direction (John 10:28).

Finally, as a result of an abiding relationship in Christ, the believer experiences blessings untold, indeed a foretaste of Heaven here on earth (Eph. 2:6). *“And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus”* (Phil. 4:7).

Approaching Marriage in the Lord

“Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favor of the Lord” (Prov. 18:22). The gift of true marriage in the Lord can be obtained only by following the precepts of the Word of God. Unmarried brothers and sisters in Christ are encouraged to adhere diligently to the longstanding, scripturally based practices of the church in this matter. The great benefits of this approach are quite evident when compared with the disastrous results of man’s methods.

The first step in this undertaking should be sincere, prayerful soul-searching to be certain that one’s relationship with the Lord is sound, with no hindrances in his spiritual life. *“Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith, prove your own selves”* (2 Cor. 13:5). Marriage must never be approached with the view that it will provide the solution to unresolved personal problems. Likewise, a marriage must not be based on self-interest, as this foundation will never stand.

There are many factors which should be thoughtfully and prayerfully weighed, such as maturity, readiness to establish an independent family unit, vocation, financial and parental support, etc. Jesus spoke in a parable of counting the cost before beginning a major undertaking (Luke 14:28-32), and the Apostle Paul wrote, *“if any provide not for his own... (he) is worse than an infidel”* (1 Tim. 5:8). Although these matters should be given serious consideration, the most important preparatory step is to have Christ reigning in a humble heart: *“Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you”* (Matt. 6:33).

One aspect of this need not even be brought to the Lord in prayer because the Word gives an explicit answer: marriage of a believer is to be *“only in the Lord”* (1 Cor. 7:39) and not an unequal yoke (2 Cor. 6:14-18). The church has been directed of the Holy Spirit to give specific definition to these scriptural teachings; namely, marriage of our members may occur only between brothers and sisters whose testimonies of conversion have been heard and affirmed by one of our congregations.

It is apparent scripturally that a marriage proposal ordinarily originates with the man. Isaac was given counsel by his father Abraham and his proposal of marriage was conveyed by a servant (Gen. 24). Rebekah provides a beautiful example of a godly woman who was faithfully serving others in her single state until called to be a wife. This is exemplified by her willingness to share a drink of water with Abraham’s servant and her generous offer to draw water for his camels also (Gen. 24:18-20).

Our tradition regarding marriage proposals bears some similarity to the betrothal of Isaac and Rebekah. A brother who feels directed of the Spirit to approach the step of marriage seeks the counsel of his elder or authorized minister. This very important spiritual conversation includes a confirmation on the brother’s part that he is standing in grace with God and is not harboring sin in his heart which has not been dealt with as required by the Scriptures. There should be a mutual feeling of peace that the matter has been approached properly and not through infatuation or any other improper motive. The brother is reminded that the scriptural teaching of truth being established by “two witnesses” applies, and that only if the same revelation is given to the sister can this be established. In the event that this does not occur, it should not be a detriment to either the brother or the sister, but rather a refining fire bringing them closer to God (1 Pet. 1:7). The evil one should not be allowed to implant an attitude of self-reproach and rejection. Mutual effort must always be made to keep this matter in strict confidence and to continue to be prayerful for the Lord’s direction.

The proposal is then conveyed by the brother’s elder to the sister, or to the sister’s elder if she is from another congregation. A very similar conversation occurs between the sister and her elder as described previously. Her spiritual life is reviewed and she is counseled to give the proposal much prayer and ample

time to discern the Lord's direction. She too must "count the cost" and humbly seek the guidance of the Lord in this very significant matter. Whatever the outcome, this is to be viewed as an experience through which God will provide spiritual benefits to those who are of humble, submissive hearts. Once again, strict confidentiality must be observed.

When faith to accept a proposal is revealed to a sister, the answer is relayed through the Lord's servants and subsequently arrangements are made to announce an engagement. These conversations provide additional opportunities to share spiritual counsel concerning specific preparation for approaching marriage.

Unfortunately far more attention is often given to preparation for a wedding rather than preparation for a marriage. Engagement should be a time of initiating edifying communication patterns. It is expected that the engaged couple will begin to develop a spiritual relationship in which faith and love can grow. However, they should permit no behavior in public or private which would subject them to lustful temptations or be offensive to their fellow brethren.

Believers entering marriage must be prepared to sacrifice their own will and submit to one another (Eph. 5:21). They must cultivate unselfishness and not expect to establish quickly the same standard of living experienced by their parents. Sometimes individuals have not learned how to communicate their thoughts openly and honestly without hurting others. Loving counsel with an elder or minister can be beneficial. Husbands and wives should diligently observe the beautiful example of the love of Christ. Such sacrificial love will always seek the welfare of the other, and God's richest blessings will surely follow.

Evangelism

“And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea for they were fishers. And he *“saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”* (Matt. 4:18-19). This vivid instance of the Lord gathering men to help him proclaim the message of salvation is an example of evangelism in the early days of Christ’s ministry. It reflects the willingness of Peter and Andrew to follow Jesus and spread the message of salvation.

Evangelism is listed along with four other spiritual gifts in the church: “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11). The Apostle Paul exhorted. “But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry” (2 Tim. 4:5). The Word also refers to Philip, the evangelist, whom Paul visited in Caesarea (Acts 21:8).

The word “evangelist” is defined as anyone who preaches the gospel, a messenger of good news! In another sense, it is someone who is involved in establishing a local church. Indeed, wherever the gospel message of salvation is proclaimed and lived in truth and sincerity, it is a form of evangelism.

Today, as in the time of the Apostles, certain individuals are called by the Lord through the church to the work of evangelism. In the church at Antioch the Holy Ghost said, *“Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.”* They then *“... laid their hands on them, (and) they sent them away”* (Acts: 13:1-3). In addition, all believers have the responsibility to share humbly with others what the Lord has done for them. *“to be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear”* (1 Pet. 3:15).

Since the time of Christ, the Word has spread into varying cultures through the efforts of evangelism. We today are the beneficiaries of evangelistic efforts expended by our European forebears. Our American church, which began in 1847 in upstate New York, is an outgrowth of zealous efforts by ministers who helped establish many churches of our faith in America. Since 1847 approximately one hundred churches have been founded in this country. A willingness to labor and to preach *“all the counsel of God”* (Acts 20:27) allowed early “evangelists” to establish a Bible-believing and Bible-obeying brotherhood in America.

Previously in Europe (beginning in the early 1830’s) a godly zeal resulted in our forefathers participating in efforts whereby God raised up 110 congregations in 35 years. The Holy Spirit prompted them to establish a church based on Scriptures alone. Early leaders heralded the verse, *“teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you”* (Matt. 28:20).

The critical test of true evangelism is that the biblical pattern of genuine conversion be proclaimed, lest a soul obtain a false hope through a superficial acceptance of Christ or so-called “easy believism.” Great danger exists today in various forms of “evangelism” which fail to give proper emphasis to the scriptural basics of repentance, conversion and life-long commitment as a disciple of Christ (Luke 9:62, Heb. 6:1-2).

True evangelism sounds the warning of coming judgment and points the way to salvation through faith in Christ’s redemptive work on Calvary’s cross (Eph. 2:8). It proclaims sincerely the message of repentance, and directs the longing soul into the haven of the church for spiritual nurturing and direction in godliness (Eph. 4:12-13). Much counsel is given the seeking soul to assure that he or she gains a strong foothold in God’s Word and the Christian graces and becomes truly dead to sin (Rom. 6:11). After baptism, continued nurturing is provided for the maintenance of faith and vigilance against temptation (Heb. 3:13-

14). Thus, brotherhood is an important component of a believer's life, lest he should stray from his steadfastness without the exhortation and admonition of the church.

Evangelism has many forms. Preaching from a pulpit is foremost in our churches. The establishment of many churches of our faith in America, together with activities in Japan and India, give evidence of additional evangelistic efforts. Recent founding of new assemblies such as St. Louis, Atlanta, San Diego, Washington, D.C., etc. are reflective of evangelism as are meetings on college campuses.

Bible distribution also constitutes a form of evangelism. Our brethren have accelerated efforts in this mode of spreading the Word. Since 1983, more than 100,000 Bibles have been distributed through these endeavors.

Sunday School constitutes a significant means of presenting God's way to our youth. The intent is not to "evangelize" young children as such, but to plant seeds of faith that will hopefully sprout when a child reaches the age of accountability.

The home is a vital field of evangelism. It is here, both by example and ongoing verbal expressions of parents, that the gospel can have its most enduring influence (Prov. 22:6).

A Christ-like example is also an effective means of evangelism. This conveys a strong message of virtue and nonconformity to the world, and in many instances might be the only message of holiness to those who otherwise have no interest in the Scriptures. *"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, which is in heaven"* (Matt. 5:16).

Proclaiming the Word of God is among the most important responsibilities of the church. Jesus exhorted his disciples: *"The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest"* (Matt. 9:37-38).

Contentment

“But godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Tim. 6:6). The beautiful state of contentment is one of the highest goals of every human being. Though many exhortations and instructions are given on becoming godly, nowhere in the Bible does it tell specifically how to become more content. Contentment is not something individuals can simply produce themselves. Instead, if a soul wants to be content, he must exercise himself in godliness, pursuing the scriptural attributes of this great virtue.

First of all we must love the Word of God and make full use of its divine wisdom. *“The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes”* (Psa. 19:7-8). Another part of our growing in godliness is to practice humility. *“For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith”* (Rom. 12:3). This attribute of godliness is essential for inner peace. Satan would cause us to focus on a bit of pride. Further, discontent is often characterized by offense taking. Perhaps we have not been fairly dealt with and we feel hurt or mistreated. If we are striving for our rights or dwelling on what we deserve, we cannot be content. *“Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them”* (Ps. 119:165).

Another important aspect of godliness is to *“lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us ...”* (Heb. 12:1). We must pray earnestly for grace to acknowledge our errors and remove these weights. We need to say humbly to our Lord and to all, *“I have failed, please forgive me and help me to do better. I need strength and courage and the grace of God to overcome.”* Likewise, we also need to forgive others. If we are harboring a grudge, we can never be content (Jam. 5:9). *“And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you”* (Eph. 4:32).

We must learn to walk in unity, content in the fellowship wherein God has called us. This blending of hearts and nurturing of common beliefs is very important. The Apostle Paul writes: *“walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called ... endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (Eph. 4:1-3). *“Fulfill ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord; of one mind”* (Phil. 2:2). If we focus on ourselves, our individual opinions, we do not contribute to the unity of the brotherhood. In such selfishness, we become more and more discontented with our lot. However, as we direct our prayers and actions toward the needs of the brethren, we become more godly and thus more content.

Being godly also requires that we be faithful, consistent and obedient. True faith is manifested by obedience to the Word of God. Employers look for consistency of effort and responsibility. We cannot rest on last year’s or even yesterday’s worthwhile performance. *“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord; forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord”* (1 Cor. 15:58).

We must also be aware of potential distractions to our contentment. Being jealous or covetous will definitely work to destroy our godliness. In Luke 12 the rich fool had his soul required of him. In 2 Timothy 3:2-5 the covetous are listed as people to turn away from. We are not to become distressed by looking on others and desiring to possess what they have. One of the surest ways to become discontent is to desire something that is not rightfully ours. How many of us are troubled with trying to be what we cannot and should not be? *“Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have”* (Heb. 13:5).

Desire for riches can be a great disadvantage to being content. In the Proverbs many verses remind us of this: *“He that is greedy of gain troubleth his own house”* (Prov. 15:27). *“Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues without right”* (Prov. 16:8). *“A faithful man shall abound with blessings: but he that maketh haste to be rich shall not be innocent”* (Prov. 28:20).

A desire for immediate gratification can also be a drawback and lead to restlessness. There is a splendid analogy in the Word: *“Surely I have behaved and quieted myself as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child”* (Psa. 131:2). Thus we must learn to be patient, allowing our souls to be as weaned, contented children, willing to wait on the Lord for our fulfillment. We must remember our peace is not dependent on circumstances. Despite life’s pressures, frustrating situations, or perplexing decisions, we can be at peace; for we know our Lord is always present and has an unconditional love for us. Paul described one of the beautiful results of many of the lessons of his life: *“... for I have learned; in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content”* (Phi. 4:11).

Contentment brings the great gain of peace, joy, happiness and fulfillment. There is inner abundance to be found for the believer in this life and even greater joy to be anticipated in eternity: *“Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in Heaven”* (Matt. 5:12). There is a natural desire in all of us to enjoy life. The only way to achieve this in its fullness is to practice all aspects of godliness, leading to contentment and great gain on both sides of the grave. Then we can experience true peace and even bring pleasure to our beloved Savior.

Nonresistance

Strife, conflict, and selfishness are the everyday hallmarks of our time. How do God's children react to these powerful influences which surround them? How can converted souls who are in the world but not of the world (John 17:15), best reflect the image of Christ? Does Christ's light shine brighter when the believer takes up earthly weapons of warfare and conflict, even for a so-called just cause?

Many contemporary professing Christians embrace a doctrine which permits bearing arms and taking human life in circumstances such as defending a free nation against an evil enemy. This writing seeks to present the scriptural basis for our belief that this doctrine is unsound. Christ came to bring peace and love to the hearts of mankind through the salvation of lost sinners, not by establishing an earthly kingdom or by violently resisting oppressive governments.

Since its inception, the Apostolic Christian Church has practiced refraining from bearing arms with the intent to kill another human being. This has stemmed from the belief that the New Testament teaches it is wrong to kill or injure one's enemy. Perhaps the greatest sin of all lies in the fact that taking the life of a human being terminates forever his chances to find salvation.

The Lord Jesus left no doubt about a Christian's attitude toward an adversary. *"Ye have heard that it hath been said; Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you"*

Further, Jesus exhorts, *"... I say unto you that ye resist not evil but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also"* (Matt. 5:39). John the Baptist told the soldiers, *"Do violence to no man"* (Luke 3:14). The Lord rebuked a follower for cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant: *"Put up again thy sword into his place, for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword"* (Matt. 26:52).

The Apostle Paul writes: *"Bless them which persecute you bless, and curse not. Recompense to no man evil for evil. . . If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved; avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head"* (Romans 12:14, 17-21).

"For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God; and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

Sometimes the texts found in Romans 13:1-2 are used to support taking life in warfare: *"Let every soul be subject to the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God."* It should be noted that this directive is written to Christians about those who govern. The church and the state are separate entities. The former is spiritual and is the body of Christ; the latter is a secular entity and exists for the physical well-being of the citizens, believer and unbeliever alike. However, the Christian's primary citizenship is in Heaven (Phil. 3:20). He is a pilgrim and stranger on this earth (1 Pet. 2:11). His devotion to a higher entity prohibits him from engaging in ungodliness. His rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's is not a blind allegiance whereby he is justified in breaking one of God's commandments. If the state's edict contradicts God's teachings, then as practiced by Peter and other Apostles, *"We ought to obey God rather than men"* (Acts 5:29).

It is nothing new for godly men to resist peaceably an impure edict of the state. Daniel and his three friends resisted the Kings' decrees and humbly submitted to the lions' den and the fiery furnace (Dan. 3:16-18; 6:10-17). Peter and John were forbidden to preach or teach in the name of the Lord Jesus, but they "*spoke the word of God with boldness*" (Acts 4:18,31). As a result of their actions, the Apostles were often cast into prison. In the 16th century the Anabaptist forefathers refused to obey the state's commandment to baptize their infant children, and many paid with their life for their refusal to follow a falsehood. All of these brave forefathers of faith exemplified Christ's peaceful way of nonresistance, which resulted in powerful testimonies to the unbelievers.

The state exists to maintain order and to protect its citizens. While God grants it power, its principles are usually earthly in nature. The believer's ultimate allegiance is to the ways of God and the Word, not to the state. We must not disobey a commandment of God in order to fulfill an edict or law of the state, even in the name of preserving a benevolent government. God is the only sovereign power who can grant or withdraw the authority to govern (Rom. 13:1).

Our church should be deeply grateful to God and to our nation for allowing us to serve in a noncombatant status, not carrying arms for the purpose of taking human life. In this way, a brother can render proper obedience to both entities, the church and the state. Many brethren in years gone by have found themselves in the thick of battle, armed only with their medical supplies for use in the saving of life (whether friend or foe). They humbly dared to be Daniels and portrayed Christ's message of faith and love even in the most trying of circumstances.

Consistent Patterns in Prayer

“What a friend we have in Jesus All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry Everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry Everything to God in prayer”

Prayer represents a direct line, through Christ, from man to God. Even though God knows our needs before we pray (Matt. 6:8), His ear is inclined to our pleadings (1 Pet. 3:12). We are taught that the “*effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much*” (Jam. 5:16).

Through prayer man can bring his praises and petitions to the throne of a merciful God, and can be assured if he prays in faith believing, that God will hear and answer his prayers (Phil. 4:6). As the song writer continued, “In His arms He’ll take and shield thee, thou wilt find a solace there.”

Via prayer the believer finds comfort, guidance, relief, and strength for the inner man. In a time of great need the Saviour entered a garden, “*And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground*” (Luke 22:44). What a shining example of zeal for the believer!

“*Draw nigh to God and He will draw nigh to you*” (Jam. 4:8). As the child of God enters his closet (or a quiet place), falls on bended knees and bows his head, clasps his hands and humbles his heart, he establishes an altar of sincerity and faith. This becomes a beautiful “garden of prayer, wherein he can thrive and find spiritual strength and direction. Indeed, the Apostle Paul exhorted to “*pray without ceasing*” (1 Thes. 5:17) and to be “*instant in prayer*” (Rom. 12:12).

Prayer is not only a source of power, but it is a giver of spiritual direction. There is ever-present need for the wisdom of God in dealing with the many issues of life, both great and small. Spontaneous prayer as well as disciplined patterns of prayer are essential aspects of maintaining viable communication with the Heavenly Father.

While a practical formula for consistent prayer may vary from one individual to another, there are several general characteristics that will help a sincere soul become more stable and consistent in his prayer life:

1. **Separation from the world:** A soul must come away from the noise and tumult of the world. He must cease from harboring affection for worldly things (Rom. 12:2), realizing that “*the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things*” can choke the Word, and thence our spiritual resolve (Mark 4:19).
2. **Self-surrender:** One must humbly throw himself into the hands of God, and rely on His promise to hear and answer prayer. Humility will allow grace to fill the heart, and when the believer finds he can “reach” God, his prayer will grow in fervor.
3. **Discipline:** A soul should discipline his prayer patterns so he can pray at regular times during the day such as when arising in the morning, at meals, before retiring for the day, and at other special, convenient times (Psa. 92:1-2).
4. **Waiting on the Lord:** Seeking quick answers will inhibit effective prayer. Also, life’s hectic pace often hinders concentration. It helps to kneel down and close one’s eyes and ponder awhile God’s presence with no immediate verbal expressions. Often as we struggle to pray, “... *the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us*” (Rom. 8:26). As we become calm and settled, away from earthly cares, we can often begin praying with an attitude of repose and patience (Is. 40:31).
5. **Thankfulness:** “... *in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests*

be made known unto God” (Phil. 4:6). It always helps to begin by thanking God for our many blessings. A joyful attitude then graces our hearts, and this allows for more effective praise to God.

6. Dedication and commitment: We must remember our covenant to be true and faithful. Consistency in prayer is a vital part of our fidelity to God. *“He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully”* (2 Cor. 9:6). This applies to prayer also.

While God hears all our prayers and knows the *“thoughts and intents of the heart”* (Heb. 4:12), it is beneficial, when possible, to pray in a kneeling position. This is symbolic of fallible man bowing in submission before an all-powerful Lord and Creator. Solomon knelt at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:54), Daniel knelt in prayer in his time of distress (Dan. 6:10), and Jesus knelt while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:41). The Apostle Paul said, *“I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Eph. 3:14).

Perhaps the most important attitude of prayer is to sincerely seek God’s will to be done, and the grace to accept whatever that may be. This requires true humility and trust. In addition, we should focus on the needs of others, which are often much greater than our own. This is in accord with the pattern of the Lord Jesus, who daily intercedes on our behalf.

A final suggestion in establishing a consistent prayer life is to show confidence toward God and to claim His promises. We are to *“... come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need”* (Heb. 4:16). We must believe that God is *“... a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him”* (Heb. 11:6).

The Mission of the Church

It is important to keep in mind the purpose or mission of the church as established by the Holy Scriptures. We should be able to feel that we are personally involved in fulfilling these responsibilities and that our church is faithfully following the patterns intended by the Lord Jesus Christ, who is its Head.

The parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates the two-fold mission of the church. The traveler who had been robbed and severely wounded was facing death. Only through the compassion and life-saving measures administered by the Good Samaritan (exemplifying Jesus Christ) was death averted. Long-term care and nurturing was then provided by those who constituted the inn, which represents the church. Thus, saving of lost sinners and maintenance of the believer are the prime missions of the Saviour and the church, which are to function spiritually as one (Eph. 4:15-16).

The Word plainly foretells the consequences of unreconciled sin: *“the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”* (Rom. 6:23). The certainty of eternal death for all who are not saved is a far worse fate than loss of physical life. The one and only hope for man’s wretched state is realized through faith in the shed blood of Christ, freely given for all mankind on Calvary’s Cross. *“By grace are ye saved, through faith ...”* (Eph. 2:6). The role of the church includes preaching and living the Gospel message, as well as helping the new believer through the crisis stage of recovery from the doom of sin. True faith will produce the fruits of repentance; and the humble, upright soul will be converted into a *“new creature”* (2 Cor. 5:17) by the grace of God. The church also is commissioned to fulfill the sacred rites of baptism and laying on of hands for the converted soul.

The mission of maintenance of the believer then commences as represented by the inn. The Lord promised to supply whatever would be needed for the long-term needs of that wounded traveler. The church of its own strength could accomplish nothing, but through its God-given position as the Body of Christ (always looking to Him as its Head and source of power) the essential work of the Lord can flourish here upon this earth (Col. 1:18).

A basic aspect of maintenance is *“feeding the flock”* (1 Pet. 5:2). Through both teaching and preaching the principles of the Scriptures are expounded for the instruction and edification of the believers (Eph. 4:11-13). This is to help develop a strong, enduring relationship with Christ, to encourage obedience and good works and to assist in overcoming temptation (Heb. 3:13, 10:24-25).

Fellowship within the church is a special blessing to those who are united in the love of Christ. *“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin”* (1 John 1:7). A closely-knit church family provides an essential support group for each member of the body. Every brother and sister both gives and receives in this very special relationship. The evidence of the extent to which this abounds in our church is overwhelming. We can enter the door of any one of our 80 or more churches and feel an immediate warmth and familiarity. This represents a genuine *“household of faith,”* the members of which are viable parts of a spiritually and personally integrated body. True compassion is manifested overwhelmingly when trials such as illness or death occur. Hospitals and funeral homes which serve our church families quickly recognize a unique and powerful force which produces an outpouring of support for every suffering individual or family. These attributes do not develop by accident, they result from the power of the Holy Spirit working within a unified fellowship of God’s children, and they should be deeply cherished.

Loving admonition and discipline are also intrinsic to the maintenance of a purified and spiritually healthy body of believers. Each of us needs others to love us so much that they will tell us when we have erred and will help apply the scriptural remedies needed to remove the stain of sin from the brotherhood.

Sometimes individuals fall back into a measure of self-centeredness and lose their willingness to accept admonition. An unchecked human desire for “being one’s own person” can lead to disaffection with the intensity of the relationship which exists in an all-encompassing spiritual inn. True love for God is manifested in willingness to sacrifice self for the brethren: *“Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren”* (1 John 3:16). This intense godly love will overpower all personal hindrances when hearts are truly humbled and are allowed to be filled with His grace. *“He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him”* (1 John 2:10).

In order for a church to fulfill its missions effectively, its members must have common convictions and a shared vision. Brethren must be united in their interpretation of the Word and its application in everyday life. There must be a total commitment to Christ and to each other (Matt. 10:38; John 17:22-23). The spiritual strength derived from Christ, our Head, through full integration within His Body will preserve the essential faith by which we were first rescued from eternal death. We are initially saved by faith and we remain saved by continuation of that faith. *“As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving”* (Col. 2:6-7). We must continually thank and praise our God for giving His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and for providing the sacred spiritual inn, which is Christ’s Body, the church, to nurture and preserve true faith upon the earth.

Serving Self or Others

Perhaps the most basic temptation faced by man is that of yielding to self-will rather than to the Spirit of God. This had its origin in the downfall of Lucifer, when he became obsessed with himself and said: *“I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. . . I will be like the most High”* (Is. 14:13-15). The Apostle Paul warned that this affliction of man’s spirit would intensify: *“This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves ...”* (2 Tim. 3:1-2).

We see a complete contrast in the attitude of the Lord Jesus Christ, who *“made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant; and was made in the likeness of men”* (Phil. 2:7). Jesus taught that those who would become His true disciples would have to crucify their own wills, *“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me”* (Matt. 16:24). When self is in control, the influence of the Spirit is greatly hindered: *“God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble”* (Jam. 4:6).

The craving to elevate self was evident in the fall of Eve. Satan approached her with the enticing proposition: *“For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil”* (Gen. 3:5). She could not resist this intriguing temptation.

Today in our society there is much evidence of growing reliance upon human strength. The belief that man is able to control his destiny and determine truth by his intellectual powers is known as secular humanism. Many of the founders of our nation believed that God is sovereign. Many people today believe man is supreme, which is perhaps a fulfillment of the warning that people will become “lovers of their own selves.” Such beliefs result in a distorted value system. For example, vast sums of money are spent to protect endangered species of animals, but it is considered acceptable to destroy unborn babies. In the current abortion controversy, the very name of the movement called “pro-choice” betrays the worship of self and the insistence upon the right to have one’s own way. Humanistic philosophy maintains that inconvenience is something humans should not have to endure. Little wonder that we are consumed with litigation over numerous aspects of daily life and the family unit is under siege!

An attitude sometimes surfaces in the corporate world that if an employee’s career is hindered because of dedication to meeting family needs, the family should be sacrificed in the name of personal fulfillment and achievement. Life-long commitment of spouses to each other and a willingness to sacrifice for their children are values which are clearly on the decline. Christianity teaches, “give of yourself to others,” but humanism says, “take care of number one.”

Excessive emphasis on self often manifests itself in materialism and greed. The Apostle Paul wrote, *“They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare”* (1 Tim. 6:9). This speaks directly to those whose goal is becoming wealthy, an all too common aspiration in our nation. The advertising field nurtures this by bombarding us with slogans which appeal to emotions and pride. There is little emphasis on the practical value of a particular item or service. Rather the claim is that it will make you feel good about yourself, look attractive, bring recognition, wealth, etc. In reality, trying to fulfill these desires with material things only leads to a self-indulgence which can never be satisfied. Jesus said, *“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal”* (Matt. 6:19).

Sometimes our struggles with self are manifested in subtle habits which are not even recognized as selfish. Being habitually late is an example of this. When we frequently make others wait on us, we are subconsciously determining that our time is worth more than that of others. Those with a hasty tongue who readily interrupt others may not truly *“esteem others better than themselves”* (Phil. 2:3). When a believer

succumbs to the temptation of elevating his opinion above the collective judgments of the church, and then ignores accepted patterns of godliness, this too is a form of self-exaltation. Reluctant service is another example of unwillingness to deny ourselves. We may actually do a favor or carry out a good deed, but we let it be known that we have inconvenienced ourselves. If we would first overcome the struggle with self in our hearts and fully yield to the Spirit, then we would be able to render cheerful service and receive a much greater blessing.

There are abundant blessings promised by God to those who truly put Him first in their lives and seek to follow the selfless example of Christ. *“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you”* (Matt. 6:33). God permits us to enjoy the fruits of our labors, but we must not set our hearts upon them (Psa. 62:10). *“Mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands”* (Is. 65:22). *“Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth”* (Col. 3:2).

The greatest joy comes with willing service given for others, motivated by true Christ-like love. The Apostle Paul refers appreciatively to an example of humble service rendered to him while suffering as a prisoner. He writes, *“The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus; for he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain”* (2 Tim. 1:16). How wonderful to someday be able to hear those beautiful words of the Saviour, *“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me”* (Matt. 25:40).

The Fruits of Repentance

Fruit is produced from the inherent substance of a living organism. Therefore fruit is a part of that organism, and its qualities demonstrate the nature of the plant which produced it. Carrying this theme from the physical into the spiritual, fruit is visible evidence of what rests within the heart of man.

The concept of fruit as a result of God's creation comes to light very early in Scripture. After forming sea and land, God then said, "*Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind*" (Gen. 1:11). This demonstrated the expectation of the Almighty as He formed that which in His divine eyes was "*very good*" (Gen. 1:31).

Repentance can be defined as a change of mind and spirit which results in sorrow for sin and a turning away from it. John the Baptist preached, "*Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance*" (Matt. 3:8). The people were exhorted to repent and bring forth appropriate changes in their lives. The Apostle Paul proclaimed the message of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus to mankind, and taught, "*that they should repent and turn to God and do works meet for repentance*" (Acts 26:20). Condemnation comes through the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21), and salvation comes by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8). Good works cannot achieve salvation, but they are an inevitable result of true faith, a testimony of God's work in the heart (Jam. 2:17). "*Repentance from dead works and faith toward God*" (Heb. 6:1) are principles of the doctrine of Christ.

In the New Testament the subject of repentance nearly always refers to turning away from sin. One outstanding example is the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). This young man wasted himself and his inheritance, finally reaching a desperate state in which he came to himself and returned in deep remorse to his father. This and other Scriptures confirm that there can be no true fulfillment of repentance unless there is a turning away from sin (Prov. 28:13; John 8:10-11; 2 Cor. 7:9-11; Jam. 4:8-10).

However, even more striking than what the Prodigal Son did is the example of the forgiving father, who welcomed the son in his repentant state with arms of love and compassion. Repentance involves not only what we do, but more importantly what God in His infinite mercy has done for us in sending his Son to pay the price for our transgressions so that we might be forgiven. We respond by faith and fruit bearing (Rom. 6:22).

The act of turning from sin, repenting in earnestness, finding forgiveness and peace with God and man need not take a long time. This varies with each individual and involves development of sufficient faith to grasp the reality of God's forgiveness. God justifies an individual when he sees genuine faith in the shed blood of His Son, the Lord Jesus. Conversion is an experience which takes time and is manifested by a new heart and lifestyle. "*And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts*" (Gal. 5:24) and "*.. put on the new man, which after God are created in righteousness and true holiness*" (Eph. 4:24). The bearing of fruit is a long process. It takes a lifetime of self-denial and walking with God to bring forth the finest fruit (Jam. 5:7-8).

Repentance and conversion bring about an entire change in attitude, with fruit of the Spirit becoming manifest in the life of the true believer. Our lives should demonstrate, "*love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.*" (Gal. 5:22-23). Baptism is the symbolic burial of the old sinful nature into the death of Christ, and the arising to a newness of life in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:3-6). Fruit bearing begins when a convert turns to the Lord in repentance and begins to be transformed by the renewing of his mind (Rom. 12:2). The fruits become quite apparent if there is a genuine conversion. Jesus said that we are known by our fruits (Matt. 12:33).

As a result of his change in attitude and the crucifixion of his fleshly nature, the convert loses interest in the things of the flesh which once preoccupied his life. A hymn-writer once wrote, "... and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace." The convert's manner of living changes; no longer serving flesh and sin, he associates himself with things of the Spirit. The companions with whom he revelled in the world notice his disinterest in those things he formerly enjoyed (1 Pet. 4:4). His actions and appearance testify that he has chosen to be separate from the world. "*Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you*" (2 Cor. 6:17). "*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God; which is your reasonable service*" (Rom. 12:1).

Thus our duty is clearly to bring forth the fruits of repentance and then to devote our entire lifetime to fruit bearing. It is most sobering to realize the tremendous price God paid in sending His Son for the redemption of the sin debt which we owed and could not pay, and then to perceive His great expectations of our enduring fruitfulness (Col. 1:10).

As does the tree, faithfully putting on new leaves each season, bearing fruit with patience, arms uplifted toward God—so may each one of us, rooted in the Word of God, faithfully strive to bear much fruit. Even those fruits which come years after one's conversion still emanate from that foundation of true repentance and faith in Christ, which changed the course of life, and gave us the blessed hope of eternal life.

Choosing a Career

Although God promised to care and provide for His children (Matt. 6:25-34), He expects us to work and earn our living (1 Thes. 4:11; 2 Thes. 3:11-12). Giving sincere thought to career planning has thus been an important matter for believers. Today with over 22,000 career options available, 75% of which require post-secondary school training, the issue has become even more complex.

While career preparation is generally considered a school-related decision made by young adults, it should actually begin at home at an early age. The first step in such planning is the establishment of values that are essential in all careers. A recent study in a midwestern state revealed the top reasons for being fired from a job: (1) absence, (2) attitude, (3) poor performance, (4) failure to get along with others, (5) lack of skills, and (6) no interest. Of these six reasons, only one (lack of skills) is school-related; the rest are scripturally based, home-taught values. Jesus gave us the example of the proper set of work values when He spoke of Himself being a Shepherd rather than an hireling (John 10). A shepherd fosters a caring, responsible attitude toward his work rather than the self-centered attitude of an hireling.

As children grow into adolescence, they begin to become more aware of the working world about them, of their own interests and abilities, and of the various role models they observe. At this stage, it may be helpful to acquaint young people with general career clusters (rather than trying to focus on one or two careers among the thousands). One example of career grouping is to classify careers according to (1) mechanical, (2) social, (3) artistic, (4) scientific, and (5) clerical skills. In this way, adolescents can begin to formulate ideas based on their own interests and abilities. Regardless of how the grouping is done, it is important that youth are aware that a wide range of occupations are valuable and important provided that they honor God and are performed honestly with a Christ-like attitude. David used both his lowly shepherd position and his exalted kingly position to glorify God.

This does not mean that every occupation is becoming to a Christian or in accord with teachings of the New Testament. Law enforcement usually requires readiness to use arms to accomplish its goals, violating scriptural principles which teach us to love even our enemies (Matt. 5:44), and *“Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good”* (Rom. 12:21).

Another important consideration in job selection is close proximity to one of our churches - either an established one, or a developing assembly. The opportunity to maintain proper priorities for family and church is of great significance. Some careers demand such a high degree of commitment that it is extremely difficult to devote adequate time and energy to those things which have eternal value. Jesus taught, *“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”* (Matt. 6:21).

If a particular career requires higher education, the selection of an institution should take into account accessibility to the brotherhood. Enrolling near home for at least the first two years can be very beneficial. When this is not feasible, every effort should be made to select a school which is near one of our churches or where services are held on campus. It cannot be emphasized enough that exposure to powerful influences of the world must be offset by the sustaining truths of God’s Word. The Apostle Paul taught, *“Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ”* (2 Cor. 10:5).

Values become more important as an adolescent matures into adulthood and the job search narrows to a specific career. The decision-making process becomes crucial. The standard steps of (1) selecting possibilities, (2) determining job values, (3) exploring possibilities, and (4) developing a plan, are helpful but only truly accomplished if done under the prayerful direction of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). The primary motive of the decision-making process should be seeking the will of God. He expects His people

to be diligent (Prov. 22:29), trustworthy (1 Cor. 4:2), honest (Prov. 11:1), fair (Lev. 19:35-36), obedient (Eph. 6:5), and respectful (1 Tim. 6:1) workers. Any job selection that would compromise these scriptural principles is not God-honoring. Values which the world emphasizes in job selection are wages and prestige. We must realize that God's rewards and His honor are much more valuable than that which the world would offer. In fact, being "*keepers at home*" (Tit. 2:5) constitutes one of life's noblest careers.

Government publications, libraries and related classes can provide helpful information for job selection. Talking to or working with individuals (especially brethren) involved in a specific career can provide excellent experience. Established godly values, an understanding of what God expects of us in a career, and knowledge about a particular career of interest are of great help. In our rapidly changing world, career planning may be a life-long process requiring much thought, prayer, and direction from the Holy Spirit for both young people and older adults.

Finally, we must remember that God's measure of success does not focus on the rewards of a career, but on obedience to His Word and love for one another—characteristics that may be displayed in a wide variety of careers (Josh. 1:8). Whatever our calling in life may be, we should fulfill it "... *heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men*" (Col. 3:23), waiting on the Lord for his blessings.

Our First Love

When a soul is rescued from the condemnation of sin and given the precious gift of salvation by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, an overwhelming love and gratitude fills the heart. This deep love creates sincere motivation to serve the Lord with all diligence and to obey His Word. The Apostle Paul asked the question, *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”* (Rom. 8:35). Of the many potential threats, all were eliminated in subsequent verses, with the exception of self.

The message given to the angel of the church at Ephesus included much commendation for their good works. However, the Lord also said, *“Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love”* (Rev. 2:4). What does our first love consist of? It involves the deep commitment of love to Christ which blossomed at the time of conversion. The Word teaches that this love will come forth in its purest form among the brethren. As Jesus concluded his High Priestly prayer, he pleaded, *“... that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them”* (John 17:26). The Apostle Paul put it this way, *“But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another”* (1 Thes. 4:9). Although the Ephesian church was still busily occupied with good works (Rev. 2:2-3), their efforts apparently were no longer motivated by a burning love for Christ and for each other.

Jesus said, *“A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another”* (John 13:34-35). The Apostle Paul rejoiced with the new Colossian believers by acknowledging both their faith and their love, *“Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints”* (Col. 1:4). Peter linked love of the brethren with the cleansing of the soul when he wrote, *“Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently”* (1 Pet. 1:22).

It is prophesied that in the latter days there will be a diminishing of this love. Jesus warned, *“And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold”* (Matt. 24:12). It is also foretold that *“... men shall be lovers of their own selves”* (2 Tim. 3:2). There is a misconception that a believer can retain in full measure his “first love” for Christ even though he may lose his sense of commitment and submissive love toward his brethren. This self-sacrificing love for the brethren sometimes deteriorates to the point where individuals forsake the Body of believers which they once warmly embraced, and they renounce doctrinal teachings which were gladly and willingly upheld following their conversion and enlightenment by God to His eternal truth.

Few of us who are married would ever condone forsaking our mates on the basis of a diminished love for them. Yet the attitude exists in many groups that if true love is lost in a marriage, one can remain a Christian and trade in his or her spouse for another. This is another form of deception in which the significance of lifelong sacrificial commitment has been lost. Personal comfort and selfishness prevail, rather than willingness to sacrifice and make intense effort to nurture love so that it will remain strong and true. The Word compares the love of Christ for the church to the love of a husband for his wife. It also says that as a man nurtures and cares for his own body, so should he do for his wife (Eph. 5:28-29). The flame of love must have fuel and it must be cared for. The proving ground for maintaining our “first love” for Christ is within the church, an organized Body of believers which provides responsibility and accountability for every member (1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Cor. 5:12, 12:12-27; Rom. 14:19).

We must constantly examine our motives. The inspiration for all that we do should be our faith in Christ and our love for Him and His Body, the church (1 Thes. 1:3). If our good works are for the praise of men, we have our reward here on earth and there is no spiritual blessing (Matt. 6:2). We are to give honor

to one another and prefer each other (Rom. 12:10). When we become individualistic and begin to insist on our own way, we are failing in this area. The Apostle Paul said, "*Be not wise in your own conceits*" (Rom. 12:16). Sometimes our love becomes hindered because we have exposed ourselves to other teachings and we begin to question the simple, tried and proven ways of our own church family. This is the same corrupting pattern which occurs when a married person begins to look to any other than his/her mate and succumbs to what appears to be better than the old and the tried and true. Once again, the real test comes in honestly evaluating our motives. Are we driven by unfeigned love or selfishness?

Nearly all of us can recite John 3:16 by memory. Perhaps we need to be just as familiar with 1 John 3:16: "*Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.*" How far are we willing to go for our brethren? The answer to this will reveal how far we are willing to go for Christ. In fact, this is really one of the marks of being a true believer "*We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death*" (1 John 3:14). May God inspire all of us to re-evaluate our attitudes about how we can prove and sustain that beautiful and most precious "first love" for our dear Saviour, who died for us, that we might live.

Woman's Headcovering

The doctrine of woman's headcovering has been firmly embraced in our brotherhood since its inception. As written in our Statement of Faith, "Sisters wear a veil or headcovering during prayer and worship as a symbol of their submission according to God's order of Creation." Observance of this scriptural teaching (1 Cor. 11:4-5) often provokes questions, because even though it was quite common in Christianity until recent years, it is relatively rare today. We must be able to give a correct and positive answer to such inquiries, making use of the opportunity to emphasize the importance of obedience to the entire counsel of God's Word (Ecc. 12:13-14). As part of Jesus' last commission to spread the Gospel, He said, "... *teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you*" (Matt. 28:20).

The Apostle Paul began his teaching regarding the headcovering with a clear explanation of the basic principles which are honored by this practice. God is a God of order and he has ordained distinctiveness between male and female: "... *he which made them at the beginning made them male and female*" (Matt. 19:4). He has also instituted a specific order for the welfare of the human family. "*But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God*" (1 Cor. 11:3). This spiritual order in relationships does not imply inequality between men and women; rather, it establishes a constructive level of dependence and mutual respect (1 Cor. 11:11-12; Gal. 3:27-28).

There are other scriptural examples in which spiritual honor, power and responsibility are symbolized in a formal manner involving the head. In the Old Testament there was special significance to anointing the head with oil. "*And he poured of the anointing oil upon Aaron's head, and anointed him, to sanctify him*" (Lev. 8:12). "*Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward*" (1 Sam. 16:13). In the New Testament, laying on of hands signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit, for the newly converted and, in a special measure for those called into leadership service (Acts 8:17; 13:3; 2 Tim. 1:6; Heb. 6:2).

Likewise, when the Apostle Paul introduced the ordinance of the headcovering, the church was given a sacred symbol of God's plan for order, distinctiveness, and spiritual honor to one's authority. It is grave error to assume that this instruction was intended only as a local custom for the Corinthian believers. Paul introduces his letter by addressing it to "*all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ*" (1 Cor. 1:2) and toward the end he says "... *the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord*" (1 Cor. 14:37). It was said many centuries ago, "When we accept the parts of the Gospel we like and reject the parts we do not like, it is not the Gospel we are believing but ourselves."

The head (authority figure) of a married woman is her husband (Eph. 5:23). It follows that the head of an unmarried woman is the church, and ultimately Christ is the head over all (Col. 1:18). The woman is instructed to cover her own head when praying or prophesying. She dishonors her authority figures (husband, church, Christ and God) when she fails to do this (1 Cor. 11:5) and likewise the man dishonors his authority figures (Christ and God) when he prays with his head covered. Praying and prophesying are specific spiritual activities. Prophesying is defined in the Word as speaking in a form of "*edification, exhortation, and comfort*" (1 Cor. 14:3). It is obvious that obedience to this simple commandment requires a designated act, just like anointing and laying on of hands. Wearing the headcovering continuously is not required, and this is left to individual discretion. This practice certainly does not violate the intent of the scriptural teaching. However, to neglect the headcovering during prayer, worship or spiritual conversation, or to misinterpret the Word and assume that hair is a sufficient covering is a violation of the Word of God and brings dishonor. This is compared to a woman being shaved (1 Cor. 11:5) which has been viewed as a disgrace through the ages of time. The erroneous view that hair is a prayer covering is based on misunderstanding of verse 15: "*But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her*"

for a covering.” If hair were a prayer covering, men would have to remove their hair in order to comply with verse 4. However, the word “covering” as used in verse 15 originates from a different root word and refers to a natural covering of hair, given as a glory. Obviously, no conditions are attached in verse 15 as to when long hair should be worn. Without doubt, the long hair should always be present as it radiates a special, God-given, feminine glory. The prayer veil covers both head and hair and expresses a sacred symbolism deserving our sincere respect. Indeed a special measure of spiritual power (strength) is promised to the godly woman who observes this ordinance (v. 10).

As we worship and fellowship together, faithfully veiled sisters reflect submission to God’s plan of Creation and bring a special honor to the Body of Christ. This attitude of reverence is deeply felt, as evidenced by their hesitancy to extend the hand in holy greeting without first putting on a veil. Likewise, our beloved Lord Jesus is honored whenever veiled sisters privately or publicly turn to Him in formal prayer, Scripture reading and worship. Brothers give the same special honor by respectfully uncovering their heads at such times.

The Lord has entrusted His children with the great responsibility of portraying to the world the pure, unadulterated Gospel message. Numerous individuals, when exposed to our church, have been helped spiritually by observation of concerted efforts to obey the literal truths of the entire Bible, including the teachings regarding headcovering.

Peace

The condition of peace is one of inner calmness, quietness and contentment. It involves reconciliation, overcoming of sin and establishing of harmonious relationships. It is universally sought by well-intentioned human beings, but for many true peace is seldom, if ever, obtained.

The “peace that passeth all understanding” (Phil. 4:7) is available only through genuine faith in Christ, which opens the way for the gift of salvation: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). On the other hand, sin destroys peace. God has declared that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), and no one can be at peace facing such a fate. However, the penalty was paid for us by the pure and righteous Lamb of God, who became sin for us, that we might live (Isa. 53:5; 2 Cor. 5:21).

Those who turn to the Lord Jesus in true faith and repentance will experience the miracle of conversion. A monumental change of attitude and outlook on life occurs when the reality of forgiveness and reconciliation is grasped. Like never before, the true meaning of these words of Christ are comprehended: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27). The Saviour did not promise that we would be spared from the turmoil of the world around us. However, we have a very close union with the Lord in which there is an abiding peace. “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Maintaining that relationship is the key. “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee” (Isa. 26:3).

As new believers we learn very quickly that it is Satan’s goal to disturb our peace and to ultimately destroy it. It is evident in the Scriptures that peace with God and with our fellow men must be continually nurtured. If our relationship with God is neglected, our peace will begin to wane. We are also taught to “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14), and to “Depart from evil, and do good; (to) seek peace and pursue it” (Psa. 34:14). This implies a diligent effort on our part to insure that peace is maintained. Simply being more aware of the reality of God’s promise of peace to His children has a very beneficial effect: “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful” (Col. 3:15).

Our peace is sometimes disturbed because we fail to heed the most basic instructions of the Word of God. First of all we are taught to pray...“For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (1 Tim. 2:2). It is human nature to criticize authorities rather than to pray for them. Our attitude toward those whom God has placed over us can make a great difference in our inner peace. This involves the church, the home and the nation. If we have lost our godly esteem because of seeking our own self-will, there will be turmoil in our hearts.

A vital part of the armor of God is to have our “feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15). Without the guiding light of the Word continually illuminating our paths (Psa. 119:105), we will find ourselves wandering into dangerous enemy territory. When we have our hearts filled with the truths of the Word, we are shielded from temptation and from being easily hurt or disturbed. “Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee” (Psa. 119:11). “Great peace have they that love thy law: and nothing shall offend them” (Psa. 119:165).

Successful maintenance of peace has always required humble obedience to God: “O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea” (Isa. 48:18). When a believer disobeys, a God-given turmoil must be experienced before true peace

can be reestablished. The conviction of the Holy Spirit is painful. “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Heb. 12:11). We must never allow the weights and sins which can easily beset us to take root (Heb. 12:1). Chastisement must be allowed to take its course; whatever is wrong in our lives must be acknowledged, regretted, forgiven and overcome, if our peace is to be restored.

There are outstanding blessings promised by God for those who not only possess true inner peace themselves, but are also able to foster greater peace among others. “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matt. 5:9). “The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace” (Jam. 3:18). “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another” (Rom. 14:19). Finally, “When a man’s ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him” (Pro. 16:7).

The greatest blessing on earth is to be able to leave this life in peace. Because King Josiah did that which was “right in the sight of God” he was promised that he would be gathered into (his) grave in peace” (2 Kings 22, 20). What a joy to feel peace overflowing our hearts “like a river” and to know at the end of life’s day: “It is well, it is well with my soul.” (Hymns of Zion, #55)

The Ministry

One of the most noble callings ever given to man is the ministry of the gospel. “How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!” (Rom. 10:15). God promised to provide men for Israel with “understanding of the times” (1 Chron. 12:32) to serve as ministers and leaders of His people, and the same is true for the church today. The true spiritual leader is a servant, called by God to feed the flock and give himself wholeheartedly to ministering to others.

When help in the ministry is sought, the church should pray for divine guidance so that it can be revealed as to whom the Word of the Lord shall come (Luke 3:2). There are certain biblical qualifications for brothers being considered for service as deacons and bishops (elders). These also apply to ministers, because every newly appointed minister shares in the leadership of the church and is a potential deacon or elder. Brothers considered for the ministry should demonstrate order in their own household and they should have the respect of those not in the faith. They are to be serious-minded, spiritually mature, patient and willing to teach (1 Tim. 3:1-13). Such brothers should be blameless stewards who seek no earthly gain from these labors. They are to be lovers of hospitality and of good men, just, holy and temperate. They must be willing to defend the true doctrine (Titus 1:6-9). Their wives must be sensible and godly women who are “faithful in all things” (1 Tim. 3:11).

Following exhortation regarding these Scriptures and a time of prayerful consideration, the sentiment of the church is sought regarding who among the brothers should be considered to serve in the ministry. The ultimate responsibility for this decision rests with the elder, as the Apostle Paul entrusted Timothy: “And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

When a brother is asked to assume the responsibility of preaching the Word, it is essential that he and his wife prayerfully search their hearts and plead for the Lord’s grace to fulfill their calling. A genuine spirit of humility should be evident, and although unworthiness may be felt, an attitude of willingness to become a dedicated servant of the Lord should prevail (1 Cor. 9:17-19; 1 Tim. 1:12). It is required of those who are placed in ministry and leadership positions to be sound examples (1 Tim. 4:12). Anything in the lifestyle of the brother or his wife which may be a hindrance to the effectiveness of these labors must be removed: “Giving no offense in anything, that the ministry be not blamed” (2 Cor. 6:3). How could a minister effectively exhort the brethren to abstain from unwholesome entertainments such as television and competitive sports if he were not free from these spiritually corrosive influences? Involvement in these and other worldly activities is an indication of a spiritual deficiency. Likewise, a minister’s wife must be an example in attitude, word and appearance of the biblically-based teachings of the church regarding godly women. “Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised” (Prov. 31:30). Adornment should be in accord with our modest traditional patterns, springing forth from a meek and quiet spirit (1 Pet. 3:3-4).

When the mantle of ministry of the gospel is placed on a brother, he is asked to promise to give all diligence to being a submissive vessel through whom the Holy Spirit can feed the flock. It is also required that he faithfully uphold the teachings of the Word of God as interpreted by the Apostolic Christian Church. Special emphasis is placed in the Word on holding fast to sound doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16; 5:17; 2 Tim. 3:14-17). Ministers must be free of seminary-rooted confusion and falsehoods, speaking “not with excellency of speech” or “with man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor. 2:1, 4).

Ministers must realize that there will sometimes be resistance to their preaching of the truth. They are instructed to “preach the Word...in season (and) out of season: (to) reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their

own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). It is not acceptable for a minister to remain silent or neutral about a controversial issue in order to avoid disturbing those who are not supportive of church teachings and standards. Rather there must be a willingness to “earnestly contend for the faith” (Jude 3); “Holding fast the faithful Word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers” (Tit. 1:9).

If a minister at any time should become unable, because of varying convictions, to clearly defend biblically-based church doctrine and practices, he should examine his heart, counsel with his elder, and make his views consistent with the body of believers for whom he speaks. Each elder ultimately bears the scriptural responsibility for the wholesome feeding of the flock by the ministering brothers laboring under his charge (1 Pet. 5:1-2). One of the elder’s greatest and most far-reaching responsibilities is that of entrusting the preaching and teaching of God’s Word to faithful men! When there is sincere humility of heart and an attitude of submissiveness on the part of every brother occupying the pulpit, this work can be done with joy, which is profitable to all (Heb. 13:17).

Apostacy

Apostacy is referred to in the Word of God as falling away or forsaking the faith. It consists of a desertion or departure from the true Christian faith. It is prophesied that a falling away will occur before the Antichrist is revealed (2 Thes. 2:3-4). It can happen to individuals, such as Demas, who forsook the Apostle Paul for the world (2 Tim. 4:10); or it can happen to groups of believers as prophesied regarding several of the seven churches (Rev. 2 and 3). The primary purpose of this article is to review the scriptural warnings against the dangers of apostacy and the instructions as to how it can be avoided.

The Lord Jesus pleaded with the Father in His last hours before Calvary on behalf of all who would become His own: “Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are” (John 17:11). He provides all the necessary resources to help assure our remaining faithful, but we are subject to an enemy who, “as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

Certain characteristics often precede apostacy. These include lukewarmness, indifference, waywardness, individualism, intermingling and doctrinal confusion, as well as lack of commitment to Christ and His church. Lack of commitment is really just one step away from rebellion. The Word speaks of gainsayers, who are individuals who oppose or contradict authority and interpreted truth. Titus was given specific instructions as a leader in the church: “Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers” (Tit. 1:9). Timothy was given a similar exhortation: “In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:25). Much loving effort should be made to help correct wayward brethren who become ensnared in false beliefs and develop unsubmitive attitudes. However, the Word also makes clear that when such individuals sow discord in the church (Prov. 6:19) and confuse others, they must be reproved by the brethren, and if not submissive, separated from the fellowship (Rom. 16:17; Tit. 3:10-11).

Obviously, the best approach is to make every effort to prevent deception from entering the hearts of the believers. This is achieved by staying very close to the Lord, and being alert to the various dangers which confront His people. A humble attitude which is subject to the counsel of the Word and to faithful brethren is essential.

The child of God is to “give diligence” or make tremendous effort to add numerous virtues to his faith, such as knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness and charity (2 Pet. 1:5-7). Developing these virtues, serving others and suffering for the cause of Christ will go a long way in warding off the enemy’s attempts to foster indifference, lukewarmness and doctrinal confusion. Moses was a faithful servant, “choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Heb. 11:25).

There are many warnings and examples in the Word about spiritual drift which can ultimately lead to destruction. The children of Israel often followed a pattern of backsliding, “and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt” (Acts 7:39). Even in battle they sometimes retreated, “The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle” (Psa. 78:9). Faithful Jonathan, however, remained true to David: “the bow of Jonathan turned not back” (2 Sam. 1:22). The believer is sternly warned, “Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness” (2 Pet. 3:17). “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:12-13).

As believers, we must be especially alert to the subtle nature of today's destructive forces which can undermine our spiritual stability. Many appealing but misleading ideas and biblical interpretations are espoused in modern day religious literature and broadcasts. A basic deception which colors many of these teachings is the belief that it is impossible for a true believer to ever fall away. It should be recognized that this misconception has far-reaching effects upon individuals' attitudes about sin, church discipline and the risk of exposure to spiritual deception. It can produce a false sense of immunity to danger, numbing our spiritual senses and making us easy victims of Satan. The Apostle Paul wrote, "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3).

The time-tested, biblically sound doctrines and practices of our forefathers continue to be taught from our pulpits throughout the land and exercised in our churches and homes. May we all recognize the profound significance of being whole-heartedly committed to these truths, so that no seeds of rebellion or false doctrine will ever take root in our hearts. We can understand why the Apostle John said "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 4).

May we as God's people, in "simplicity and godly sincerity" (2 Cor. 1:12) resist the threat of apostasy, standing firmly with Christ our leader, and with our beloved brethren, as faithful Jonathan stood with David.

The Importance of Family Life

The family unit patterned after godly principles is one of the most significant elements of a society. It consists of a husband and wife (bound by vows of lifetime fidelity and commitment in marriage) and their children. It exists as a nurturing and binding agent among individuals in a family circle. It also contributes a sense of stability and identity as life flows from one generation to another.

The composition and order of the family unit find their sacred origin in the Bible. God instituted the family when he said to Adam, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.” (Gen. 2:18). God took a rib from Adam and made a woman; and Adam declared, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23).

Over the centuries, the concept of the godly family has survived. It has provided spiritual and emotional nourishment through all of life’s varying phases and experiences. Strong families are central to societal durability and are of great benefit, both to the church and to the nation.

The family relationship is rooted in love: “Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us. (Eph. 5:1-2). Such love flourishes when family members submit to one another (Eph. 5:21) and “follow after the things that make for peace” (Rom. 14:17).

According to the Word, the father is the head of the house and has the ultimate responsibility for the spiritual and physical well-being of the entire family. “The husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church” (Eph. 5:23). Such an obligation is quite sobering because the husband is not to lord over his family. Rather, the Word teaches, “Husbands love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). In this context, the father is reminded not to provoke his children to anger “lest they be discouraged” (Col. 3:21).

In God’s order of creation, the head of the woman is the man (1 Cor. 11:3). Wives are to submit themselves unto their husbands “as unto the Lord” (Eph. 5:22). “Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (Eph. 5:24).

Children are given specific instructions in the Word: “Obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth” (Eph. 6:1-3). As parents love each other and submit themselves unto Christ, this serves as a great example to children who will hopefully follow such a godly pattern.

Scripturally, fathers and mothers have distinctive roles to fulfill. As the family’s head, the father has responsibilities to provide the financial, physical, and spiritual needs of his wife and family. He personifies the male gender (masculinity) reflected in physical and spiritual strength as well as leadership (1 Kings 2:2; 1 Cor. 16:13). He also is to be kindly sensitive to the emotional needs of his family (1 Pet. 3:7). He is the major breadwinner and provider (1 Tim. 5:8). Among a father’s many important duties are the offering of prayer before meals and the reading of Scriptures in his family’s presence.

Likewise, the mother has a biblical role to fulfill as a “keeper at home” (Titus 2:5), and one who is readily available to love and nurture her dear children. Her God-given feminine gifts are for the purpose of lovingly ministering to the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of her children. As her offspring grow from babyhood through adolescence and thence into adulthood, a mother’s visible example of godliness and Christian nurturing is continually needed in the home.

The primary goal of a converted husband and wife is the raising of their children “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). Their heartfelt desire is the conversion of their children and they should kindly remind them of their eventual spiritual responsibility. Christian parents demonstrate their love for God, and for the church through willing obedience to these spiritual authorities. When parents convey attitudes of submission to those whom God has placed over them, they can more fully expect their children to be obedient to them.

Parents must recognize that Satan is working with a steady diligence to undermine the home. Broken marriages abound and children are the greatest victims. The exodus of mothers from the home into the work force and the excessive preoccupation of fathers with earthly gain have both contributed to the instability of families and marriages. Many parents neglect their responsibility toward their children during their crucial formative years.

Godly parents should make every effort to keep their homes holy and shielded from worldly influences. The nurturing of spiritual values and communication are severely undermined by the vast majority of television programming, by decadent movies, and by morally destructive videos which can be rented and watched at home. Christian parents have a solemn obligation to protect their children from these morally degrading influences. Sensitivity to their anxieties and problems will help to maintain open communication between parents and children.

Opportunities abound to promote the scriptural patterns of sound family life. Godly order, respect, Christ-like love and a wall of defense against evil will provide the kind of home on this earth which will help precious souls prepare to spend eternity in Heaven.

Biblical Aspects of Obedience

The doctrine of obedience remains as one of the most significant foundational principles of the Christian faith. A most fundamental aspect of our relationship to God centers on our obedience to His ways. To exclude obedience from faith is to deny a true faith.

During conversion we become crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20), which means we surrender our will. We voluntarily resolve to live in obedience. The Lord said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 4:5). The Apostle John wrote, "He that saith he abideth in him, ought himself also so to walk, as he walked" (1 John 2:6). The Lord Jesus "became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Heb. 5:9).

Unconditional obedience involves following God's commands without always knowing the specific purpose He has in mind. This clearly reflects the Bible's standard of obedience. Abraham exemplified this when he answered God's call to leave his home country: "he went out, not knowing whither he went" (Heb. 11:8). Later, he obeyed God's command to offer up his beloved son Isaac as a burnt offering (Gen. 22:1-14). Although Abraham is usually referred to as the father of faith, he could as well be referred to as the father of obedience. Foremost is the example of the obedience by the Lord Jesus, who willingly gave His life and shed His blood for our atonement. Although He could have summoned ten thousand angels to lift Him out of His suffering, He instead prayed to the Father, "Not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). He was willing to suffer rebuke, humiliation and death to obey God's wish. Jesus taught that if we obey His will, eventually we will know that it is the truth and is of God (John 7:17).

Anyone who sincerely seeks to live a life of obedience will encounter conflict. Self-will and rebellion are Satan's ageless weapons to overthrow submission and obedience. Deceptive influences of modern society promote self-assertion and self-exaltation. Like a magnet, the cry of individualism seeks to draw a believer out of a humble and content state of biblical obedience. When a child of God falls prey to this deception, his love grows cool and he begins to withdraw from the mainstream of the fellowship. When a group of believers becomes collectively weakened by patterns of individualism, the entire church suffers. The result is a dim and divided witness to the world.

We must strongly resist the popular forces of self-centeredness which seek to undermine our love and unity. God wants His people to be perfectly joined together and to follow the same spiritual judgments (1 Cor. 1:10). When we find we can no longer do this, we have exalted ourselves above the church. The end of the church age is typified in the condition of the Laodiceans, who were so self-sufficient that they said we "have need of nothing" (Rev. 3:17). Jesus replied, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent" (Rev. 3:19).

Satan also seeks to offer a compromise between human reasoning and godly obedience. However, true obedience implies a complete trust in God, without conditions. Naaman, the Syrian, learned that he had to move beyond human reasoning to simple obedience in order to be healed (2 Kings 5:1-14). Suffering from leprosy, he sought healing from the prophet Elisha. Told to bathe himself seven times in the muddy waters of the Jordan, Naaman turned away in a rage, feeling the advice made no sense. When he abandoned his human reasoning and obeyed, he was healed.

The Lord has consistently promised blessings to the obedient. Regarding Israel he said, "Oh that there were such a heart in them that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!" (Deut. 5:29). The promise is repeated at the very end of the Bible, "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city" (Rev. 22:14).

Obedience to God and His Word covers a very wide scope. Believers are to submit “one to another in the fear of God” (Eph. 5:21). They are to please their “neighbor for his good to edification” (Rom. 15:2). They are responsible to obey those who are over them in the Lord (Heb. 13:7, 17) and to submit to the Spirit-directed exhortations of church leadership (Acts 15).

Believers are obligated to obey the authority of government, so long as no biblical teachings are violated. “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers... the powers that be are ordained of God” (Rom. 13:1).

Obedience is one of the hallmarks of a godly family. “Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord” (Col. 3:20). “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord” (Eph. 5:22). These commandments clearly do not imply dominance, for parents are warned not to provoke their children to wrath (Eph. 6:4) and husbands are taught to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave His life for it (Eph. 5:25).

Obedience is not a burden, it is a great privilege. It results in much inner joy and contentment. Jesus said, “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love” (John 15:10). When we submit to the Word and the subordinate authorities which God has ordained (particularly Christ’s body, the church), we will find a pathway which leads to love and peace and righteousness, rather than the fear, and turmoil and sin of this world.

Fellowship

“If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). We can experience a measure of the joy of Heaven through the beautiful gift of fellowship with one another. This majestic expression of love is made possible only when it is centered in Christ Jesus. We must walk in His light and be cleansed by His blood in order to be joined with one another in this sacred bond. Shortly before He went to Calvary, Jesus asked God to share this wonderful gift with us: He prayed, “...that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:22).

The expression of our love in true Christian fellowship must come from hearts which deeply care about each other. Solomon made the right choice when he asked God for an “understanding heart” (1 Kings 3:9). God gave him abundant wisdom, which included the ability to listen to his fellow men and understand them. Fellowship involves patient listening and a willingness to take time for others because of a genuine interest in their spiritual well-being.

Fellowship in the spirit of Christ consists of openhearted communication among brethren. While “small talk” about common interests of daily life may have its place, true edification occurs when fellowship is centered on spiritual conversation. This is pleasing to God. “Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord and that thought upon his name” (Mal. 3:16).

The motivation to communicate at the spiritual level must never be instigated by pride, whereby an individual seeks to demonstrate his knowledge of the Word or to outdo someone else he considers less spiritual. Such an attitude is not only judgmental, but condescending. It brings no blessing. The goal must be edification, which is the building up of the believers. The entire purpose of fellowship is to edify each other and to nurture our relationship with the Lord (Rom. 15:2).

The primary purpose of assembling in the house of the Lord is for worship. Sharing in rich fellowship while together complements worship, especially when it centers on the spiritual. It is not a healthy sign if brethren frequently head for the door as soon as services are finished. It is also unfortunate if one’s visiting is restricted to a particular group of individuals. This may reflect only partial love, as compared to concern for the whole body of believers. Christ was the perfect example in making special effort to seek out the lonely and others whose needs were unnoticed by man.

Active involvement in fellowship requires training. It should start with young children. Parents should encourage their participation in organized Sunday School visits to other churches. Families should experience the blessing of visiting other Apostolic Christian congregations as they travel on vacations or visit friends and relatives. It is unfortunate if children are deprived of this unnecessarily. Occasionally a brother is hesitant to visit other churches because of fear of being called upon to pray. If this cannot be overcome with sincere effort, an acceptable alternative is to ask the lead minister or elder of the church being visited to excuse one from this task. This will be graciously honored. Young group fellowship throughout the churches is also edifying. The bonds of Christ’s love are strengthened when the activities are spiritually edifying to all.

The full potential of sweet Christian fellowship can hardly be comprehended. God “hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6). Christ’s pure and holy love is poured out upon every one of us without partiality. If we are to fulfill His commands and experience fellowship in its purest form, we also must love all the brethren. The Apostle Paul warned: “That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another” (1 Cor.

12:25). “Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8). Brethren should avoid the temptation to withhold their love from someone who does not conform as they might expect. We need not compromise our convictions to be loving and caring to all the brethren. This may be the most effective approach in helping a struggling soul to see the benefit of laying aside personal preferences for the sake of the unity and welfare of the body of Christ.

Fellowship efforts must be extended to seeking souls. It is extremely important that a warm welcome be given to strangers who enter the doors of our assemblies. “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb. 13:2). Many have testified that their first impression upon entering one of our churches has had a deep and lasting impact. We should gladly encourage anyone who has an interest in learning about our Saviour. We have nothing to be ashamed of. If we are apologetic about some of our church beliefs and practices, it is probably because we do not totally understand them. Rather, we should enthusiastically support our beliefs and try to help others find salvation. Share a “Welcome” booklet and be willing to become personally involved.

Jesus made very clear the most powerful evidence of our being his true disciples: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35).

The Church - A Light to the World

The Lord's church is manifested today as closely knit bodies of believers with the mission of promoting the glorious cause of Christ. This involves proclaiming the Gospel of salvation to the unconverted and providing a haven for the nurturing and spiritual guidance of the believers. It is life's highest calling to be a part of the body of Christ, the church.

For a church to reflect the true light of Christ, its doctrines and teachings must be based on the Word and its members must be truly converted individuals, who are no longer living in sin (Rom. 6: 1-2, 11, 14).

According to the Word, Christ is the head of the church (Eph. 5:23), the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20), and the individual members constitute His body. The Head (Christ) and His body (the church) are inseparable. Individual members co-exist symbolically within the spiritual body. Their similar spiritual understandings and exemplary walks of life allow the church to reflect the light of Christ.

Likemindedness (Rom. 15:5), unity of spirit (Eph. 4:13), and common observation of godly lifestyle standards (Phil. 3:16) allow the church to perform its mission in a gracefully coordinated manner, "fitly framed" (Eph. 2:21) and "perfectly joined together" (1 Cor. 1:10). This enables the church to be recognized as a "chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9), and as the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15).

Christ's true church is to be kept free from sinful leaven (1 Cor. 5:7-8). Indeed, the Apostle Paul exhorted that the church should be one "not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27). This is a very high standard. Many times it is casually said that no church is perfect because it is made up of human beings. This may be true, but it does not alter the fact that God has established a perfect standard to which we should aspire. Christ has given the church the authority to "bind and loose" (Matt. 18:18), which is a very great responsibility. When appropriate, admonition or discipline must be carried out, in the spirit of love, for the eternal welfare of the erring individual and the preservation of the purity of church.

As a church conforms to the biblical blueprint, it will shine forth to unbelievers. Its members will become visibly distinct from the world. Their attitudes and lives will exemplify the virtues of the Lord Jesus Christ. Themes such as "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19), "love your enemy" (Matt. 5:44), and "whatever you do to the least of these, ye do unto me" (Matt. 25:40) will draw attention. As believers show love and concern for the sick, for the grieving, and for the lost, indeed for all mankind, the Spirit's light will shine brightly and will glorify God. Compassion, forbearance, kindness and mercy should be hallmarks of every child of God.

By the same token, the practical application of the various principles of the Word by humble believers, will draw attention to Christ. Examples such as simplicity and moderation in the material aspects of life, modesty in outward appearance, and refraining from worldly entertainments often arouse questions about our faith. This provides an opportunity for expression of the hope that is within us (1 Pet. 3:15). "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2).

The example of a humble, obedient Christian "lifestyle" is a type of evangelism whereby many unbelievers have been drawn into the faith. Consistency in visible holiness serves to reflect a bright and clear light to the world. It gives identity to the fact that we are God's people and that we are devoted to obeying the Word as believed and understood by the Apostolic Christian Church family. Modesty and

restraint in all aspects of life give a strong message of solidarity. This confirms that the believer's affection is for spiritual, not earthly things. "For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace" (Rom. 8:6).

Today, however, Satan is trying to dim the light of Christ as projected by our churches. The enemy, on a worldwide basis, is trying to diminish holiness and confuse unbelievers. Individualism, lukewarmness, and a lack of spiritual maturity are all factors which help to create a dim light. Sometimes brethren are unknowingly persuaded by Satan's trickery. By living an independent, non-conforming lifestyle they give a clouded message to those who are seeking spiritual stability in the midst of a "crooked and perverse" world (Phil. 2:15). The Apostle Paul wrote, "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle" (1 Cor. 14:8). The other extreme of placing unreasonable emphasis upon insignificant matters is also not profitable (Heb. 13:9). Each member should examine his heart to insure that he is adding to, not detracting from the church's light to the world.

Someday the complete church of Jesus Christ will be revealed. This "mystical" body will consist of believers from all ages and all nations who have been found faithful. They will be joined as one to live forever with the Lord.

Today the true light of Christ rises from within the individual sanctified hearts of God's people. When they are united and fully committed to the New Testament pattern established for Christ's church, this light shines forth as a powerful, visible force, piercing the darkness of the world.

Opportunities to Serve the Lord

Serving others makes for a much happier, more fulfilling life. Therefore, if a believer really wants to be happy, he should forget “self” completely and focus on praising God and trying to help others. There is sacrifice in helping others, and there is no guarantee our efforts will bear fruit. Yet we should be ready to lend a hand to those who feel a need and desire help (Gal. 6: 10). Our responsibility is to be willing to serve; the results belong to God.

When the Lord Jesus Christ spoke to His disciples in Acts 1:8, He said, “Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” In this exhortation the Lord begins at home (Jerusalem) and works His way to the uttermost part of the earth. Following this principle, we must begin at home if we hope to serve, to be a witness and example of true faith.

Do we practice true brotherly love within our church family? “Be kindly affectioned one to another in brotherly love; in honor preferring one another” (Rom. 12:10). How do we interact with our classmates in school, and with our teachers? Can they feel that we love and respect them as human beings and that we have the peace of God in our hearts? How do we treat those with whom we share an apartment? Do we portray a humble Christ-like example? What about our spouse? Do we let him or her know that as far as we are concerned, he or she is the most precious person on earth? Do we show love and respect to our children while trying to guide them in the ways of the Lord Jesus Christ?

In all of the above situations we have the opportunity to serve the Lord - and that is only the beginning. The world is full of need for people who are really willing to serve. The Lord Jesus gave us the perfect example of humble servanthood. He performed the lowly task of washing others’ feet (John 13:1-17) and later He gave the ultimate sacrifice, becoming sin and dying for us, that we might live with Him eternally (John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:21).

If we are to serve effectively in our brotherhood, we must be willing to bend, to reason together, to submit to one another, “with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:2-3). We must not insist on our own way as if we have a monopoly on wisdom and truth. “Be not wise in your own conceits” (Rom. 12:16). If we have Christ-like love for all the people in our church, and if we sincerely embrace the biblically-based doctrines and practices of our church, we will greatly enhance our chances of being effective servants of the Lord. The Word teaches us to “covet earnestly the best gifts” (1 Cor. 12:31). God will reveal to the humble heart what are the “best gifts” for the edification of the church.

Whether called to a specific duty or not, each member (motivated by Christ’s love) can make diligent effort to greet people in church with an encouraging word and with great respect, always putting others above self. Take time to pray for one another. Visit the sick, care for the dying, and lend a helping hand to those who are in need as the opportunities arise.

Our World Relief program offers numerous opportunities to help needy individuals in many nations, including our own. These activities are covered in detail in other written materials. Likewise the Work Projects program offers many opportunities for service to our fellow human beings. As mentioned earlier, our service begins at home, but it does not end there.

The Mission Committee of our church provides direction and oversight for another type of service. It assists in establishing churches in new locations within the United States and has also provided assistance for establishing Apostolic Christian churches in other countries, as was the case in Japan. Anything we

undertake in the direction of founding new Apostolic Christian churches must be done with a complete blending together of convictions and goals with those who have the oversight of our existing churches. Then and then only can harmony prevail and the entire Apostolic Christian Church support the effort wholeheartedly, with prayer and offerings. We believe that for anyone who is commissioned to spiritual service in any capacity, he must have the prayers, approval and support of his church.

There are a number of small churches within the United States which the Mission Committee would like to strengthen by encouraging brothers and sisters from larger congregations to move to those areas. Those who feel so called should consult with their local elder and contact the Mission Committee for appropriate guidance.

Encouragement is also given by our church to participate in the distribution of Scriptures. Small Bibles or Gospel portions can be carried on one's person and given to anyone who asks a reason for the hope within us (1 Pet. 3:15). This in turn opens the way to invite others to visit our church, which is always a good thing. "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). Someone may be waiting for an invitation. The recently printed "Welcome" booklet and a copy of the Statement of Faith can be shared with those who show more interest.

Opportunities to serve the Lord abound. Let us all serve diligently and humbly in some appropriate capacity, and truly the Lord will be honored.

Unconditional Eternal Security

God offers the wonderful promise of the assurance of salvation to all His children who remain true and faithful. The Lord will present true believers to God as “holy and unblameable and unreprouable” (Col. 1:22), if they “continue in the faith, grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel” (Col. 1:23). Indeed, “He that shall endure until the end, the same shall be saved” (Mark 13:13).

The entire concept of assurance of salvation must be seen in light of 1 Timothy 4:1: “Now the spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron.” The potential for deception is real, and we must always be on guard.

Unconditional eternal security or “once saved, always saved,” is a false doctrine. This viewpoint holds that even if a believer falls into gross, willful sin and persists in a state of apostasy, he will nonetheless retain his salvation and spend eternity in Heaven. Inevitably, it fosters a careless lifestyle which brings great shame to the cause of Christ. Such misinterpretations result when persons dwell only on certain of God’s promises and fail to see them in the context of “all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

Proponents of unconditional security emphasize several New Testament texts. If taken out of context from other pertinent Scriptures, these verses seem to lend some validity to this viewpoint. “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). “And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand” (John 10:28). “...for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2 Tim. 1:12). None of these verses excludes the fact that any individual can himself choose to no longer abide in Christ and thus reject Him. “. . . if thou seek Him, He will be found of thee; but if thou forsake Him, He will cast thee off for ever: (1 Chron. 28:9). It is a fallacy to presume that human beings would lose this freedom of choice by becoming Christians.

There are many examples in the Word which affirm the need for the believer to be faithful. The Lord’s parable of the vine and the branches concludes that if one does not remain in the vine, “... he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:6). Similarly, the parable of the ten virgins indicates that those whose lamps were without oil heard distressing words from the Bridegroom, “Verily I say unto you, I know you not” (Matt. 25:12). The Lord Jesus reiterated, “Ye are the salt of the earth: But if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men” (Matt. 5:13).

While the promises of assurance abound (John 1:12-13; 2:17, 24; Rom. 8:16; Heb. 7:25; 1 John 3:2, 20-21; 5:13; Jude 24), there are many “ifs” that indicate security in Christ is conditional, not unconditional. Assurance in Christ is predicated on faithfulness. God does not reward disobedience, rebellion, or wanton sin. Rather, he abhors sin, and if unrectified, its wages are death (Rom. 6:23).

The Word cautions the believer: “For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence (assurance) steadfast unto the end” (Heb. 3:14); “Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall” (2 Peter 1:10).

The Apostle Peter’s exhortation regarding faithfulness is one of the Word’s strongest. “For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,

they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them” (2 Peter 2:20-21). This clearly refutes the argument that those who fall back were never truly saved. Peter refers to believers who had escaped the world through Christ.

God’s Word is clear in describing a condition of hopeless “falling away” and makes a sobering declaration that in such cases it is “impossible” to renew “them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame” (Heb. 6:4-6). Those who deny this truth and give a false hope to lukewarm, backsliding Christians will bear a heavy responsibility on judgment day.

The entire outlook of professed believers is influenced by their position on eternal security. Belief in its unconditional form minimizes the importance of church discipline, holy living and perseverance. It creates an obsessive concern for getting people to make a “decision for Christ” without an accompanying sense of responsibility for their spiritual maintenance.

The subject of eternal security is best understood if we simply recognize that just as we are saved by grace through faith, we remain saved by retaining that living faith unto the end. And true faith will be manifested by continued obedience to the Word of God.

Pilgrims and Strangers

The phrase “pilgrims and strangers” is a vivid description of true believers here on earth. Perhaps no other phrase so accurately symbolizes the life of those who follow Christ according to the direction of God’s Word.

The Apostle Peter, addressing early believers as strangers and pilgrims, pleaded with them to “abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11). Based primarily on this text and on that found in Hebrews 11:13, followers of Christ are regarded as pilgrims and strangers in this present world. How one relates to such a description can serve as a barometer of one’s spiritual well-being. (Zion’s Harp # 136)

If a believer sees himself both as a pilgrim and a stranger, his attitudes and behavior will focus on spiritual and eternal matters. Any preoccupation with the material things of this world should fade away. One cannot serve the prince of this world and still regard himself as a pilgrim and stranger.

A pilgrim is one who is on a journey to a special destination. His general mode of life is transitory, he is somewhat rootless, and his attention to the attractions along the way is fleeting. His primary interests pertain to his ultimate destination, and he continually refers to the map showing him the way.

A stranger is one who is not accustomed to his surroundings. Also, he is unfamiliar with most of those he may meet in the foreign territory along his journey.

The believer’s citizenship is in heaven. This world is not his home. It is a temporary abode during his purposeful journey to Zion. As such, his affection is on “things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:2). Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Luke 12:34). The material things given high esteem by worldly-minded people (fame, fortune, and worldly pleasure) are things that hold little affection for a pilgrim. As one who is travelling on a journey, he can easily see that these are burdens that can slow down his progress, and sometimes can even tempt him to turn aside. “Friendship with the world” only curtails the pace of his journey, leaving him weary and tired. It could eventually remove his status as a stranger.

To maintain a true sense of pilgrimage, and to remain as a stranger, the believer must come out from the world and be separate (2 Cor. 6:17). Likewise, he must not conform himself to the sinful and careless patterns demonstrated by those persons who are not travelling the spiritual pathway and who are not strangers to this world (Rom. 12:2). Rather his desire is to help others to find this narrow pathway, joining hand and heart as fellow pilgrims, and bearing each others’ burdens along life’s journey (Gal. 6:2).

By virtue of his willingness to be a pilgrim and a stranger in this present world (with a differing value system), the true disciple of Christ will realize his unique status in society. His desire for the styles and fashions of this age will be low. This will lead him to recognize that he is different from his contemporaries, both in motive and manner.

The pilgrim will also be willing to suffer and to bear the reproach of the world for the sake of Christ. If he truly walks according to the ways of Christ and the apostles, he will in some way meet with the disapproval of unbelievers. No matter! While striving to love his neighbor as himself, and to love the Lord with all his heart, strength, and mind, the pilgrim will bear any reproach he receives from the world, and will continue on. This adversity and struggle is recognized as a part of the glorious cause of Christ and will lead to the ultimate goal of his earthly pilgrimage—the glories and magnificence of Heaven (Rom. 8:17-18).

Cross-bearing and suffering are patterns the pilgrim and stranger must be willing to accept. Jesus said, “And he that taketh not his cross and followeth after me, is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:38). Historically, faithful believers have suffered severe torture, or even death. Their endurance created a spark that ignited the spread of the true faith. Christ and most of the apostles died a martyr’s death. They were pilgrims and strangers to the ultimate extent.

Today’s ease of life and the many material comforts run counter to the typical circumstances of a pilgrim and stranger. We can easily fall asleep as we become involved in the attractions of this present life. Perhaps our journey has been stalled or nearly stopped. Perhaps we have been diverted from the pathway leading to our destination. If so, we must awaken out of sleep, cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light (Rom. 13:11-12).

We must retain our vision of that glorious destination, and remain on the spiritual pathway, not becoming entrenched as “citizens” of this world who are caught up with the fleeting pleasures of this present life. This temptation is very great today. We have an endless array of opportunities for advancement in all areas of life, and we live in the most free democracy in the history of the world. Material comforts abound. This invites Satan to unleash his attack and draw those who would be pilgrims into the pitfalls of slothfulness and slumber. In light of the steadfastness of the fathers of faith in Old Testament days (Heb. 11), how much more should we in this day of grace stay on course to the end. “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13).

Music

Music is the art of blending sounds in a deliberate and organized way for a specific purpose. It is a gift of God and has been used since ancient biblical times as a part of worship. Chenaniah was skillful in music and provided instruction about singing during the time of David (1 Chronicles 15:22).

All types of music have one basic quality in common. They are a form of communication. We are exhorted to communicate our praise to God in Psalms 98 and 100:1-2. In effect, a partnership is formed between the composer and/or the performer to communicate a message and create a mood and an attitude in the one who listens. Saul's servants sought out David, who was known to be an excellent harpist, to play for Saul in order to help him feel better when he was troubled by the evil spirit (1 Samuel 16:15-23).

Lyrics also communicate a message into our minds. Words communicate more effectively, in fact, when they are presented with a melody and are often placed in our memory without any effort on our part to consciously think about the message or remember it. The ability of music to communicate is powerful and it may change our mood, develop our attitude, or put a message into our minds. The effect can be momentary or long-lasting but in either situation it may have a potent influence.

We develop a taste or preference for different types of music through exposure. We generally learn to like something by hearing it repeatedly. Our preference can develop accidentally or with purposeful direction. Young people today experience a significant amount of pressure to listen to the more popular types of music including the various kinds of rock music.

Rock music originated in the mid 1950's and has been the greatest commercial success in the history of music as judged by the amount of money composers and performers have made presenting it. It is characterized by loud noise, costumes, colorful and flashing lights, and other visual effects such as smoke. Composers and performers have openly acknowledged that their intent is to communicate a message to young people of our society in an effort to change values and affect life styles. Careful examination of the rock music culture reveals that the music promotes drug abuse, sex abuse, obscenity, and ungodliness. Rock music is addictive and capable of producing passion, rebellion to authority, and instability. The objectives of most rock music today are sexual immorality, alcohol and drug abuse, and the occult, including satanic messages. The effect on the listener is the creation of impure thoughts and changed values. The message frequently promotes rejection of the authority of parents, government, and church and consequently creates a rebellious attitude.

How can we as believers select music that will affect our mood and attitude in a positive way that would be pleasing to God? There are several basic types of music including classical, folk, spiritual and popular. The Word of God exhorts us to enjoy the benefits of spiritual music: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" (Eph. 5:19). The Psalmist wrote, "I will sing of mercy and judgment: unto thee, O Lord, will I sing" (Psa. 101:1). It is prophesied that the heavenly hosts will sing a new song in Zion before the Lamb of God some day (Rev. 14:3).

Singing is an integral part of our worship. Effort should be made to learn the basics of music and to participate in this wonderful blessing. We are fortunate that many brethren have recorded beautiful hymns which can be enjoyed at any time. Listening to inspiring thoughts set to soothing melodies brings a special form of edification to the believer in times of joy as well as times of sorrow.

There may be times we wish to listen to music other than hymns. At such times we should consider the beat, the rhythm, the loudness, and the words to make sure that the sound and the message have a blend

that will affect our mood and our attitude in a way that produces peace, joy and harmony with the Word of God. We should consider scriptural warnings such as: “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 John 2:15-16); and “I will behave myself wisely in a perfect way. O when wilt thou come unto me? I will walk within my house with a perfect heart. I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes: I hate the work of them that turn aside; it shall not cleave to me” (Psa. 101:2-3).

Some contemporary “Christian” tapes and records appeal more to the flesh than the Spirit. The music of so-called “Christian rock” borders on ungodly patterns and the lyrics are often found to be shallow and inconsistent with a devout, humble lifestyle. We benefit greatly by concentrating upon hymns with melodies and lyrics long known to provide manna for the spiritual mind.

Music has many different effects. It may relax, soothe, stimulate or motivate. Music definitely has the power to reach the very depths of our heart and, when used properly, can have a good effect. However, music should not consume nor control all of our time. We need time to think and to pray. With all the technology of our day including walkmans, car radios, tape players and stereophonic sound in our homes, we need to strive for the proper balance of how we spend our time. “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is” (Eph. 5:15-17).

The Cares of Life

The cares of life come in many forms including the fears, temptations and common stresses confronted by every human being. Cares can cause emotional pain, anxious concern, distraction and uneasiness. They can pull us in different directions and, if permitted, can inhibit the overall effectiveness of a believer's spiritual life. No one can escape the cares of life. We can either allow them to pull us apart and destroy us or we can, by the grace of God, manage cares in such a way that we can benefit from them and be a more effective light in the world.

The risk of being overcome by the cares of life is great. In the parable of the Sower and the Seed, Jesus taught, "He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful" (Matt. 13:22). The promise of God to provide sufficient grace for every challenge gives us the assurance that we need not succumb. "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

The Apostle Peter exhorts, "Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you" (1 Pet. 5:7). If we allow cares to build up in our minds, we can become overcharged with anxiety. This limits our ability to distinguish reality from imagination. Peter also wrote, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). Notice that Satan is described as a roaring lion, not that he actually is a lion. This means that he makes a pretence of ferocious power. Satan works by the power of suggestion. He causes us to exaggerate the cares of life, allowing them to preoccupy our thoughts and finally tear us apart. Perhaps when we see Satan unmasked someday we will be amazed that such a spirit was able to cause so much havoc upon the earth. Isaiah wrote of Lucifer, "They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee, and consider thee, saying, Is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms?" (Is. 14:16). We must not give in to unfounded fear. "For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7). "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world; and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4).

How we cope with our cares teaches those around us a lot about our faith. People who are carnally minded turn to alcohol, drugs, cheating, threats, abuse, divorce, and many other evil means to fight against the reverses of life. If we are spiritually minded, we will portray a peaceful attitude, even in the face of distressing circumstances (Rom. 8:6). We will equip ourselves with godly armor as instructed by the Apostle Paul: "Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Eph. 6:13). The true faith and steadfastness of believers can help attract lost souls to Christ. It will help them recognize they are lacking something essential which far exceeds any human determination or strength.

Many of the cares of life are brought upon ourselves. Living above our means creates untold stress. The Word teaches that we should be diligent in our earthly labors and give proper attention to our occupations (Prov. 27:23). We are warned that we should establish a livelihood first before spending significant amounts of money for our own comfort. "Prepare thy work without, and make it fit for thyself in the field; and afterwards build thine house" (Prov. 24:27). Consumptive lifestyles and craving for wealth bring much grief. "But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition" (1 Tim. 6:9).

Job held to his integrity in the face of terrible temptation and loss. At one point he cried out, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him” (Job 13:15). He faced his cares in a way that brought glory to God, and he was blessed even more in the end than in the beginning of his life.

God provides many excellent spiritual remedies for coping with cares. Prayer and reading of His word provide our first line of defense. Singing of hymns and listening to soothing music create a calmness of heart which can help prepare us to meet a challenge. Before Elisha prophesied before the king, he called for a minstrel to play music; then the hand of the Lord came upon him (2 Kings 3:15). The singing of hymns just prior to a church service can have a similar effect. We are also exhorted to do this on an individual basis: “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19).

Fellowship with believers of like mind is very effective in helping us to handle our cares. Sharing our burdens can be enlightening, enabling us to understand the spiritual benefits of the trials of life (Rom. 5:3-5). We are to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

It is part of God’s beautiful plan for the believer that the inevitable struggles with the cares of life will lead to spiritual growth and the bearing of more abundant fruit. “Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is. For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see (fear) when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful (worried) in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit” (Jer. 17:7-8).

Moderation

It is important that children of God both understand and apply the biblical concept of moderation. “Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.” (Phil. 4:5). Moderation is defined scripturally as an attitude of gentleness, forbearance and fairness which will be manifested in reasonable behavior. Modern society defines moderation as simply taking a position on any matter which is someplace between the extremes. Obedience to the Word requires complete avoidance of some activities and wholehearted support of others. The carefully considered guidelines given by the church are to help brethren find a reasonable position on matters which are not specifically addressed in the Word. This will help to maintain peace and harmony within the brotherhood which is a vital scriptural principle (Rom. 14:19; 2 Cor. 13:11).

Consistency is a very important part of moderation. In many areas of our daily lives we may do as we should for a period of time, but lacking self-control we may slide back into the habit of doing something too much, too often, or not at all. We should follow the scripturally defined moderate pathway in our work, appearance, diet, rest, exercise, speech and attitude.

We should work hard but not so hard that we ruin our health or neglect our families. The Bible teaches, “But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1 Tim. 5:8). However, in the same letter it is written, “And having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Tim. 6:8). Therefore, each should do his best to see that his family has a reasonable measure of life’s necessities. However, it is not of God to be driven to accumulate a great abundance of material possessions.

Moderation also applies to the outward appearance of believers. Peter writes concerning wives, “Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel” (1 Pet. 3:3). It is generally agreed that we should be neat and clean, and portray an appearance which blends in harmony with our brotherhood’s standards, rather than following fads and fashions of our worldly society. To be well mannered, loving, and genuinely friendly dispenses with the need for all the camouflage and concern about worldly beauty (glamour). “Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised” (Prov. 31:30). Sisters who follow the biblical guidelines radiate a natural beauty and serenity which the world cannot duplicate: “The ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price” (1 Pet. 3:4).

Hair style is an important part of our appearance. For sisters to have their hair long and gathered together in an appropriate manner is considered to be moderate in our brotherhood (1 Cor. 11:15). The same is true regarding brothers wearing their hair short and neatly trimmed (1 Cor. 11:14).

Eating moderately is important. There is a tendency to eat too much and then too little. This is not healthy for the body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). Moderation includes a sincere life-long effort to eat the proper kinds and amount of food.

There is also a danger of pushing oneself too hard and failing to get adequate rest. Stress that is not properly managed can be very damaging. We can accomplish more in the long run if we discipline ourselves and take time for rest. This includes appropriate time for sleep as well as time away from the heavy demands of our routines. Jesus often went to a quiet mountainside or garden to pray. Wholesome relaxation can help restore body and mind for more effective service. On the other hand, it is not becoming for a child of God to become slothful. Following adequate rest we should be thankful to get up each morning; we should pray, and enter heartily into the work of the day (Col. 3:23).

The Apostle Paul wrote, “For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come” (1 Tim. 4:8). The above verse teaches us that bodily exercise profiteth little spiritually compared with godliness, which gives promise of eternal life. This does not deny the fact that exercise (in moderation) can be beneficial. Although it is only a temporary vessel for God’s spirit, regular, consistent exercise such as walking is good for the physical body. Many people have bursts of too much exercise in their work or other activities followed by little if any exercise for a period of time. A consistent pattern should be followed.

Speech is another area in which we should practice moderation. It’s good to be a fluent conversationalist but there should be a proper balance between talking and listening. “Wherefore my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (Jam. 1:19).

Moderation or reasonableness in our attitude prevents division. Maintaining an inflexible attitude on issues which are not clearly taught in the New Testament or by the church can be disastrous. We are taught in Ephesians 5:21: “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.” We need to recognize that our brothers and sisters also have the Holy Spirit and we are to learn together what God has to teach us.

Moderation with consistency is one of the hallmarks of a true believer, who seeks to pattern his life after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Think on These Things”

Thoughts can be allowed to drift freely, they can be self-willed or they may be placed under the control of the Holy Spirit. The inner thoughts of a person ultimately determine his character and pattern of life. “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23:7). The consequences of habitual thought patterns are profound: “For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Rom. 8:6). If allowed free reign, Satan will find great success in planting disturbing and evil thoughts which can lead to disaster.

Negative ideas can arise in our minds without any effort on our part. One of Satan’s most effective weapons is the power of suggestion. He seeks every opportunity to stimulate unwholesome thoughts. Some of the more common types include: worry, fear, doubting, complaining, hurt feelings, self-pity, lust and covetousness. The Word exhorts the believer to make an active effort to nurture good thoughts. One of the most frequently mentioned positive thoughts is thankfulness. “In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thes. 5:18). The Apostle Paul left a beautiful message regarding wholesome thoughts. “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Phil. 4:8).

Maintaining sound spiritual thought patterns requires a cooperative effort between ourselves and the Holy Spirit. One part of the fruit of the Spirit is temperance (Gal. 5:23) which is self-control or self-discipline. The Spirit will provide the motivation but we must be willing to work hard and persistently to maintain sound thinking. If we recognize the importance of fighting this battle, we will continually pray for God’s help to overcome. We should echo this heartfelt prayer of David: “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer” (Psa. 19:14). In another time of trouble David was greatly distressed because of reverses in battle. Yet we find that “David encouraged himself in the Lord his God” (1 Sam. 30:6) and he was able to press on. Perhaps he was able to call to mind a spiritual truth which had been deeply embedded in his heart when he was tending the sheep as a youth or during the many times while he was in hiding when he communed with his God.

It is imperative that we accumulate in our minds a library of spiritual truths which we can call upon to correct our thought patterns when they go astray. This is the purpose of teachings such as: “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom” (Col. 3:16) and “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19). Are we making sufficient effort to fill our hearts and minds with spiritual truths?

Of equal importance is the sharpening of our vigilance so that we can immediately recognize Satan’s efforts to pull our thoughts down to his corrupt and seductive sphere of influence. Christ’s all-important warning is the best defense: “And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch” (Mark 13:37). If we are vigilant we will be able to stop evil thoughts before they take root.

Fear and lust are examples of suggestive weapons used by Satan which can easily overpower us. Many scriptural teachings can be used to counterattack such thoughts. “The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (Heb. 13:6). “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7). If we give in to fear, we will become greatly weakened spiritually and unable to fulfill our duties in the Lord’s service. We may even faint in despair (Luke 21:26). The only effective way to deal with lust is to repel its dangerous attraction at the onset. “Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22). “But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lust thereof” (Rom. 13:14). This means we should not be thinking about how we might fulfill the desires of the

flesh. If we allow lust to reside in our hearts we can lose everything. “Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (Jam. 1:15).

The Pharisees were very particular about cleanliness with regard to eating. Jesus had to reprove them. “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man” (Matt. 15:19-20).

The benefits of nurturing thought patterns on a high spiritual plane are beyond description. It will bring joy to our own hearts, “My meditation of him shall be sweet: I will be glad in the Lord” (Psa. 104:34); and will benefit all who are around us: “Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all” (1 Tim. 4:15).

We are challenged by God’s Word to give our all to fight this battle for control of our thoughts with the faith that the Holy Spirit will prevail and lead us to victory. “Casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).

A Step of Faith

“How do I know when God is calling me? What should I feel when it is the right time for me to repent? I don’t want to do it just because my friends are repenting and everyone thinks I should. It seems like others have miraculous experiences which bring them to repentance—why doesn’t this happen to me? I try not to think much about death or the Lord’s return, but I do want to live for Him someday. I envy believers and the way they live. How can I be sure I won’t miss my chance?”

These are some of the thoughts which torment the hearts and minds of many of our friends who have been taught the truths of God’s Word and know that they must repent and be converted if they are to spend eternity in Heaven. There are many misconceptions which Satan uses to confuse people and keep them from turning to the Lord in repentance. Some individuals feel very little conviction regarding sin. They are motivated more strongly by the desire to live a godly life than by the fear of death and destruction. Others are overwhelmed by the magnitude of their sins and fear that they are too great to be forgiven and overcome. They are more likely to be motivated by fear of death or the Lord’s return. One of Satan’s most effective tools is to just get people to put off repentance until a “convenient time” which likely never comes. This is the greatest risk a sinner can ever take.

What can be done to clear up the misconceptions in many hearts about how and when the step of turning to the Lord in repentance should occur? Perhaps the most important thing to understand is that no individual can expect to have every question answered and every doubt removed before this step is taken, because it must be “a step of faith.” “Without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

The basic doctrine of Christ requires a “foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God” (Heb. 6:1). If we insist on waiting until all of our questions are answered or until we see with our eyes some desired sign or “ideal” conditions and circumstances, we remain trapped by Satan and cannot take that essential step of faith.

The point in life must be reached when we are ready to lay aside our life (our own will) and cast our lot with the Lord Jesus Christ, realizing this means becoming his life-long disciple or follower (Luke 9:23-24). This requires taking that first step upon a pathway we have never trod before. It is like when Peter, Andrew, James and John, who were lowly fishermen, answered Jesus’ simple request: “Follow me” (Matt. 4:18-22).

The best way to reach that point in life is to make a diligent effort to seek the Lord. “Ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13). This includes going to church and thinking seriously about the truths of the Bible. “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Salvation is not a complicated matter. There is no “wrong” time to repent as long as we are among the living and have reached the age of accountability. “Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near” (Is. 55:6).

The Bible tells the beautiful story of a man named Zacchaeus who wanted to see Jesus. He simply put himself in the favorable position of climbing a tree (because he was short) and Jesus immediately noticed this effort and went to be with Zacchaeus in his house (Luke 19:1-5). Soon Zacchaeus poured out his heart in repentance and Jesus said “this day is salvation come to this house” (Luke 19:9).

Although Satan tries to cloud this whole matter with endless questions, doubts and confusion, the Word gives us clear directions as to how we can take this step of faith. With a broken and contrite spirit (Is. 66:2) we must acknowledge to the Lord Jesus that we are lost and that we truly believe that it is only through

His shed blood and death on Calvary that we can receive the gift of everlasting life (John 3:16, 36). “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (John 1:12). This humble step of genuine faith will then allow grace to enter our hearts and give us the courage to make this known to others. “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Rom. 10:10).

We should not delay in telling someone close to us (a family member or acquaintance who is a believer) who will then encourage us to counsel with one of the Lord’s servants. The initial step of faith for most of us is taken with much weakness and requires a lot of support. The Lord has provided His church to be readily available to give that support as empowered by the Holy Spirit. The fruits of repentance such as confession of sin and restitution will follow as faith motivates obedience to God’s Word. The new convert will be directed to many pertinent Scriptures which bring enlightenment and direction for his walk of life. The old sinful ways are renounced and abandoned, and good works and fruit come forth. Love for God’s people unfolds like a beautiful blossom. Soon those questions and doubts which may have plagued the soul for years begin to vanish away. In due time one receives “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding” (Phil. 4:7) and a burden of heart develops for others yet lost in sin.

What is the significance of maintaining faith once an individual has become a child of God? We are exhorted to “hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering (for he is faithful that promised)” (Heb. 10:23). Only when we reach heaven’s door will faith be laid aside and we shall see our Saviour face to face. Then we will praise Him through all eternity for reaching out to us when we took that first trembling step of faith and for sustaining us to the end with His grace.

The Golden Years

The Bible teaches that a long life can be a blessing. Children who honor their father and mother are given this promise: “That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth” (Eph. 6:3). Abraham was the father of faith and was greatly blessed by God. Among God’s many promises to him was the assurance that he would go to his rest in peace at a good old age (Gen. 15:15). Our most important goal is to live in such a way that we may leave this life in peace with God and man and be with the Lord in all eternity. Reaching a “good old age” as a faithful servant of the Lord can be a special blessing, not only to the individual but to many others. It is not ours to choose how long we will live, but we should have the readiness of the Apostle Paul to go or stay (Phil. 1:21) and to always remember the Scripture: “. . . if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5:1).

There are many differing attitudes which individuals adopt as they grow older. Some foolishly try to deny the reality of aging by using artificial means of looking younger or by simply not “acting their age.” For some there are fears of failing health or loneliness. Some become discouraged because they feel they have lost their usefulness to others. On the other hand there are those who adjust to the “golden years” in a constructive manner and welcome the many opportunities unique to this phase of life. Rather than denying the reality of the aging process, we should apply a scriptural outlook which is very positive. “The hoary head (gray hair) is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness” (Prov. 16:31).

For the believer the greatest joy of reaching the older years should be the awareness that the heavenly goal is approaching. In His times of heavy trial, the Lord Jesus was lifted up and strengthened by the thought of the “joy that was set before him” (Heb. 12:2). God has given many wonderful promises to those who reach an old age as his faithful servants. “And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you” (Is. 46:4). David prayed to God for sustenance in his old age: “Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth” (Ps. 71:9), and his prayer was answered. Essential attributes of a wholesome outlook on aging include patience and maintaining trust in God’s faithfulness. “Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise” (Heb. 10:35-36).

Many gratifying opportunities present themselves in the golden years. It is often possible to spend more beneficial time with grandchildren than was possible with one’s own children. Those who are older are to serve as teachers and role models for the younger (Tit. 2:2-4). The years of experience and the wisdom of the elderly should be highly valued and heavily utilized resources.

Retired individuals should take advantage of the numerous opportunities for volunteer work. If we feel we are not needed it may be because we have simply failed to take the initiative to make ourselves available to help others. The Psalmist wrote, “Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing” (Psa. 92:13-14). Those who are blessed with good health and strength into a high age should maintain an active life of service to God as long as possible. When Moses came to the end of his days “his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.”

The Word also explains how we should adjust to the more common experience of eventual decline of human strength and health. “Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:16-18). We should

always make effort to care for the health of our bodies because they are temples of the living God (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 5:29). Nevertheless the time usually comes when we must make appropriate adjustments in our activities and our living arrangements because of advancing age. How reassuring to know that when these times come, the Spirit of God within us remains as a powerful, unwavering source of guidance and help.

In our beloved fellowship there is no lack of loved ones who are ready to lend a helping hand and an encouraging word to those who are no longer able to lead an active life. Excellent homes for the elderly have been established in a number of our communities. These provide a wonderful spiritual and physical haven for souls who need special care. The pathway of life includes both giving and receiving. Although “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:25), if we have served others while able, we can receive help gratefully and joyfully like the Apostle Paul, who described this as “fruit that may abound to (the giver’s) account” (Phil. 4:17).

Above all things, may we be found faithful in the end, declaring like Paul, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

The Narrow Way

The Bible teaches those who desire to follow Christ to enter in at the strait gate, and then to walk on the narrow way, “which leadeth unto life” (Matt. 7:13-14). Conversely, entering in at the wide gate and walking on the broad way will lead to a terrible and eternal destruction.

In this, every soul has two choices—a “narrow way” or a “broad way.” Obviously, the wise way is the narrow way. In order to reach the proper spiritual destination, a soul must enter in at the strait gate by faith in Jesus Christ, through a true and upright repentance, in obedience to His Word.

The broad way is undeniably destructive. Today’s patterns of sin as found on the broad way are sinking lower and lower as Satan unleashes his wrath. He boldly aspires to draw the believer from the narrow to the broad way. Unfortunately, casualness and indifference are leading some to walk a precarious pathway.

In today’s social context, anything considered “narrow” can leave negative connotations. Any inclination toward a fixed opinion, a sense of absolutes, or even a mild conservatism tends to draw a negative response. On the other hand, a focus on individualism, relativity, or liberality usually draws a more favorable response.

Thus, the believer should not be surprised that others will think it is strange to renounce the widely acclaimed way of life for the devotion to the narrow way (1 Pet. 4:3-4). This misperception results when the way of Christ is seen through unconverted eyes. Only when one’s eyes are opened and understanding enlightened by the power of God can the narrow way be seen as a positive way, filled with blessings and benefits.

The narrow way is not a “narrow-minded way.” If it was, it would misrepresent most of the virtues of the Christian faith. Too often it is seen as such and this accounts for the erroneous negativism often associated with what may appear to be confining. This presents a special challenge for the believer to examine his walk to insure that his life’s patterns and attitude reflect Christ’s love and concern for all mankind, and not a narrow minded or self-righteous demeanor which creates a bad light.

It should also be realized that the true narrow way, as intended by the Word, is not the “difficult” way, and the broad way is not the “easier” way. Spiritually, the narrow way leads to godly enrichment and contentment and the fleshly way (the broad way) leads to spiritual deterioration. “For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Rom. 8:6). God’s way is not burdensome. As the Lord stated, “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:30); and we have found this to be true.

As the child of God walks along the narrow path, he finds many spiritual riches. As he grows in grace and in the knowledge of God, the riches multiply. The narrow way frees the spiritually aspiring soul from the bondage of many of life’s burdens and frees the believer to devote maximum energies for the glorious cause of Christ. The narrow way exists, not as a hindrance, but to help focus the believer on the things which have eternal value. It enhances the process of sanctification, and makes him a more effective servant in the household of faith.

The narrow way continually reinforces the believer’s biblically based value system and motive in life. Fellow believers walking together on this path serve to strengthen and encourage one another toward the same goal (Acts 11:23; Heb. 3:13). Likewise, the narrow way provides freedom from many distractions: from a love of the world, from conformity to worldly patterns and from the inevitable spiritual corrosion which results from the wasteful pleasures of this present world. The Word teaches the doctrine of separation

from worldliness. “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you” (2 Cor. 6:17).

Departure from the broad way and embarking upon the narrow way result in many positive attributes. A cheerful and loving disposition will develop and the believer will be easy to be entreated (James 3:17). He will be deferential to others, esteeming others in faith above himself (Phil. 2:3). He will gladly obey the Word and will further recognize the church’s godly authority over him. He will submit to its carefully-considered guidelines pertaining to lifestyle and sanctification. He will wisely resist religious falsehoods and will avoid fraternization with those of questionable religious doctrines.

Walking along the narrow way hand in hand with Christ will motivate the believer to lay “aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and evil speakings” (1 Peter 2:1). Judgmental and harsh attitudes will turn to compassion and pity, if one truly submits to the influence of the Holy Spirit. There is no room for extra weights and hindrances if we wish to progress on this heavenly journey.

The narrow way becomes clearer when there are footprints left by faithful forefathers. By virtue of experience, and through gifted discernment of the spirits, the church (Christ’s body) helps to define the narrow way.

The believer should strive for righteousness and “lay hold on eternal life” (1 Tim. 6:12). In trodding the narrow way, he must “fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim. 6:12); endure temptation (James 1:12); forsake all (Luke 14:33); and live free from sin (Rom. 6:16-18).

May we as believers and as a brotherhood keep our hearts with all diligence (Prov. 4:23). The narrow way will enhance our spiritual blessings, and will provide safety as we strive for our eternal destination.

Young Group Activities

For many years a group of members in each of our churches has enjoyed special blessings of fellowship during their single years. Although often referred to as the “young group,” there is really no age limit to participation in these gatherings. The benefits derived from the spiritual edification and friendships developed during the years in the young group endure for a life time.

The Word teaches that brethren who are single are able to give more of their time and attention to the things of the Lord (1 Cor. 7:32-34). This is a time of special opportunity for spiritual development and offering of one’s time and talents to the service of others.

From time to time there are the newly converted who enter the young group. There is a special responsibility to help nurture these precious lambs and every effort must be made to avoid offending or harming them spiritually (Matt. 18:6). Sometimes there are those who do not mingle well and appear to isolate themselves. Extra effort should be made to reach out and nurture friendships. Special attention should be given to any who become lax in their participation. The early church was filled with new believers and they were characterized by a zeal to worship and fellowship together. “And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God” (Acts 2:46-47). A fellowship can be experienced through Christ which compares to no other on this earth. “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

We are especially blessed in our church because of the opportunity for fellowship to extend beyond our respective congregations throughout the entire brotherhood. Many of us have observed the awe on the faces of various co-workers or school mates when we mention the close brotherly relationships we share with individuals from many congregations throughout the land, many of whom we have never met before. This cherished benefit will be retained only if great effort is made to uphold beliefs and practices which are in accord with the long-established, scripturally-based doctrines and traditions of our church.

Apostolic Christians should be non-conformists with respect to the world, as the Word teaches (Rom. 12:2). It is sometimes very difficult to resist the pressures to conform to the casual behaviors and fleshly entertainments of the world. Tremendous support is derived from being part of a group which abhors the ways of the world, holding in common strong, biblically-based convictions to which all can gladly conform. We as individuals must do everything we can to strengthen this essential support mechanism and not weaken it.

The unifying force in young group gatherings is the spiritual relationship of the believers in Christ. When time is spent in diversionary activities such as athletic games, etc. there is no spiritual benefit to be derived. This is a step toward worldliness and away from godliness. Such activities create an additional temptation to dress with casual, even immodest apparel. They create division within the group because there are many who justifiably feel such activities are not edifying. “If thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably” (Rom. 14:15). We should take note of the origin of athletic contests which occurred hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. History tells us that the Olympics were created for the purpose of bringing honor to Zeus, the king of the Greek gods, and to glorify man.

Is there any justifiable reason why hair styles should be casual and flighty when a young group gathers on a Saturday evening and then be re-arranged in a more orderly manner for arrival at church on Sunday morning? Consistency and spiritual stability are very important attributes in our serving as effective examples to the unconverted as well as to other brethren. We should not have to feel compelled to follow the teachings and practices of the church, but rather we should feel motivated by the Spirit within to walk

in the ways of godliness, and to resist the ways of the world, out of a deep love for Christ and for our brethren. The Apostle Paul wrote: “I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you” (1 Cor. 4:14). “Charity (love) does not behave itself unseemly” (1 Cor. 13:5).

There are many opportunities for spiritually edifying activities for our young groups which promote unity and bring glory to Christ. When several groups spend a weekend together, the emphasis should be on singing, fellowship and exhortation. There is lasting benefit from singing (Eph. 5:19), and it should be approached with enthusiasm and joy. Special blessings have also been derived from asking a minister (through consultation with the elder) to give a brief exhortation to the group. When additional time is available, effort should be made to schedule activities such as singing for residents at local nursing homes. Sometimes circumstances lend themselves to other wholesome activities such as visiting a museum, a historical site or an area of natural beauty, which if undertaken carefully can be beneficial.

Local young groups can involve themselves in important volunteer activities such as work projects and Bible distribution. Participation in authorized Bible studies under the supervision of a minister is also encouraged. Many blessings will be enjoyed by all if we “follow after the things which make for peace” (Rom 14:19). The chances for this will be enhanced if there is consultation with the local church leadership in planning young group activities.

Esteeming Others Over Self

“For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think” (Rom. 12:3). “Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another” (Rom. 12:10). “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves” (Phil. 2:3).

One of the major attributes of our conversion and of our becoming a part of Christ’s body, the church, is to esteem our fellow believers in Christ above ourselves. In this we become conscious of the fact that Jesus loves each one of the brethren so much that He gave His life to pay for their sin and gave them peace and salvation. Thus, we desire to love and esteem all our brethren very highly (1 John 3:14).

The idea of lowliness of mind and esteeming others over ourselves does not imply an unhealthy attitude about one’s own self-worth. If we put on the “mind of Christ” we will not be concerned about enhancing our own reputation (Phil. 2:5-7). Rather, we will find our true worth in the knowledge that Christ uses each of His children to further His sacred work here on earth. As ambassadors of Christ we possess the highest standing of all human beings. We are humbled as we recognize that this is not something we have earned or deserve.

In this humble, Christ-like state of mind, a higher sense of peace and harmony can prevail among the brethren. As believers in Christ, we struggle daily to achieve this biblical precept of esteeming others over ourselves. We fight this battle in a society that finds such attitudes outdated. The prevailing philosophy in our secular-oriented world is to exalt one’s self over others and to do what is right in one’s own eyes. Self-exaltation and individualism are cardinal features of corrupted human nature, finding their origin in the ancient fall of Lucifer (Is. 14:12-15). As a culture we are in danger of being consumed by wholesale esteem for self, rather than esteem for others, or for the absolutes of God’s word. This is clearly a fulfillment of the prophecy that in the last days “men shall be lovers of their own selves” (2 Tim. 3:1-2).

There are many specific scriptural instructions regarding esteem of others over ourselves. The Word teaches that wives are to show respect to their husbands, even to the extent of reverencing them (Eph. 5:33). Likewise husbands are exhorted to extend a special honor to their wives as the “weaker vessel” (1 Pet. 3:7) and they are to love them as Christ loves the church (Eph. 5:25). The highly valued position in Christ of both husbands and wives is evidenced by this summarizing statement: “...as being heirs together of the grace of life” (1 Pet. 3:7). The Apostle Paul also taught that widows are to be given special esteem: “Honor widows that are widows indeed” (1 Tim. 5:3). Believers in Christ are to honor all men, with special recognition toward certain God-ordained authorities. “Honor all men, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king” (1 Pet. 2:17). If we show esteem to both the lowly and great, it will return a positive response to us and will be a light for Christ.

The Bible is clear that we are to give a special esteem to the servant leadership and ministry of the church: “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake: (1 Thes. 5:12-13). Those that rule well will “be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in word and doctrine” (1 Tim. 5:17). It is not intended for us to exalt individuals but to honor a spiritual office and by such honor to obey the instructions and warnings given by those who are over us in the Lord. It is spiritually “profitable” for us to do this (Heb. 13:17).

Satan is cunning in his efforts to bring confusion and division within the body of believers. He tries to cause brethren to judge each other’s motives and lose esteem for one another. Factions can develop and deepening rifts can occur if this corrupting process is not stopped (Gal. 5:15). Sometimes fixed opinions

and personal convictions are allowed to take precedence over scriptural truths and established church standards. Paul warned, “Be not wise in your own conceits (Rom. 12:16). He had to chasten the Corinthian believers for their polarization and misdirected exaltation and censure of their church leaders and ministers. Some were for Paul and against Apollos (1 Cor. 3:4) and vice versa. Paul wrote: “. . . no one of you (should) be puffed up for one against another” (1 Cor. 4:6). They were not to judge the motives of the Lord’s servants (1 Cor. 4:5). Other scriptures give instructions requiring judgment of sin (1 Cor. 5) and doctrinal error (Tit. 3:10-11) when committed by anyone in the church. These actions are not the responsibility of individuals but of authorized brethren in the church.

From the beginning of the church age there have been differences in gifts and talents as well as in administrations (1 Cor. 12:4-6). These should be viewed as adding to the collective strength of the body. Partiality or critical attitudes toward ministers and elders eventually lead to emulation, divisiveness and loss of esteem. The same can happen among brethren. These are not fruits of the Spirit.

Realization of true peace and harmony in the brotherhood can occur only when there is an abundance of godly esteem for one another, emanating from spiritually minded brethren who walk meekly in the blood-stained footsteps of our beloved Saviour.

Spiritual Offerings (1 Pet. 2:5)

The high calling of God in Christ Jesus remains the highest standing any man or woman can be granted in this earthly life. In this, the individual believer is regarded as a “lively stone” (1 Peter 2:5), and is molded together with other lively stones (brethren) into a spiritual house. Their purpose? To comprise a “holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5), to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God. Such lively stones are chosen of God, and are precious.

The obligation to offer spiritual sacrifices is a very important one. The true believer will take seriously the duty to offer up holy, spiritual sacrifices every day. In doing so, he will regard the things that are spiritual and eternal far above the things that are transitory and frivolous. This will be reflected in his lifestyle and overall value system.

It is noteworthy that spiritual offerings are to be made by a holy priesthood. This indicates that we as believers serve Christ with a new divine nature which is very different from the carnal nature of the levitical priesthood.

In order to make spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God, a believer must be endowed with power from above. The manifestation of this power is a surrendered heart which humbly bows down to Christ, is submissive to Christ’s body, the church, and sees himself as least among the brethren. The proper attitude in this spiritual priesthood was best reflected by Christ, who gave His life for us (1 John 3:16). He also denied Himself many of life’s comforts and pleasures.

Today, in order to offer spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God, we as believers should understand the divine nature that undergirds spiritual offerings. We should realize that obedience to God (Rom. 8:7), to each other (Eph. 5:21), to the church (Heb. 13:7, 17), to government (Tit. 3:1), and to our parents (Col. 3:20) is an inherent part of the manifestation of the new man (Eph. 4:24).

This divine nature is aware that we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God. This is described by the Word as our “reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1). Since we no longer serve sin, our new nature is free to serve God’s divine purpose and to glorify His name through spiritual sacrifices. “Likewise, reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 6:11).

In harmony with this is the fact that we as believers are no longer our own (1 Cor. 6:19-20). We make spiritual sacrifices in the context that he who loses his life will find it (Matt. 10:39). We cannot effectively offer sacrifices to God, unless our own life (will) is crucified with Christ and we put on the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5). Spiritual sacrifices include a number of important areas: submission, good works, service, suffering, and worship. Each area offers numerous opportunities for application.

Submitting to the will of God, to the Bible, and to church-defined patterns of holiness are wonderful examples of spiritual offerings. Visible holiness, for instance, pleases God and portrays an attitude of devotion to Him rather than conformity to the world. The attitude of submission reflects a loyalty and love to the Lord. Humility, meekness, and gentleness add to the readiness of offering spiritual sacrifices.

Charitable giving out of a cheerful heart constitutes a practical method of presenting spiritual sacrifices (2 Cor. 9:7). Giving can be done both by offering money, or by offering time and talent in the Lord’s work. In addition to meeting local needs, the church’s World Relief and Work Projects programs offer ample and broad opportunities to do good for our fellow human beings (Gal. 6:10). These activities have grown significantly during the past decade.

Serving one another by using our God-given gifts constitutes another area of spiritual sacrifice. Preaching, teaching, praying, visiting the sick or lonely and giving encouragement are important avenues of spiritual sacrifice (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 9:19; Jam. 1:27). God is well pleased and others also benefit.

Worship is a sacred part of spiritual sacrifice through our divine nature. The collective gratitude of the church pours out an adoration and thanksgiving that billows lovingly to the throne of God. Whether in song, in prayer, in the spoken Word, or in thought, the “spiritual house” when assembled together in worship offers up a mutual sacrifice of praise to God. Thanks be to God that our church service has remained free of flesh-pleasing forms of worship. The focus is upon God, the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, who are honored in true reverence. No individual or group is put in the position of performing or entertaining others. Rather, emphasis on man is minimized, and a collective praise unto God arises from the hearts of all.

The believer’s commitment to live his or her life fully dedicated to Christ is demonstrated by steadfastness of faith (Heb. 10:23), growth in the knowledge of His Word, and fruit-bearing (Col. 1:10). Godliness in all its aspects comes before the Lord as a sweet smelling sacrifice (Phil. 4:18).

By the grace of God, may our spiritual sacrifices arise from the purest motive of love for Christ, and may they be “acceptable unto God” (1 Pet. 2:5), and an honor to His holy and most precious name.

Symbols of the Christian Faith (I)

Although God's work begins in the heart, its results eventually are expressed outwardly in a variety of ways.

Such a reflection gives evidence to others that a life-changing work of salvation has occurred, since we cannot see into each other's hearts. Jesus taught, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

The Old Testament taught God's people to follow many ceremonial activities. The numerous feasts and rituals were symbolic of important spiritual truths as well as mighty acts which God had performed in their midst. The New Testament requires only a few doctrinal and worship symbols, but those which have been given are an important part of the Christian faith; they are of great significance and should be cherished. In addition, an inner life that is pure will be reflected by an outward life that is virtuous and full of Christian graces. As a believer practices separation from sin and nonconformity to the world, he is demonstrating that his heart's desire and overall goal in life is to serve God. Conversely, a worldly lifestyle, an emphasis on fashion, materialism, and a love of pleasure would symbolize a heart that is not fully devoted to God.

A symbol is a visible sign that stands for or represents something not seen. For instance, the dove is considered almost universally as a symbol of peace. Kneeling to pray symbolizes the submission of man before his Almighty God.

The Lord Jesus and His Apostles introduced several doctrinal symbols which represent the most basic precept of the Christian faith, which is salvation by grace through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (John 3:16; Rom 5:8; Eph. 2:8). Baptism, laying on of hands and Holy Communion are sacred rites which carry a deep and precious meaning for all true believers. They are given as directives in the New Testament and are to be faithfully observed by all who experience true conversion.

Baptism is a very striking symbol of the miracle of conversion. An individual is immersed in water, usually before a host of witnesses. The water represents a grave where our former sinful nature (now dead) is symbolically buried into the death of Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). As the new child of God comes up out of the water, he arises unto a new life in Christ Jesus in the "likeness of his resurrection" (Rom. 6:5). Baptism also reflects "the answer of a good conscience toward God" (1 Pet. 3:21). This is accomplished when a heart has been thoroughly cleansed of sin has fulfilled the scriptural obligations to be at peace with God and man. Baptism should be viewed as a very important part of the conversion process. Jesus told Nicodemus, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God (John 3:5). Baptism constitutes the rebirth in water which is to follow and confirm spiritual rebirth. The salvation of the repentant thief on the cross just before his death (Luke 23:43) reveals that an individual can be saved without baptism if lack of time and unusual circumstances prevent it, but this does not minimize the importance of this sacred rite.

The "laying on of hands" is one of the principles of the doctrine of Christ (Heb. 6:1-2). After baptism, the elder (1 Tim. 4:14) lays hands on the convert's head and prays over him. This represents being sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise until the redemption of the purchased possession (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30). The Holy Spirit is given to every cleansed and truly converted soul (Acts 5:32) and serves as a seal, marking the individual as a child of God. This sets the newly redeemed person apart unto God, consecrated to a life of sanctification and service unto Him, and it places him under God's protection. The consecration

prayer and laying on of hands provide a specific step (like baptism) which then symbolizes and acknowledges the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul reminded Timothy of the wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit by this exhortation:

“Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands” (2 Tim. 1:6).

Holy Communion is one of the most solemn and impressive rites which can be experienced by God’s children. The Lord Jesus introduced this sacred rite when He gathered with His disciples in the upper room on the same night He was betrayed (Matt. 26:26-29). Later, the Apostle Paul gave specific instructions to the church regarding this important practice: “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death til he come” (1 Cor. 11:26). The Lord’s Supper is a time when believers of like precious faith gather together to eat of the bread (symbolizing Christ’s body) and to drink of the fruit of the vine (symbolizing Christ’s blood) in a solemn remembrance of the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross. By partaking of this holy supper believers remember and deeply appreciate Christ’s suffering on their behalf, and they are drawn closer to Him and to one another in the “common union” of their faith.

Let us be deeply grateful to God for the precious doctrinal symbols which He has given to those who love and obey Him. The worship symbols and other visible symbolic attributes of the Christian faith will be covered in a subsequent editorial.

Symbols of the Christian Faith (II)

The symbols of the Christian faith convey deep spiritual truths. They are precious aspects of our faith and are enriching to our lives. The doctrinal symbols of baptism, laying on of hands and Holy Communion were discussed in a previous editorial. There are also important worship and fellowship symbols which portray important precepts of God's plan for His church. They help to provide a unique identity to believers and draw them closer to God and to each other when practiced in sincerity and humility.

Prayer is a sacred experience for the believer in which he draws nigh to God and communicates directly with Him. The name of God is to be held in great esteem and He is to be approached in the highest forms of reverence. When the Lord Jesus taught the disciples how to pray He addressed God by saying "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name" (Matt. 6:9). When God spoke to Moses in the burning bush he instructed Moses as follows: "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground" (Ex. 3:5).

Reverence for the Lord must come from the heart. This reverence is symbolized and reinforced by certain aspects of form and posture in prayer. The children of Israel portrayed humility and submission to the Lord when they "bowed their heads and worshipped" (Ex. 4:3 1). Jesus set the example of falling upon one's knees in prayer. After the Lord's Supper He went to the Mount of Olives, "And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed" (Luke 22:41). Peter and Paul both practiced the kneeling posture in prayer (Acts 9:40; 20:31). The customary folding of hands and closing of eyes symbolize entering a closet and shutting the door to earthly distractions as instructed by the Lord (Matt. 6:6), so that we might draw close to our Heavenly Father in reverent consecration. The classic language of the King James Version of the Bible and of our traditional hymns (Thee, Thou, Thy and Thine) when used during prayer symbolize the believer's special respect for God by addressing Him differently from any other being.

Through the Apostle Paul the believers were given additional symbols pertaining to prayer and worship which portray the distinction of male and female in God's order of creation as well as submission. When a woman prays or discusses spiritual matters, she is to cover her head with a prayer veil (1 Cor. 11:5). The veil, or other headcovering, worn during prayer or other spiritual activity, is a godly symbol that is striking in its impact, and is in conformity to the Word of God. The woman is also to wear her hair long to provide a natural covering of feminine glory (1 Cor. 11:15). A glory is a praiseworthy attribute, a symbol of honor or distinction—clearly held in high esteem by God. Believers should love the things God loves. It should be understood that hair does not provide a prayer covering. If it did, the presence of any hair on a man's head would make him automatically disobedient to the scriptural directive to men to pray "uncovered" (1 Cor. 11:4). Gender distinction is further enjoined by the strong statement: "Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame to him?" (1 Cor. 11:14). A man's short hair and well-trimmed demeanor give evidence that he is striving to follow this biblical precept.

The exchange of the holy kiss is a vivid symbol of the love and esteem brethren feel toward one another. "Greet ye one another with an holy kiss" (1 Cor. 16:20) and "greet ye one another with a kiss of charity" (1 Pet. 5:14). This teaching appears five times in the New Testament. As brothers greet brothers and sisters greet sisters, no better symbol than the holy kiss could portray the kindly affection and respect the children of God feel for each other. This kiss should be given from a heart full of Christ's love, and should not drift into a lifeless habit or form.

There are additional practices associated with a believer's personal appearance that symbolize devotion to upholding godliness in our daily walk of life. Because of the world's deteriorating standards with regard to discretion and modesty in dress, the true believer will thus stand out, and bring glory to God

if properly attired. By observing the traditional standards in dress that reflect the appearance of godly men and women, believers symbolize the truth that God, in His perfect order, created a specific role for the man, and a specific role for the woman. Men should look like men, and women like women. “Male and female created he them” (Gen. 5:2).

Biblical teachings concerning outward appearance point to the great value of modesty and restraint (1 Tim. 2:9-10; 1 Pet. 3:3-5). By avoiding sensuous or costly apparel as well as jewelry and cosmetic enhancements, the believer demonstrates a refreshing freedom from the powerful pressures of the world to conform to its fashions and vanities. Rather, there is an emphasis on adornment of the inner man with the graces of humility and godliness which bring honor to our Lord. This is then “the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price” (1 Pet. 3:3-4).

It takes very little effort to follow these various symbolic practices. If we truly appreciate the boundless mercy and love of our Heavenly Father and our Saviour, Christ Jesus, we will gladly do our best to bring the visible symbols of our walk into harmony with the treasures of our heart.

Biblical Knowledge or Biblical Obedience?

The above question is not intended to have an either/or answer. Both attributes in the question (knowledge and obedience) are very important, and both are beneficial in our spiritual walk.

The question is intended to draw attention to the matters of knowledge and obedience as they pertain to Christian living; and it is recommended that a proper and balanced emphasis be given to both aspects of discipleship. True spiritual knowledge and obedience go hand in hand and cannot be separated.

There are essentially two ways of responding to knowledge. They are referred to in James 1:23-25: “For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.”

Biblical knowledge without obedience does not accomplish God’s will. Lip service to Christ may be openly acknowledged, but often the fruitful life is lacking, and a worldly lifestyle is not forsaken. Such half-hearted efforts seem to abound in our time.

Some professing Christians who appear to have a strong grasp of the Scriptures, nonetheless fail to come out from the world and reflect the traits of self-denial and obedience which would distinguish them from unbelievers. The Word describes such as those who are “ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7). They have a form of godliness, but their unregenerated lives indicate that they “deny the power thereof” (2 Tim. 3:5).

True spiritual knowledge is a desirable trait. It is obtained by prayerfully studying the Word, both personally and under the guidance of church counsel (2 Thess. 3:9; 1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Tim. 2:15). This should result in the individual developing a longing to embrace the truths and apply them in every aspect of life. Such knowledge of God should not make one self-centered, but should reflect the biblical ideals of “likemindedness” (Rom. 15:5) and “esteeming others better than themselves” (Phil. 2:3).

An intricate knowledge of God’s Word is beneficial as long as it does not cause a believer to become exalted in his own understanding or deviant from established doctrine. If a soul becomes over-studied, all too often an attitude of self-sufficiency undermines a love for church guidance and for the humble pathways of the church body, of which the individual member is an integral part. This is not the intended outcome of growing in biblical knowledge. With any kind of knowledge (spiritual or secular), there is a risk of becoming vain and puffed up and even falling into the sin of variance (Gal. 5:20). It is love that edifieth (1 Cor. 8:1-2) and strengthens the church (Eph. 4:16).

Biblical knowledge is an important step in the sequence which leads from faith to fruitfulness: “...add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful...” (2 Pet. 1:5-8).

Sound knowledge is distinguished by several scriptural examples. The “fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7); “the prudent are crowned with knowledge” (Prov. 14:18); “the tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright” (Prov. 15:2). Thus, it is clear that wisdom, prudence and godly fear are attributes that are closely associated with biblical knowledge.

Biblical obedience is not an option for the believer. A devout, humble Christian will be motivated by love for Christ to be obedient to His Word. Jesus exhorted, “If ye love me, keep my commandments”

(John 14:15). Samuel told Saul that “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam. 15:22). God has promised to give the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him (Acts 5:32).

We live in a society which places a high value on individualism. In the world any type of submission must be preceded by prolonged introspection to determine if reasons for obedience are credible, and acceptable. Such attitudes, which stem from patterns of reason and rationalism, want to spill into the beloved church. There is a tendency to hesitate to obey a church teaching unless one is in full agreement with it. Submission involves obeying without waiting for agreement. However, understanding and conviction will follow if we obey with a willing, humble attitude. Jesus taught that if we do the will of God, we will come to know that it is the truth (John 7:17).

We should remember that increased spiritual knowledge is intended to lead to a deeper obedience to Christ. Knowledge is not an end in itself. In fact wisdom is even more important because this is the ability to apply knowledge properly. James writes: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (Jam. 1:5).

As believers we should sincerely desire and pray to be “filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Col. 1:9) so that we may become “obedient in all things” (2 Cor. 2:9) and bring glory to our beloved Saviour.

Biblical Basis of Tradition

At times the Apostolic Christian Church is criticized both from those within the church and by those from outside for placing too much emphasis on traditions. There are those who say that our traditions are simply an outward show designed to put on a good appearance, regardless of what is really in the heart; that they are legalistic; that they are mere externals and have no value on the path toward salvation. Such attitudes are clearly an indication of a serious misunderstanding of the role of traditions as outlined in the Bible.

From the Word of God it is quite evident that we are not saved by traditions. Many passages of Scriptures clearly state that “by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Eph.2:8), and “a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16). The Bible provides instruction concerning both the positive and the negative potential that traditions may have in our lives. We can learn from the Word of God that traditions can either be very damaging or very beneficial spiritually.

Christ spoke a warning to the Pharisees not to make “the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition” (Matt. 15:6). He also warned of the dangers of “teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt. 15:9) and He clearly pointed out the unacceptable position of those who would “reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition” (Mark 7:9).

The Apostle Paul wrote an urgent exhortation to the believers at Thessalonica regarding the attitudes about tradition. “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle” (2 Thes. 2:15). The Word also instructs the believers to “prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thes. 5:21) “be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:2).

One could form the opinion that there is a serious contradiction between the teachings of Jesus Christ and those of the Apostle Paul. To resolve this seeming contradiction, it is vitally important that a child of God look carefully at several important issues. It must be understood that the contexts in which Christ and Paul spoke were vastly different. Also, it is important to understand both the potential value and the limitations of traditions in the life of a Christian.

The “traditions of the elders” and the “commandments of men” that Christ spoke of were rules imposed on the children of Israel that attempted to justify behavior that was ungodly, to nullify the commandments of God or to make a physical issue (hand washing) a spiritual issue. They were used by the scribes and Pharisees as a means of keeping the people in subjection, as a way of earning God’s approval or as a substitute for the Word of God. These practices were utterly condemned by Christ because they were so distorted by the Pharisees and scribes that they prevented men from doing what was right—“Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition” (Mark 7:9). They were more interested in appearance than substance. “This people honoreth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (Mark 7:6).

Sometimes individuals use Paul’s teaching that we “stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1) as justification for setting aside the traditions of the church and as a means of freeing themselves from what they describe as old fashioned, unnecessary “man-made” rules. Paul, however, admonished that we “use not liberty for

an occasion to the flesh” (Gal. 5:13), and Peter warned against “using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness” (1 Pet. 2:16).

The liberties we have in Jesus Christ and the freedom from bondage promised to Christians are liberties and freedoms from the grip that Satan has on the unconverted and should not be used to justify behavior that is offensive to our Lord or to our brethren (Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 8:12).

Why do we need traditions or defined patterns of holiness? Why are they so important to our brotherhood? The Bible does not expressly deal with every specific situation that may confront the children of God. As a result, over the years practices have developed based on scriptural principles that enable God’s people to deal more successfully with many of these situations.

The instability that we see in the world today is partially a result of many years of gradually removing ancient “landmarks” that helped people make sound decisions. The ancient landmarks have been replaced with a do “what is right in your own eyes” (Judges 17:6) philosophy which has caused many to suffer spiritual shipwreck.

Nearly all institutions have their own set of traditions, including families, government, educational systems and many others. It is well known that these traditions provide a sense of identity and cohesiveness; they serve as a vehicle for continuity from one generation to another.

The traditions spoken of (2 Thes. 2:15) and taught (Acts 16:21) by Paul were practices that supported the doctrine of Christ, that gave direction to God’s people where the Scripture was silent, that helped separate God’s people from the world and helped promote unity among the brethren.

The traditions of the Apostolic Christian Church have proven over time to be spiritually beneficial to those who willingly embrace them. They have provided an element of protection from the world and supported the precious doctrine of Christ.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is one of the greatest virtues of the Christian faith. To be forgiven of God, and to have the grace to forgive others, represents a glow of Christ's light that draws special attention to His glorious cause. To forgive someone is a noble act of charity and it brings blessings to both the forgiving person and the one who is forgiven.

The definition of forgiveness is an inspiration to ponder: "to give up resentment against or the desire to punish: stop being angry with; to overlook; to cancel or remit a debt." The characteristic of resentment and the unwillingness to forgive are evidence of the weakness of the flesh. Resentment brings more resentment, and one's entire being can seethe in the mood of unforgiveness. Such a trait, which may include hatred, is in total opposition to the spirit of Christ. It is a pattern from which a believer in Christ has been converted. The gentle, forgiving ways of Christ have no place for an unforgiving spirit.

To "overlook" the failings and misdeeds of others is to forgive. This is reflective of the mind of Christ. Because none of us is perfect, and we often fail, the aspect of forgiveness which includes "overlooking" is most essential in the household of faith. We need to do it daily. Yet, we must not overlook the faults in others to the extent that we would fail to kindly exhort someone who demonstrates an ongoing fault that is spiritually harmful or corrosive.

It has been said that it is easier to ask forgiveness than it is to forgive. This is true when God's spirit is lacking in one's heart. When one's heart is filled with God's spirit, the ability to forgive is greatly enhanced. It is a commandment of God to forgive others.

Our inclination to forgive others should stem from our appreciation of how willing God was (and is) to forgive us. At the time of repentance, when many of us came to the Lord with a heavy load of sin and hearts stained and scarred with ungodliness, God was graciously willing to take us lovingly into His bosom, and to forgive our sins. As prodigals we had left our father's house, had rebelled, and had eaten of sin's husks. In our hardness of heart, we did not deserve forgiveness. But as the prodigal son's father forgave his repentant son, so God forgave us. Forgiveness of God is not predicated on whether we deserve it. It only requires our asking for it, in humility and sorrow, through faith in the shed blood of Christ. The most gross and devious sins can be willingly forgiven by God, who is "ready to forgive and plenteous in mercy unto all them who call upon him" (Ps. 86:5).

The seeking of forgiveness has a power that can affect others. Many of us can attest, when we repented for our sins and made restitution, how willing people were to forgive us. Even unbelievers often melted and became very willing to forgive when we apologized and "made things right." Such a response adds credence to the saying, "to err is human, to forgive is divine."

The greatest example of forgiveness was portrayed by Christ on the cross. As he existed in a crucified state, in severe pain, in agony, and in great disappointment, He prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). While His despondent heart uttered to His father, "Why hast thou forsaken me" (Matt. 27:46), His divine quality allowed Him to show forgiveness. As the soldiers mocked Him, and even offered vinegar to quench His thirst, He had the grace, and the power of God's spirit, to forgive them. Why? Because of His unfailing love for mankind. He recognized they were ignorant of the magnitude of their sin. With the deepest sense of forgiveness, He "overlooked" their putting Him to death.

In teaching us to pray, the Lord emphasized forgiveness: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). It is obvious that as we go through life we are going to encounter persons who will

wrong us, or even offend us. Our calling of God is to be willing to forgive. The greatest and possibly the most dramatic emphasis on forgiveness is found in the instructions found in Matthew 18:22 where Jesus said not only to forgive a person seven times, but seventy times seven, or 490 times. It is crystal clear in the Word that we are to always be willing to forgive a person, no matter how many times we've been wronged, or how serious the infraction may be.

There is a severe penalty for unwillingness to forgive. "But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:15). On a positive note, the Word teaches, "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you" (Matt. 6:14).

Forgiveness is a wonderfully noble Christian grace. Ideally a believer should automatically forgive, even before a person comes and asks for forgiveness. God can give power to allow one to forgive, and to love the offender. Closely related to forgiveness is the teaching of "turning the other cheek" to an enemy, or to someone who has wronged us. In a sense, this is the automatic forgiveness that can only come from the Holy Spirit.

The compassion of Christ is our greatest example of forgiveness. It is His example that the true, spirit-filled believer must follow: "And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross" (Col. 2:13-14).

Maintaining Peace in a Chaotic Society

Most people in our society today appear to be captives of overloaded schedules, constantly hurrying and striving to catch up. The biblical ideal of living a quiet and peaceable life is often neglected when such a frenzied pace of life is maintained.

The modern conveniences and higher standard of living we enjoy have resulted in more leisure time. Why then are we as believers so often pressed for time and so easily caught up in the same relentless pace as the society around us? Is it because our non-working hours are often filled with activities which offer little respite from the pressures of life?

The Word teaches the believer in Christ to pray for those in authority so he may “lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (I Tim. 2:2). Another reassuring promise is given in the Old Testament: “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee” (Isa. 26:3).

How can the believer maintain a quiet and peaceable life and keep his heart fixed on spiritual things? The Apostle Paul exhorted: “Study to be quiet, and to do your own business and to work with your own hands” (I Thes. 4:11).

In planning our schedules we should evaluate the importance of each activity we consider undertaking in terms of spiritual enrichment and with regard to the amount of time it will consume. Is it wholesome for our family? Does it foster keeping our minds stayed on God, or does it draw us away toward worldliness? Is it competitive? Will the activity, and its frequency result in a greater feeling of peace, or will it undermine peace by virtue of its nature or simply by robbing too much time from an already crowded and demanding schedule? Will it strengthen or weaken our faith?

If we as God’s children are carelessly wasting our time in unnecessary pursuits, then we will find ourselves often frustrated and weary, drifting far from the state of mind needed to be effective servants for the Lord. Such a life is unrewarding and results in spiritual loss.

Maintaining a sense of peace in a chaotic society requires several disciplines on the part of the believer. The foremost discipline is that of prayer. We should ask the Lord daily to help us in “redeeming the time” (Eph. 5:16), which means making the best use of our limited time. By appealing to God often, and regularly, by putting Him first in our lives, our fears and anxieties will subside, and peace will envelope our minds. Neglect of prayer brings automatic forfeiture of peace of mind.

The second discipline is reliance on strength from God to see us through. If some obligations become excessive due to factors beyond our control, only a total child-like trust in God will keep us from becoming discouraged, short-tempered or even spiritually exhausted. The Psalmist wrote: “I will go in the strength of the Lord God” (Psa. 71:16).

Third, the believer should always seek to do God’s will, not his own, in scheduling his time. If this principle is followed, then very likely many unnecessary and stress-producing activities will be eliminated. Many activities bring “no fruit to perfection” (Luke 8:14), but only add to the frustrations resulting from being over committed. Also, in planning our schedules, we should establish reasonable goals for each day. Unrealistic expectations bring disappointment and undermine our peace of mind.

Isaiah had a good understanding of peace when he wrote: “And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever. And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places” (Isa. 32:17-18). Jeremiah wrote “It

is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord” (Lam.3:26). Another important factor in maintaining peace is to practice patience in all daily activities. We are to “run with patience the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1), which indicates putting forth fervent effort while patiently waiting upon the Lord to bless our efforts.

Very likely many of us need to curtail or reduce the level of demands we have allowed to press upon our lives. Perhaps we are guilty of planning too much for many of our days, and then suffering from the fatigue and frustration that follow. Sometimes we are even too hurried to be kind to our loved ones or to notice the beauty of God’s Creation. Perhaps we all need to exercise more wisdom and discernment in deciding what we will do with our time and in learning to say “no” more often. Could it be that we some times may even take pride in our over-committed schedules? Are we boasting or complaining to others about how busy we are? These attitudes will only bring us grief.

As we seek to properly manage our time, let us all remember our high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:14), and our sole purpose in being here on earth, which is to serve our God and prepare for eternity. Let us not be swept into the often pointless flow of activity that leaves the inner man empty, and which does nothing to reflect the light of Christ in this dark world. Rather, let us be about our Father’s business—and be laborers in prayer, in reading the Word, and in extending the virtues of Christ to all those around us. Let us eliminate unfruitful activity and embrace this everlasting scriptural truth: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psa. 46:10).

“Tried by Fire”

As believers we all experience times of severe trial and tribulation. We try to cope with these struggles, but sometimes we fail. We are taught in the Word that our faith which is more precious than gold, must be “tried with fire” (1 Pet. 1:7). We have been given a perfect example in our suffering Saviour to help us understand the purpose of trials and to reap their full benefit.

On the surface, it appears as if some believers have few afflictions and others carry a disproportionately heavy load. No believer is spared, and many times one’s trials are not evident to others. When we “take up the cross” of the Lord Jesus Christ we make a life-long commitment to deny ourselves and share in His sufferings. These sufferings may include loss of loved ones, health or possessions; failure and disappointment; harm or hurt inflicted by others; as well as many other difficulties.

Sometimes we are able to bear our burdens well by trusting in the Lord and promptly casting our care upon Him (1 Pet. 5:7). In other instances we may experience trials which press so heavily upon us that we are overwhelmed. Our entire outlook on life can be altered, causing difficulty in carrying out our daily responsibilities. We struggle to overcome, but sometimes it is like crawling up a steep and slippery slope; we gain a little ground and then fall back again. When loved ones offer their comfort and prayers this is of great help. Yet Satan tries to make us feel hopelessly bound or trapped by our trials. We must remember that no individual, event or evil spirit can keep us bound any more than the jailers could restrain Paul and Silas. Even though they beat them and fastened them in stocks, Paul and Silas prayed, sang praises to God and saw His miraculous intervention as an earthquake loosed their bands (Acts 16:22-26).

But what about when after much prayer and pleading the trial does not pass? We know from God’s Word that nothing is impossible with Him (Luke 1:37). We must claim this scriptural truth, but we must also believe that the most important goal is that His will is done. It is essential that we hold to a thread of hope, even in our darkest hours. Job was able to cry out in his wretched condition, “When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). Isaiah was moved by the Spirit to record this beautiful promise of God’s faithfulness: “Fear thou not, for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee: yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness” (Is. 41:10).

There may be periods when it seems as though we just cannot find help. Perhaps these are the very times when we should give help. The turning point from our despair may come when, with thankful hearts, we reach out with determined effort to lend our feeble hand to lift another’s burden. The intensity of our trial will become less if our focus is on others, not ourselves.

Another great source of courage is the assurance that God in His own good time will bring forth the fruit of suffering. Learning to wait patiently on the Lord is one of the great benefits of trials. “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Is. 40:31).

There is divine purpose in every trial of our faith. Jesus said that every fruitful branch would be purged (pruned) so that it might bring forth more fruit (John 15:2). The Lord Jesus suffered incredible agony in Gethsemane as He struggled with the bitter cup of sin and shame which was held before Him. “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him (Heb. 5:8-9). The Lord’s suffering brought Him to the point of total surrender, where He was ready to submit to any outcome. He was able to endure the shame and torture of the Cross because of His faith in the “joy that was set before Him” (Heb. 12:2). The Apostle Paul wrote that we as believers can claim the same glorious hope. We are “joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together” (Rom. 8:17).

When we fully surrender to God we are in a position to be released from the grip of despair. Joy can be restored whether or not the trial itself has passed. This brings into focus the beautiful truth that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28), even though it may be beyond our comprehension at this point to grasp the full meaning of what has happened.

If we reap the intended benefit from a fiery trial we will find ourselves less dependent upon the things of this life for our joy and peace. Perhaps we will have made vows to the Lord in our dark hours. Like the Psalmist we will declare, “I will go into thy house with burnt offerings: I will pay thee my vows, which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken, when I was in trouble” (Ps. 66:13-14).

Additionally, we will be far better equipped to help others who are suffering by reaching out with true Christ-like compassion. We will be more appreciative of our Saviour’s sufferings and His resultant ability and desire to help us (Heb. 2:18). Above all we will share in the special blessing which is reserved for those who endure the fire and come forth as the gold: “for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to them that love him” (Jam. 1:12).

“Husbands Love Your Wives”

When asked about marriage the Lord Jesus taught, “Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female... For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh . . . What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matt. 19:4-6).

“Why are increasing numbers of marriages in serious trouble today?” Perhaps the New Testament prophecy: “In the last days...men shall be lovers of their own selves” (2 Tim. 3:1-2) provides some explanation. In these latter days people expect full satisfaction from a relationship or they set it aside. Self-centered desires for immediate personal gratification are the norm in our society.

The Lord Jesus Christ gave us the perfect example of sacrificial love and servant leadership. If husbands faithfully obey the scriptural directive, “love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it,” their marriages will very likely thrive under God’s rich blessings.

Christ-like love as defined in 1 Cor. 13 “seeketh not her own...thinketh no evil...endureth all things” (1 Cor. 13:5, 7). It is essential that wives know that they are loved, respected and valued by their husbands far above family and friends, jobs, hobbies or any other earthly pursuit. This is evident when a husband respects his wife’s opinion, when she is his closest confidant and when her concerns play a key role in all significant decisions. Husbands are to “honor” their wives. This must be proven by evident desire to spend ample time together sharing both the joys and burdens of life.

It is the husband’s responsibility, when his wife is hurt or offended, to make every effort to understand the cause. When in error he should readily confess and sincerely apologize. In all situations he should be sensitive to her concerns. Many times men feel they cannot meet the needs of their wives and simply do not understand how they think or why they react as they do. Husbands should patiently, kindly and humbly ask their wives to explain what it is that either helps or hinders in meeting their needs. Too often difficulties are handled by a husband judging, lecturing, criticizing or belittling his wife. The Word teaches, “let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer...(Col 4:6) and “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying” (Eph. 4:29). Can we imagine our Saviour giving us a harsh lecture when we are hurt and struggling? The Bible says, “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young” (Isa. 4:11).

The husband is to be the spiritual head of the home (Eph. 5:23). If this is exerted in a forceful manner it is far removed from the gentle servant leadership portrayed by our Saviour. Jesus did not need to demand submission from His followers to feel secure in His authority. His authority was from God and His actions earned the respect of those who were godly. Husbands should follow Christ’s example as they lead. Usually it is an insecure person who leads by force.

When wives seek to control and dominate their husbands this is another perversion of God’s perfect plan. Wives are to “revere their husbands” (Eph. 5:33) and husbands are to “praise” their wives (Prov. 31:28). These attitudes should be nurtured by both spouses and they should be frequently expressed by words of commendation as well as special acts of appreciation.

When a husband’s attention toward his wife is motivated only by selfish desires he is destined to be disappointed. The true Christ-like motivation is based on concern for the welfare of the other. When this is sincerely practiced, the bond of love is fortified by expression of the blessed marital union as designed by the Creator.

Poor communication skills are often the source of discord in marriage. It is essential for each spouse to be free to express feelings and desires but each must do so in a way that is sensitive to the other's feelings. It is a serious mistake to avoid resolving conflicts and to just allow them to fester. One of the most important aspects of communication is to listen very carefully. This should involve not only hearing the words spoken but being sensitive to the feelings behind those words. Wives often feel a need to explain at some length a problem or concern on their heart and husbands too often fail to take the time and exhibit the patience to hear them out with sincere interest.

Sometimes husbands tend to run their households by the same methods applied in the workplace. They give orders and expect quick and compliant responses. They feel it is a waste of time to explain things in detail or deal with what they feel are petty conflicts. The home is to be a godly haven where Christ is the Head and love and mutual respect prevail. One of the hymns sung at many of our weddings gives a wonderful description of the Christian Home. "There is beauty all around, When there's love at home. There is joy in every sound, When there's love at home. Love at home. Time doth softly, sweetly glide, When there's love at home" (Hymns of Zion, # 64). Is this a true representation of the atmosphere of our homes, or are they filled with pressures, tensions and superficial relationships? It is God's will that we give the highest priority to making our homes the closest thing to Heaven we can experience here on this earth. The ideal standards of the Scriptures should be our goal: "I will walk within my house with a perfect heart" (Psa. 101:2); "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Psa. 133:1).

At no time did Christ say or do anything to hurt the church. Husbands should do no less for their wives.

Wives Show Reverence to Your Husbands

The duties of a wife, as described in the Word of God, are not readily accepted in America today. If taken out of context, it could be made to appear that the wife is to blindly, mindlessly do as her husband commands. The liberal element of society rejects the concept of the wife being submissive to her husband and holds to the position that women should be “liberated” from their husbands, that life has more to offer than being “just” a housewife and that women should be free to pursue a “real” career.

With nearly half of America’s marriages ending in divorce and many children growing up in an unstable environment, it is obvious that something is dreadfully wrong. God’s plan for husbands and wives was designed to bring love, peace, contentment and stability to the lives of His people.

The husband is to be “...the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church,” (Eph. 5:23) and to love his wife “even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). Christ never asks anything unreasonable of the church, and He has only the welfare of His beloved at heart.

The Bible clearly says: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord” (Eph. 5:22) and “see that she reverence her husband” (Eph. 5:33). This order of authority and responsibility is in no way intended to make the wife a second class citizen. The description of a virtuous woman in Proverbs 31 depicts a woman who is wise, kind, industrious and supportive of her husband. She is to be held in very high esteem.

A godly wife has a special opportunity to make a positive impact on the lives of her husband, children, and those with whom she comes in contact.

The first step in fulfilling this opportunity is to be certain that her attitude toward God and the church are in accordance with the Word of God. Wives who are not at peace with God can hardly be at peace with their husbands. Wives who are not content with their position in the church can hardly be content with their role in marriage. Those who can serve God with “gladness and singleness of heart” (Acts 2:46) will be loving, forgiving, supportive of their husbands and will “be in behavior as becometh holiness” (Tit. 2:30).

Just as a child of God must daily make a commitment to do God’s will and to ask for His help, so must the wife daily make a commitment to her marriage and seek God’s help in fulfilling her role as a submissive wife.

What are some of the ways in which a wife can enhance or diminish her submission and reverence toward her husband? Support and encouragement to the husband as he fulfills his role as spiritual leader of the home are vital. Encouragement to lead the family in devotions—in reading the Word of God, in praying, in singing and in talking about God’s Word and His plan for mankind—will make the husband’s responsibility in this area easier and more effective. Running ahead of him and trying to demonstrate a higher level of spirituality or exalting her opinions above his, can cause a husband to withdraw from his God-given role.

She will support and encourage him as he attempts to set a godly atmosphere in the home by allowing the emphasis to be on the spiritual rather than on the material side of life. She will attempt to help him make their home a place of refuge from the world—a place of peace and reasonable quietness and separation from the world. Certainly with children in the home there will be activity, but in the godly home, an atmosphere of control and relative calmness should prevail.

Her chief concern will not be “that outward adorning...” but rather “...the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price” (I Pet. 3:3-4).

A special blessing awaits the wife who diligently supports her husband as they “train up a child in the way he should go” (Prov. 22:6). Mothers usually spend far more time with the children than fathers do. As such, a mother’s role in teaching her children proper conduct and respect will be significant. Wives and husbands together should use scriptural directives in teaching and rearing their children.

Our society places a tremendous amount of emphasis on materialism. Too often, in an attempt to keep up with others, believing families incur far too much debt, placing a severe strain on the relationship between husband and wife. We are taught that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (I Tim. 6:6). If a wife can be content with a modest home, automobile, clothing and other possessions, and encourage her husband to do the same, she will help relieve her husband from the pressures of working too many hours and thereby spending too little time with the family.

In those situations where the husband is not being the proper leader of the home, the wife has a special opportunity to be an example to her husband: “...if any obey not the Word, they also may without the Word be won by the conversation (behavior) of the wives; while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear” (I Pet. 3:1-2). Wives who show appreciation, humility, patience, trust and the fruits of the Spirit will be a blessing to their husbands and will receive a blessing from God.

In a world filled with fear, anger, instability and sin, the children of God have an opportunity and a duty to provide an example to those whose lives they touch. Gentle and submissive wives who reverence their husbands can receive a blessing that the world can never understand nor hope to receive until they base their lives on the doctrines Christ taught.

Effective Communications

In the household of faith, as well as in the society at large it is very important for people to communicate, share and relate to one another in an effective way. This results in greater understanding and better relationships with one another.

Discord, misunderstanding, cynicism and sometimes estrangement result when effective communication is either absent or breaks down. Even on a less serious scale, ineffective communication can result in hurt feelings, withdrawal and a general lack of love and esteem.

To communicate is to share, to impart, to make known and to give and receive information. The word communicate is a derivative of the word common, which is defined as “belonging equally and sharing equally with everyone.” Isaiah wrote, “Come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord” (Is. 1:18).

In order to communicate in a positive way with fellow believers, our intent should be to edify and uplift each soul with whom we have conversation or correspondence. There are several underlying principles that will enhance the prospect of effective communication:

1. It should be done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
2. It should be done with great respect and love.
3. It should be done with the purpose of showing concern for others and with a willing heart.
4. It should be done with the goal of drawing closer in love and unity with our loved ones in Christ, and for building up the household of faith.

The most common form of communication is verbal expression. We do this by visiting, fellowship and while conducting our daily responsibilities. The Bible gives some sound direction regarding communication. First, a believer is to be “swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath” (Jam. 1:19). Ineffective communication often results when the opposite of this scriptural advice occurs. Misunderstandings develop and emotions may get out of control, but the Word says: “the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (Jam. 1:20). It is imperative that our conversations be thoughtful and that we listen well and with patience.

Another principle of communication is that we keep our “tongue from evil and our lips that they speak no guile” (1 Pet. 3:10). This takes the grace of God because one of Satan’s greatest objectives is to cause us to speak with a loose tongue. Our tongue is a fire that must be controlled (Jam. 3:6). The Apostle Paul gave excellent advice: “Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man” (Col. 4:6). In addition, our expressions should be “words of truth and soberness” (Acts 26:25).

Other principles of communication center around the Scriptures that teach us to “let thy words be few” (Ecc. 5:2), to refrain from uttering “words to no profit” (2 Tim. 2:14) and to avoid “malicious words” (3 John 10). The Apostle Paul summed it up so beautifully, “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers” (Eph. 4:29).

Listening is an essential element of communication. As a person listens to the problems and woes of another and is both sensitive and sympathetic, he is performing a very important service. Effective listening is necessary before we can offer specific help to one in need. Anyone who is in a position to offer counsel can give more useful advice by first being a good listener.

Communication can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Sending a card or a note of encouragement is a very effective mode of communication. A smile or a pat on the back sends a wonderful message to a loved one. A donation or any other charitable act also constitutes a form of communication. Simply being available when someone needs a friend sends them a powerful, loving message.

One of the most important means of exerting effective communication is to be friendly with everyone. This applies not only to those with whom we feel comfortable, but with others with whom we are less familiar. Experience teaches us that by making the effort to communicate and by exercising friendliness toward those who are not well known to us or whom we don't understand very well, will result in our drawing closer to each other.

If we avoid people and purposely make effort not to communicate, we are fostering division and are conducting ourselves in an unscriptural way. As believers, our task is to love even our enemies; it follows that in the household of faith, especially, we are to love everyone. To love everyone is to exert our utmost effort in communicating. When we assemble in our churches we should make sincere effort to greet as many brethren and friends as possible and to exchange kindnesses in the true spirit of Christ.

Effective communication, used with sincerity and sensitivity—and always with Christ-like concern and love for others—is a stimulus for greater love and unity and is a way to increase understanding and esteem in the household of faith. We should always remember that the enemy of our soul tries to build walls and create resentments among believers, but we should pray fervently for the grace to communicate in ways that will bring glory to God and will edify one another. “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 John 1:7)

The Beauty of God's Creation

The beauty of God's creation stands as a monument to the unfathomable and omnipotent power of the Almighty. To consider the complexity and perfection of heaven and earth, and all that is good therein, offers a powerful justification for belief in God. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are God's ways above our ways (Is. 55:9). The fact that God created the entire earth, and has authored the beauty of creation in its smallest details, stands as a firm testimony that He has no equal.

One can find many vantage points "to behold the beauty of the Lord" (Psa. 27:4). For instance, as one flies in an airliner across the ocean he can behold the beauty of the horizons, as they meet the blue hues of the mighty waters. Often in flight, as the airplane soars to great heights, magnificent cloud formations offer a majestic view. The clear blue sky above, and the whitened mass of clouds below give credence to a master hand that can create untold beauty. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork" (Psa. 19:1).

The beauty of creation, and God's exclusive hand in it exceed man's ability to comprehend it all. Evidences of divine creation shine forth in the form of the oceans, the snow-capped glory of the Alps, the Himalayas, and the Rockies, and in the broad expanse of the world's deserts and plains. All are unique, and often stunning in their special comeliness.

Added to the various geographical forms are the abundant fruits which come forth for the benefit of all mankind. In the Midwest, particularly, the wide expanse of crops - wheat, corn, soybeans and oats as well as verdant pastures and forests - provides a tapestry of beauty that can only originate from the masterful hand of God. "Many, oh Lord my God, are thy wonderful works which thou has done" (Psa. 40:5).

The beauty and bounty of each year's crops truly come from God's benevolence: "Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it: thou greatly enriches it with the river of God, which is full of water: thou preparest them corn, when thou has so provided for it. Thou waterest the ridges thereof abundantly: thou settlest the furrows thereof: thou makest it soft with showers: thou blessest the springing thereof" (Psa. 65:10).

It is customary in America to take vacations. During these times of relaxation a popular activity is to go "sightseeing." While museums and historical places are often of great interest, probably one of the most uplifting forms of sight-seeing is to observe geographical beauty such as the mountains, the canyons, the streams, the seashores and the national parks. These forms of natural beauty have a powerful and inspiring effect on the observer.

The natural beauty of our beloved America is accurately portrayed in the popular, patriotic song, "America the Beautiful." "Oh beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain; for purple mountain's majesty, across the fruited plain." The author effectively describes the flowing beauty that hovers across the American landscape. We should always remember it is God that has created such miraculous beauty.

The Lord is worthy of all praise and honor for His creation. "He hath made everything beautiful in His time" (Ecc. 3:11). God's creation brings glory to His name: "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained..." (Psa. 8:3). The psalmist was in awe of God's creative omnipotence, and was deeply impressed that despite the glory and power of God, He was yet mindful to create fallible man, and to mercifully love each soul He created.

When considering all of God's handiwork, the most beautiful aspect of His creation is that which is not seen by the eye of man. In this, He created the eternal plan of salvation, wherein the Lord Jesus, His only begotten son was sent to earth to die and shed His blood for our sins. God has exhorted us to set our

affection not on the things which are seen, but on the things which are not seen (2 Cor. 4:18). That which is unseen is eternal, while that which is seen will some day perish. So while we marvel at God's created physical and geographical beauty, we should ponder in our hearts that some day (in all eternity) we will behold things which are far greater than any of this present earthly beauty.

In a secular sense, an artistic work (a painting, photograph, book, or piece of music) finds a deeper appreciation if one knows the artist or the author. The same is true as we observe God's handiwork in the form of both the spiritual and physical Creation. It should draw us toward a deeper respect for His power and for His Word. This will nurture love for Him and His ways.

From time to time, many of us declare, "Oh, what a beautiful day!" When we do so we should remember that God created the day which we are appreciating so much. He is the author of all things that are truly beautiful.

Earthly beauty is but as symbol of the eternal beauty that is to come. A glimpse of God is given already on this earth when we behold the breathless sights of His handiwork. May our appreciation for God's created beauty be the foundation from which a hope in our heart springs forth for that eternal homeland beyond the river Jordan, where "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Cor 2:9).

Waiting Period for Converts

We have a long standing practice of allowing a convert plenty of time to become established spiritually before baptism and the laying on of the hands are administered. This is not typical in nominal Christendom where infant baptism or spontaneous baptism upon a verbal declaration of acceptance of Christ are widely practiced. There is a sound basis for the practice of allowing time for a thorough conversion experience, not only from the stand point of encouraging spiritual growth, but also from precedents in the Scriptures. Establishing a covenant is a significant part of the culmination of the conversion process. God used covenants in the Old Testament to indicate special times of progress and/or commitment in the unfolding of His plan of salvation.

If we consider the diligence that we apply in drawing up secular covenants (contracts), how much more prudent is it to exercise diligence in our spiritual contract with God. The success of a secular contract depends both on how well every issue is addressed and mutually understood beforehand and how well the performing parties execute each item. In like manner the success of our spiritual covenant depends upon what kind of foundation is laid and then how well we understand and follow through, knowing that God, who is the other party in our covenant, is incapable of defaulting.

First and foremost we must have faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ which will save us from our sins (Eph. 2:8). Among the issues that we will then be motivated to act upon are: confession of sins and restitution, replacement of anger with love, replacement of questionable practices with total honesty, replacement of scorn with a pleasant disposition, replacement of worldly entertainment with contentment in God's Word, and replacement of uncontrolled desire for worldly knowledge with desire to learn about God's will. We will not achieve absolute perfection in everything, but a sound beginning is essential.

The Apostles and other believers of their time had special powers given to them, hence perhaps the apparently short time involved in some of the early conversions, such as the eunuch from Ethiopia and Paul, himself. Even so, it is also recorded that in one case an individual was apparently baptized prematurely. His spiritual blindness was soon revealed and Peter had to tell him, "Thy heart is not right in the sight of God" (Acts 8:21). In addition, the eunuch's baptism was preceded by a time of preparation. His trip to Jerusalem to worship was long and he used that time to read the Scriptures. He was definitely a seeking soul.

One of the exhortations of the Apostle Paul to Timothy was to "lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins" (1 Tim. 5:22). Timothy was exhorted to first recognize in someone the evidence of spiritual fruit before laying on of his hands.

"But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). This Scripture implies that conversion is not impulsive since seeking involves a period of time. However, we cannot put a specific length of time on conversion since God deals with each soul on an individual basis. The parable of the good Samaritan helps us understand the responsibility of the church in receiving one whom Christ has rescued and brought to the church for further care.

In the Old Testament we find some valuable lessons in the manner by which God enacted covenants with His people and what was required before the time was right to put them in place. Noah was an example of diligence for many years. He was first required to spend a long time building the ark, then enduring the flood, and finally being disappointed by the message from the raven before he was given satisfaction by the message from the dove. It was after all of this that God put the bow in the sky as a covenant to Noah and to all the world.

Abraham was called to relocate twice to distant lands. He was then proven by the strife between his and Lot's herdsmen which he handled superbly. These and other acts of faith and diligence were followed by his very peaceful encounter with Melchizedek and his unsolicited tithing, before God established in full His covenant with him. The covenant with Abraham differed somewhat from the one with Noah in that it included a life-long human commitment (Gen. 17:7). Abraham's continuation of faith (Gen. 15:6) was his commitment to God, and God's commitment to Abraham and his posterity was continuation of his providence, signified by the ceremony of circumcision.

The length of time that Noah and Abraham proved themselves is not meant to be comparable to the length of time that a convert takes to prepare himself for making a formal covenant with God. The dedication of his daily life is, however, very relevant to the convert's progress prior to the establishment of the covenant. Noah and Abraham persevered without even knowing that something special lay ahead for them. A convert looks forward to making a covenant and to reaping the glorious reward of Heaven, which awaits the faithful.

Our commitment must be evidenced by righteousness which results from true faith (Rom. 10:4), then we experience the ceremony of baptism (Matt. 28:19) as a public testimony of a mutual commitment between God and man. During the time between the first genuine commitment of the heart by a convert and the time the covenant is sealed, God is faithful in helping to achieve the victory. As with Noah and Abraham, He will reveal His wishes for the timing of the establishment of the covenant in the baptismal waters.

Free to Choose

When God made man in His own image and after His likeness (Gen. 1:26) He purposely chose to give humans superior intellectual capability. Unique in mankind's makeup is the ability to reason and make choices, including the ultimate choice of either believing in or rejecting the very existence of God. Man's freedom to choose offers a great deal of liberty, and it carries with it a heavy responsibility.

Apparently God gave the created human family this intellectual freedom to ensure that those who would become His children would do so voluntarily, out of faith and true adoration. "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6). The same is true regarding the great gift of the Lord Jesus Christ who suffered and died on the Cross that by grace through faith in His shed blood men might be saved (Eph. 2:8). The Word says, "whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17).

Every person has the freedom to choose to serve the Lord Jesus or to reject Him. This freedom remains intact even after one becomes converted, and we must always remember that we remain as God's children by continuing in faith and by not choosing to turn away. Anyone who feels hopelessly caught in the clutches of Satan, even if this may involve overpowering addiction of any kind, should take heart in the fact that our most basic nature always retains that remnant of freedom to choose to break free.

Although there are many benefits of the moral freedom God has granted us, this can also be detrimental to those who lack a solid foundation on which to base their decisions. We live in a society in which many have rejected the notion of any absolute standards. The trait of individualism reigns and there are numerous philosophies from which one may choose. There is a prevailing view that no set of beliefs is necessarily closer to the truth than any other and all merit equal respect. Many feel personal preference and experience are the main factors in choosing one's beliefs. They conclude, "If it feels right or feels good, that is good enough for me." Although a large majority of people in our country profess belief in God, their personal philosophies often bear little resemblance to the teachings of Christ and the Apostles. Jesus said, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

Unfortunately this deceptive thinking has also infiltrated modern evangelical Christianity. There is a wide divergence of interpretations of Scripture which constitute the doctrines of the many different groups which fit under this broad umbrella. Once again there is a pervasive feeling that no particular interpretation of scriptural principles should be considered as closer to the truth than any other. It is more acceptable to tolerate or embrace widely variant beliefs rather than to risk the danger of being called "narrow" or "fundamentalist" by standing firm on a simple, literal interpretation of the Bible, whether it is popular or not. This attitude is reinforced by the fact that many do not want their faith to interfere with their life style, and thus prefer to design their own set of beliefs. It is simply a "live and let live" situation.

Let us examine ourselves and reflect upon the degree of flexibility in interpretations which could become acceptable within our own Apostolic Christian Church if we are not careful. The God-given freedom to choose can easily be misdirected as a result of the powerful influences of a society which is obsessed with worship of self rather than submission to God. An individual once said, "I want to be a part of a church where I can be myself." Once again, we must consider the Apostle Paul's prophetic words regarding the last days, when "men shall be lovers of their own selves" (2 Tim. 3:2). Obviously, no individual or church has a monopoly on truth. Therefore, it is essential that we come before the Lord in deepest humility with hearts that are tender and submissive to the guidance of His Holy Spirit so that we can accurately discern the spirits.

The key to discerning truth was revealed in the words of Jesus when he said, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32). In addition to the gift of the Holy Spirit to each believer, God has established another avenue through which His Spirit teaches us the application of His Word, namely the holy church, which the Apostle Paul described as the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). If we insist on our own opinions and feel that we should not be expected to conform to church teachings or submit to those who are over us in the Lord, we lose the benefit of an important part of God’s plan (Rom. 12:16; 2 Tim. 3:14; Heb. 13:7, 17).

Just like young children, believers in Christ need structure and specific boundaries in certain important aspects of life. Because of human nature, there is always resistance to structure and individuals press hard against the boundaries. May God help us to overcome these childish attitudes and attain true spiritual maturity. Then we will gladly stand firm upon a set of sound, scripturally-based beliefs which have been tried and proven over many years. We can do this without arrogance or a judgmental attitude toward other groups, but with a deep commitment to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

Our Theological Heritage - I

In all aspects of life we have a heritage, whether it be family, nation, state or village. The same is true regarding matters of faith. The psalmist wrote: "For thou, O God, hast heard my vows: thou hast given me the heritage of those that fear thy name" (Psa. 61:5). This editorial and the following will attempt to trace the major historical roots of our spiritual heritage.

The Apostolic Christian Church has never given much credence to theology or theologians. It has felt that theological influence from seminaries and formal theological training are more likely to undermine than to build up a biblical faith. With this attitude, the church has promoted the concept of a simple and enduring faith that is patterned after a literal interpretation of the Word. Like any group its beliefs were at least partially shaped by historical forces. In acknowledging this it must be understood, however, that the overwhelming influential forces on our forefathers were the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Spirit.

The Bible itself best represents the "theology" and/or doctrine of the Apostolic Christian Church. In fact, very little has been written by Apostolic Christians over the years to give specific definitions to what the Bible says. Even though Samuel H. Froehlich (who started our church in Switzerland) published several books, his writings were intended to defend the faith against the falsehoods of his time. It was for the same purpose that our church published the booklet "Winds of Doctrine" several years ago. The church has felt that Spirit-inspired preaching Sunday after Sunday has been the most effective method for expounding upon the Word of God.

In Christianity's earliest years the church was noted for its deep devotion to the existing Scriptures and for its purity of life. The believers' willingness to sacrifice all (even life itself) served as a marvelous witness for what early followers of Christ believed. By the 4th century, however, when the emperor Constantine formally recognized the Christian faith, and the church and state became one entity, the door was opened for a religious apostasy that has continued until our time.

While many misrepresentations of Christianity evolved over the centuries, a "true" remnant also existed, although in many instances, it was mostly unnoticed. Such groups became known historically as the "free church" consisting of truly converted people who held to the literal interpretation of the Bible's teachings. Without fanfare and void of the pomp and extravagance of officialdom, and without the approval of the state churches, these groups walked on the narrow pathways of Christ, often at great peril to life and limb. Reflecting holiness and a clear difference between the church and the world, they were distinguished by their evident piety and devotion to the Lord.

By 1517, the doctrinal errors and worldly life-style of the state churches in Europe resulted in the protestant reformation. People fled the state church in order to establish a new church more in line with the Holy Scriptures. Yet, reform leaders, both in Germany and Switzerland, still clung to various biblical contradictions such as infant baptism and bearing arms in war.

In 1525, more serious reformers broke off from the initial reformers (such as Luther in Germany and Zwingli in Switzerland) and strove to re-establish a true church based solely on the Bible. They also initiated the idea of separation of church and state, a radical precept at that time. They taught that the Word alone, rather than the writings of men and a preponderant ecclesiastical tradition, was to be the final authority of faith and life. The Latin term *sola scriptura* (scriptures alone) was the major theme of these sincere believers who became known as Anabaptists. This term means "re-baptizers": that is, they had been baptized as infants in the state church, and then later were re-baptized as adults in the newly-founded Anabaptist group. This baptism was based on their faith in Christ and a commitment to newness of life in Him.

Persecution of the Anabaptists by the state church was brutal and without mercy. Thousands died as martyrs. In 1527, a gathering of Anabaptists in Schleitheim, Switzerland drew up seven articles of faith that dealt with (1) adult baptism (2) holy communion (3) congregational discipline (4) separation from the world (5) duties of elders and shepherds (6) non-resistance, and (7) oath-taking. This became known historically as the Schleitheim Confession. The idea of a pure body of converted believers in mutual submission to Christ and to one another was revived by the Anabaptists. Separation from worldliness and a biblical sense of nonconformity to the world's seductive influences were themes of their spiritual outlook. These "theological" forces influenced our brethren to some degree. "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (2 Cor. 6:17-18).

In the 1830's God used Bro. Samuel H. Froehlich, a young man in his twenties and a former seminarian in Switzerland, to begin preaching the literal interpretation of the gospel. A hunger for the truth was profound at that time and a church movement, based solely on the Scriptures, was set in motion. In 35 years approximately 110 congregations were formed in a number of European countries. This faith has since spread to more than fifteen nations. The next editorial will continue the discussion of the work of the Holy Spirit in the early years of our church as well as the basis for the remarkable stability and simplicity it has retained up until this time.

Our Theological Heritage - II

This second editorial on our theological heritage continues the discussion of the development of our church and doctrine on a sound biblical foundation. Bro. Samuel Froehlich was disillusioned by the religious precepts of his day that centered around a rationalist-relativist outlook that mostly undermined the values of the Bible. Infant baptism and sub-standard Christian living were among the disturbing trends that prompted him to form a new church based on God's word.

His personal call from God and the crisis conversion he experienced, led Bro. Froehlich to follow the Bible's teachings of repentance and conversion closely as he counseled new converts and brought them into the brotherhood. The structure of the church was patterned very closely after the New Testament model. The general order of the church resembled the brotherhood concepts the Anabaptists had revived three hundred years earlier.

Bro. Froehlich's disappointing encounters with profound religious falsehoods such as eternal security, lack of a genuine conversion and the erroneous view that believers were merely "saved sinners" and could not live an overcoming life, prompted a policy of closed communion and doctrinal separation from other churches, both in Europe and in America.

Our brethren's devotion to the Scriptures, which became strengthened over the decades by confrontations with falsehoods, sharpened the church's overall doctrinal insight. From this came a clearer vision of truth and a strengthened resolve to maintain a church built only on the foundation of the Word.

Its theological-doctrinal base was well established when the church reached America's shores in 1847 and began its work in the New World. A servant leadership system along with its sense of sanctification and separation, its following of the Word's high standards of Christian living, and its policy of closed communion and doctrinal separation, served the church well. The ministry was far removed from the "higher criticism" method of Bible interpretation that began to flourish among U.S. church denominations in the late 1800's, and which resulted in the spread of a very liberal theology.

Also, when the looser modernistic patterns of American evangelicalism began to emerge in the mid-1940's (and continue on yet today), the Apostolic Christian Church was again well-defended by its theological-doctrinal stance. This movement, historically termed New Evangelicalism, was an effort to broaden attitudes toward the Bible and make the gospel more inclusive and appealing to the general populace. The result was compromise. Many aspects of biblical Christianity were ignored—and a freer, easier, less structured and more "individualistic" pattern of belief became the norm.

In summary, the theology of the Apostolic Christian Church is best identified by the "sola scriptura" symbol: that is, its faith and practice are based on Scriptures alone. Further, the view of the church, in which each believer is closely integrated with fellow believers (much like a physical body) and all are responsible, both to God and to each other, make it a very closely-knit group after the Bible's pattern (Col. 2:2).

It is clearly recognized that "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15), which means correctly interpreting the Scriptures, requires humble hearts through which the Holy Spirit can work. Since "no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Pet. 1:20), there must be submission to one another (Eph. 5:21) and deference to ordained, Spirit-directed church leadership for decisions in areas of potential controversy (Acts 15).

Bro. Froehlich and subsequent church shepherds and ministers have humbly assumed the biblical authority and responsibilities without dependence upon theological training or salary for their duties. This follows the pattern established by the Apostle Paul, who “came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom” (I Cor. 2:1), refused to accept any reward for preaching the gospel (I Cor. 9:15) and met his personal necessities by laboring with his hands (Acts 20:34). Adherence to this pattern has been a significant factor in protecting the church from intellectually and politically based forces which otherwise might long ago have led to a replacement of sound doctrine with self-serving and watered-down teachings which appeal to human nature.

The remarkable stability of the doctrine throughout the entire history of our church and the close similarity it bears to the historically recorded patterns of the very early Christian church are facts which cannot be readily dismissed. We should all be aware of these facts and hold a deep appreciation in our hearts for the consistent efforts of our forefathers to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). We should also recognize that much vigilance and steadfastness of faith will be essential right up to the end of time.

Woven throughout the church’s doctrinal understanding is the firm belief that God’s people must daily depend upon the power of the Holy Spirit to live in righteousness and obedience and to overcome sin and evil. “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we that are dead to sin live any longer therein?” (Rom. 6:1-2). “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (I Pet. 1:16).

Thus even though little emphasis is placed on a written theology in the Apostolic Christian Church, it is helpful to be aware of the spiritual forces which have influenced our doctrine and practices, and we should be deeply appreciative of our heritage.

Financial Stewardship I

A steward is one who acts as a supervisor or administrator, especially of finances or property for another. “Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2).

All that we have is the Lord’s. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” (Psa. 24:1). “For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills” (Psa. 50:10). It is only by God’s permission and generosity that we have any material possessions. “But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth” (Deut. 8:18). He provides for our needs and generously gives many of us far more than we deserve.

Being stewards of what really belongs to God requires that we conduct our affairs in a manner that will be acceptable to God because we are directly accountable to Him. “So then everyone of us shall give an account of himself to God” (Romans 14:12).

A child of God is unwise to look to the world for examples of financial stewardship. “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly” (Psalm 1:1). The world measures success by material gain. The Bible has a different formula for success. “This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success” (Josh. 1:8).

God’s ways are very different from those of man. Rulers described in the Bible were judged as good if they did what was right in the sight of the Lord, not by their economic policy. We are taught to “be content with such things as ye have” (Heb. 13:5) and to “wait on the Lord” (Psalm 27:14). Such concepts are contrary to the nature of man. “Buy now, pay later” and “instant gratification” are the guidelines of the world.

A child of God must be careful not to confuse “needs” and “wants.” The Bible tells us that “godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Tim. 6:6-8). From this we learn that our needs are very few, limited to those things which are necessary to sustain life.

Our “wants” can be virtually unlimited if we are not careful. Yet the increase of material goods will not bring satisfaction nor contentment. “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase” (Ecc. 5:10).

Many pitfalls await those who are poor stewards of God’s possessions. Misuse of credit can bring harmful levels of debt. If we borrow from others we are indebted to them and actually become their servant. “The rich ruleth over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender” (Prov. 22:7). We can get ourselves so deeply indebted that there seems to be no way out of the problem. Becoming overextended can bring bankruptcy or other types of financial distress. This can bring reproach upon Christ, the individual, the family and the church as “. . . all that beheld it begin to mock him, saying, this man began to build and was not able to finish” (Luke 14:29-30).

We are overextended if we are unable to meet our scheduled payments. Credit cards are a possible source of serious overextension. If we cannot pay credit card expenditures in full each month we are probably overspending. This could result in mothers of young children working outside the home and deprive children of the security and stability of having their mother available at a time when children are so desperately in need of love and guidance.

The purchase of too many luxuries brings additional pressures on a father to work too many hours, possibly even getting a second job and being so preoccupied with earning money that he neglects his family. This neglect often causes problems as children mature without having the benefit of stable family support, appropriate discipline and abundant parental love. The substitution of “adequate time” with “quality time” frequently falls far short of the needs of our children. It would be far better to provide adequate quality time rather than an abundance of material gifts.

The desire for possessions can easily disturb our spiritual well being. “For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Tim. 6:10). Loving money, or the things which can be purchased with money, can bring us to great spiritual sorrow. “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26). The love of money can cause us to lose our peace and contentment. “The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep” (Ecc. 5:12).

Nowhere in the Scriptures do we find special honor bestowed on individuals because they have accumulated great wealth. Rather, it is a humble heart that draws God’s attention and special blessing. (The next editorial will continue this discussion of financial stewardship.)

Financial Stewardship - II

Every child of God is entrusted with various stewardship responsibilities. Most important is the proper care and nurturing of the precious pearl of salvation given by the Lord to each believer. In addition, we will all have to someday give an account of what we have done with the material aspects of our lives.

We can become so entangled with the material affairs of this life that it consumes us. “Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days” (James 5:3). This could also lead us into covetousness which the Bible says is idolatry (Col. 3:5). God will not tolerate idolatry. It is identified as one of the works of the flesh that will keep us from His kingdom.

The Word of God not only provides guidelines of what not to do with the material things of life, but it also provides instruction on what we should do. We certainly need to remember to give back to the Lord what is His and not to rob God. “But ye say, wherein have we robbed Thee? In tithes and offerings” (Mal. 3:8). It is a privilege to be able to give to the Lord and we should do so willingly, “. . . not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7).

It is good to regularly lay aside a portion of our income as “firstfruits” for the Lord, rather than waiting until the end of a pay period and giving him the “leftovers.” The attitude with which we give is just as important as the amount. If we regularly lay aside a certain percentage of income we must not view this as a routine obligation or a “tax.” We may be tempted to bend our principles with regard to use of such funds to make it easier to reach a certain quota. Instead, each time we give, it should be with a prayerful heart and a humble desire to willingly help in the Lord’s name to meet some worthy need.

We should give discreetly, not to be seen of men, but to the honor of God (Matt. 6:1,4). We should give generously because we have received bountifully. “He which soweth sparingly shall reap sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully” (2 Cor. 9:6).

The Bible tells us very plainly that we are to help those in need. “But whoso hath this world’s goods, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?” (1 John 3:17). It is evident that we are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9), yet “. . . faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone” (James 2:17).

Jesus made it clear that we need a balance of faith and works. He said to the Pharisees: “. . . for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith: these ye ought to have done and not to leave the others undone” (Matt. 23:23). We cannot buy our way into heaven, even with the best of financial stewardship. On the other hand we should never judge another person’s motives who may be able to give much more than we or offer many more deeds of service. If we make effort to point out their shortcomings this may be a futile attempt to justify our own lack of generosity.

Some believers may have struggles regarding their financial responsibility toward the government. Because there is sometimes evil in high places and much governmental waste, the temptation is strong to be less than honest in paying taxes. When asked if it was lawful to give tribute to Caesar, Christ said, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). While we may not agree with the way those in authority exercise their power, we cannot justify dishonesty as a result of it.

Self-indulgence must be controlled. What we spend on ourselves should be moderate. When the rich man had acquired excessive possessions, he wanted to set himself up so he would have it easy for many years. If we are rich toward ourselves and not rich toward God, we could face the same judgment as he did when God said, “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12:20).

While we must be careful not to heap treasures to ourselves, we do need to plan somewhat for the future. All of us face the possibility of living several years after we retire. Surely we should not plan for a life of luxury and irresponsible consumption when we retire, but neither do we want to be a burden to others.

We should pray for modest ambition. We should willingly work when we can and provide for the time when we are unable to work. “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: Which, having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest” (Prov. 6:6-8).

As God’s people we need to be very careful that we do not overemphasize the material side of life. “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21). If our treasure is in heaven, our life will reflect God’s holy will. Our stewardship should be one which will end with our hearing, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: . . . enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matt. 25:21).

Why Church Discipline?

The Bible leaves no option but for true believers to practice a redemptive church discipline. The Word's foundation and the Spirit's direction are the keys that make kindly administered discipline a beneficial practice in the church. Although we as individual believers are not to judge one another, the church must make certain judgments when grievous sin occurs (1 Cor. 5:12-13).

Believers in the early church were commanded in the name of the Lord Jesus to withdraw themselves "from every brother that walketh disorderly" (2 Thes. 3:6). "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed" (2 Thes. 3:14). Such an act was to be done in Christ-like love, and only for the welfare of the erring soul.

Individual believers in Christ are united in His holy body, the church (1 Cor. 12:27) and knit tightly together in love (Col. 2:2). They are accountable to one another, and when "one member suffer(s), all the members suffer with it" (1 Cor. 12:26).

The church exists in this unique form to reflect light and virtue to an unbelieving world and to proclaim the glorious gospel of Christ and the teachings of the Apostles. Because the church preaches the messages of personal virtue and godliness, it follows that its members must live such a life, lest they are seen as hypocrites and Christ's message would appear to lack credibility. Thus, when sin overtakes virtue - due to the carelessness of the individual member of Christ's body - then corrective healing must take place.

Although the church aspires to perfection, it is not perfect. This is acknowledged by the fact that the Word gives instruction for discipline. The fact, however, that the church is not perfect, does not reduce its members inevitably to the status of sinners (Rom. 6:11). Although no sin can be ignored nor taken lightly, there are greater and lesser sins and failures. The Lord Jesus clarified this when He said to Pilate, "he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin" (John 19:11). Minor, unintentional failures in daily life—mostly connected with temperament and stress—are not considered the same as gross, willful sins, and neither do they make a striving soul a sinner. Just as in the Lord's prayer, our daily prayers should include the plea, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12).

Yet, willful and gross sins, which reflect purposeful disobedience and a disregard for the Word's standards, require the scriptural remedy of discipline. This is for the benefit of the individual and to maintain the purity and holiness of the church. The church, ideally, is to be without "spot or wrinkle, or any such thing" (Eph. 5:27).

When gross, willful, and corruptive sin occurs, it must be confessed and eradicated from the church. The fallen believer becomes subject to the discipline of the church to help bring him or her back into relationship with Christ. Although there is initially a measure of suffering for both the individual and the church, discipline is a positive rather than a negative practice. "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness to them that are exercised thereby" (Heb. 12:11).

Ideally, the erring believer responds to the conviction of the Spirit, voluntarily confesses his sin and accepts the remedy of God's judgment through the church as a token of love and mercy. There are unfortunate instances of individuals who become hardened and apostate for whom discipline must also be applied, "Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after" (1 Tim. 5:24). It is far better to confess and repent for sins in this life rather than to carry them into eternity where there will be "a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation" (Heb. 10:27).

There are varying degrees of discipline depending upon the nature of the sin and the circumstances involved. Determination of the appropriate steps is made by the prayerful consideration of the elders based on a number of scriptural teachings and examples. The forms of discipline range from an apology or short-term denial of church privileges such as the holy kiss and holy communion to excommunication from Christ's body, the church. Repentance, purification, forgiveness and redemption are always the foremost goals of every form of discipline.

“Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18). Thus, baptism and marriage (binding) and severance (loosing) are biblically rooted, and when carried out by a God fearing body of believers are duly recognized in heaven.

It is essential for the church to make a sincere effort to keep itself pure. The Apostle Paul taught, “Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump...” (1 Cor. 5:7).

The church is charged to pray for erring believers and to forgive them and confirm their love for them (2 Cor. 2:6-8). When the Word permits, and the individual has regained peace and an overcoming life, he is to be restored by the church in the spirit of meekness (Gal. 6:1).

Church discipline must be viewed as an act of love, “for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth” (Heb. 12:6). It is humbling for the entire church and should motivate all to a closer walk with God and a greater determination to resist temptation.

Satan's Attacks on the Church

From Genesis through Revelation, the Bible warns God's people that Satan's primary goal is to deceive mankind. From the first recorded admonition - "*Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field*" (Gen. 3:1), to the final scriptural warning - "*And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall go out to deceive the nations*" (Rev. 20:7-8), Satan has relied upon deceit, complacency and confusion to accomplish his evil work.

His goal is to cause confusion, mistrust, doubt, fear, frustration, discouragement, pride, disobedience, and any other behavior that can cause mankind to fall into disfavor with God.

The attacks of Satan upon the church are all designed to deceive mankind into losing the opportunity for salvation. Our beloved church, and all other God fearing, Bible believing churches, can expect to be subjected to his wrath. That Satan would continue to attack the church should come as no surprise to the children of God. If he had the boldness to attack Christ, the church can hardly expect to escape his temptations.

Satan tempted Christ in a variety of ways. He raised doubts about Christ's relationship with God and attacked Him at a time of weakness of the body: "*If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread*" (Matt. 4:3). Satan tried to entice Him with riches and power by showing "(Christ) *all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them*" (Matt. 4:8). He even challenged God's promises to His people, "*lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone*" (Matt. 4:6). He desperately tried to destroy the perfect plan of salvation before it was fulfilled in Christ's life.

Much of Satan's deceitful work results in confusion among God's people. We are warned by the prophet Isaiah that there would be a time of great confusion such that men would hardly know good from evil. "*Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter*" (Isa. 5:20).

Such a warning is a powerful description, and condemnation, of the time in which we are now living. Entertainment is based upon the most immoral and unethical kinds of behavior, and uncontrolled sin in the life of an individual is defended as merely an alternate life style; thus, the distinction between sin and righteousness is blurred and moral standards are seriously eroded. Such conduct has eased its way into many mainline denominations.

The church must guard against these evils that Satan would bring into our faith, thereby destroying our relationship with God.

So common is the acceptance of an individual's "right" to do as he pleases that many are not ashamed of even the most abhorrent behavior, thus fulfilling the prophesy of Jeremiah, "*Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush*" (Jer. 6:15, 8:12).

So successful has Satan been in his evil work that those who hold, or aspire to hold, high office advocate the legalization, or at least the social acceptance, of evil. Those who hold to traditional values and biblically-based morality and dare to speak boldly against such evil are subjected to relentless ridicule. But we are forewarned by the Scriptures that, "*we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places*" (Eph. 6:12). The church needs to stand firm to protect and defend from such influence those who hold the highest of all offices - the children of God.

Satan's attacks come in all manner of extremes. He may come boldly "...because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (I Pet. 5:8), or well disguised, "...for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). Whether he comes boldly or deceitfully, the result is the same for those who are overcome. The faith of individuals can be destroyed and the influence of the church weakened.

If Satan is victorious, peace and contentment will be replaced with discord and complacency. One of the things the Lord hates is "*he that soweth discord among brethren*" (Prov. 6:19). The church must continually guard against internal strife, a weapon Satan uses to drive God's people apart. If, by the grace of God we are able to overcome the temptations of the world and our works are honorable, then Satan tries to fill us with pride and make us judges of others, losing our child-like love and forbearance (Eph. 4:1-3).

The Laodicean church (because of their complacency and self-satisfaction) was warned that God would spue them out of his mouth, "*Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked*" (Rev. 3:17). We live in a time when the material blessings have been so great that we could so easily be blinded by them and feel that we are in need of nothing.

Although Satan uses a variety of very effective techniques and almost unrelenting pressure against the church, we must not despair. The very weapons of defense that Christ used when he was attacked by Satan are all still available to us today. When sorely pressed upon by temptations, we know we can be protected "*by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*" (Matt. 4:4). Satan will not win his battle if the church stands solidly on the truth of the Word of God, is diligent in prayer and is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

New Testament Priesthood

What is God's plan for the office of priest in the New Testament Church? If we examine the earliest priesthood and follow it through to the New Testament, we find that this same principle extends into today's church. The first that we read of priests in the Bible is the appearance of Melchizedek to Abraham (Gen. 14:18). He presented himself as a priest of the most high God.

The Levitical priesthood required one high priest plus the lower offices of priest. The priests were people specially consecrated and ordained of God for three major purposes: (1) to offer sacrifices (ceremonial service) for their own sins and for the sins of the people, (2) to pray for the people, and (3) to teach the people.

Some of the changes which later occurred in the priesthood were not to God's pleasure. Hosea and Malachi had some harsh words for the priests, blaming them for much of the disobedience of the people because they didn't perform their ordained functions. They delighted in the ceremonies and symbols and even expanded them, but the emphasis became increasingly superficial and progressively less meaningful. The priests also fell far short in teaching the people and praying for them. "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children" (Hos. 4:6). "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts" (Mal. 2:7-8). By the time Jesus was born, the office of high priest had declined to an appointed position which was rotated periodically for political advantage.

John the Baptist was born to righteous parents who were both from priestly families (Luke 1:5-6). John was very aggressive in his teaching and he denounced the self-righteous Pharisees. He also introduced the ceremony of baptism to the people and taught its proper use. His goal was "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17).

Paul explains that Jesus Christ is "a priest forever after the order of Melchisedec" (Heb. 7:17). The order of Melchisedec is described as a high priest "who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens" (Heb. 7:26). Jesus is currently filling these roles as part of His service to the church. He was not of the tribe of Levi so He was not a priest in His earthly life, but He gave instruction to the people of His time to use the services of the priest's office as was required in the law (Luke 5:14). Christ's revelation to John may provide insight concerning the office of priest as the Lord wanted it to exist in the New Testament Church, "And hast made us unto our God kings (a kingdom) and priests: and we shall reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:10).

A link between priesthoods of the Old and the New Testaments is made in the expressed wishes of God in the Old Testament, "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation" (Ex. 19:6), and by Peter in the New Testament, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Pet. 2:9). Each one of us as believers must accept our responsibility in the priesthood of God with Jesus as our high priest.

Our priestly service has much in common with the Levitical priesthood in that it includes the same three major areas; (1) ceremonies and symbols, (2) praying for others, and (3) teaching the people. It is necessary that we include these practices in our Christian life and regularly examine ourselves to see that they are in place.

In fulfilling the proper concept of priesthood, we want to participate in meaningful scripturally-based ceremonies and symbols, and we must not neglect them. Their true benefit would be lost if these sacred rites and ordinances were observed without godly sincerity, as in the following examples: baptism without conversion; communion without a fruitful self-examination; greeting with a kiss without holiness; displaying the scripturally prescribed hair length (men and women), wearing a head covering at appropriate times (women), and absence of head covering at certain times (men), without practicing discipline in all of our ambitions and activities. Since all of these symbolic actions require personal and inner preparedness by each individual, as well as the more visible aspects, we must resist the urging of our natural mind to examine others. Rather we should seek after our own sanctification first and then care for others as the Levitical priests were instructed to do.

We must be diligent in praying for others; our own salvation and that of others depend heavily on prayer. The effects of our prayers are not always seen by us.

One of the greatest failings of Judah was neglect on the part of the priests in teaching the people. The last statement of Jesus as recorded by Matthew lays out a clear directive, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations...teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20). The opportunity and responsibility to teach the people is no less today than it was in Bible times. First we must be taught ourselves, and then we can teach others, through the Holy Spirit and the Word. Fulfilling the scriptural pattern for the priesthood will bring untold blessings to God’s people.

The Virtue Of Friendliness

Each believer in Christ is an ambassador (2 Cor. 5:20) whose mission in life includes radiating Christ's love and spreading His good will to others.

The Lord Jesus taught, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Indeed, God's children are the "light of the world" (Matt. 5:14) as described in the Sermon on the Mount.

A major aspect of a believer's general manner in everyday living is the virtue of friendliness. A friendly manner is one of the most positive lights one can beam forth for Christ. If a person is genuinely friendly, he draws positive responses from others.

Friendliness probably does not come naturally to many people. It must be cultivated. In the Old Testament, Ezra the priest "prepared his heart" to study the law of God. Likewise, we as individuals must prepare our hearts to be friendly and to reflect a pleasing and positive personality as we seek to be a "light" for Christ.

Many people today are nearly overwhelmed by stress and the frenzy of activity in their lives. Interpersonal relationships are very often strained due to the estrangement and bitterness which have arisen from broken homes and shattered lives. Into such a setting the bright light of friendliness can offer a welcome ray of encouragement. Each and every believer in Christ has an opportunity (in fact an obligation) to be friendly, cheerful and courteous to everyone. To do less is a failure to imitate Christ.

Teachings in the Bible explain the root of true friendliness. From this immortal book people have learned throughout the ages the principles of civility, restraint, discretion, decency and consideration for others. If obedient to its teachings, believers will display the virtues of warmth, love and friendliness.

Solomon said it quite plainly when he wrote, "A man that hath friends must show himself friendly" (Prov. 18:24). Along with this, he also said, "Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones," (Prov. 16:24) and "a merry heart doeth good like a medicine" (Prov. 17:22).

Ruth, the Moabitess, was gleaning ears of corn in a field when Boaz came and impressed her with his friendliness and compassion. He said, "The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust" (Ruth 2:12). Ruth replied, "Let me find favor in thy sight, my lord; for that thou hast comforted me, and for that thou has spoken friendly unto thine handmaid" (Ruth 2:13).

When the Apostle Paul was in bondage under the supervision of Julius, the latter allowed him liberty "to go unto his friends to refresh himself" (Acts 27:3). The friendliness of Paul's companions "refreshed" him. It is no different today. Our friendliness to others can be very refreshing to them.

Friendship and friendliness were displayed in the close relationship between David and Jonathan. When Saul was conniving to kill David, young Jonathan went and told David to hide; he even went to his father, Saul, and "spake good of David" and temporarily calmed Saul's enmity. Later, the friendliness between Jonathan and David resulted in a covenant because "Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Sam. 18:1).

The Apostle Paul gave very descriptive advice to those who are risen with Christ and who daily seek those things that are above: “Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness (friendliness), humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering” (Col. 3:12).

Opportunities abound for true Christians to extend the beam of friendliness. Every believer should be aware of the daily opportunities that present themselves to portray friendliness. Jesus said, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matt. 25:40). The Apostle Paul wrote, “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). This could apply to friendliness because that virtue is a part of goodness.

The believer should show friendliness to all men, but especially to his brethren in faith, because together they are the bride of Christ, the church. A true and abiding relationship should exist among the brethren which can be compared to none other on the earth.

In the home, and among family members and siblings, friendliness is a must! Parents, are you friendly to your children? Are you too busy, too stressed and too preoccupied to show friendliness to your children? It is possible that many parents do not seize opportunities to be especially friendly to their children. Studies have shown that on an average day, a father spends only 19 seconds, one on one, with his individual children. How friendly can a father be in only 19 seconds?

In our churches during Sunday and Wednesday evening times of fellowship, are we doing our best to be friendly and cheerful to everyone, without preference? The spirit of Christ will shun no one. An important goal in coming together for worship is to encourage and edify one another. Kindliness and friendliness are traits that help to build up inner strength. It is required that we be consciously friendly among God’s people.

The believer’s efforts to achieve friendliness will not be forgotten. Even those who give a cup of water in the name of the Lord will be rewarded (Matt. 10:42). Likewise, as true believers extend cupful after cupful of friendliness in the name of Christ, the blessings of fellowship will abound here on this earth and there will be great rewards in heaven.

Retaining One's First Love

Our "first love" has its inception when, as condemned sinners, we look in faith to our crucified Saviour and feel His mercy, compassion and forgiveness. We are overwhelmed by our unworthiness and the amazing power of this genuine, heart warming love of Christ. Our regenerated heart overflows with love toward Him and toward our fellow human beings. We are eager to fulfill any request our Lord may ask of us. This is our "first love."

Retaining our first love becomes a lifelong goal, lest we someday hear words of disapproval such as those spoken to the church at Ephesus, "I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love" (Rev. 2:4). This would have grave consequences unless we repent and regain our first love (Rev. 2:5).

The biblical usage of "first love" is far beyond natural human love for family or friends, or feelings for any secular object or experience. Our first love is in response to God's love to us (1 John 4:19). From the time of that response this love should grow in its expression toward God and each other as described by John, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God" (1 John 4:7).

One function of the new testament church is to furnish spiritual direction and support for each soul that achieves first love. This was exemplified by Christ's account of the Good Samaritan who "... took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee" (Luke 10:35). As hosts, whatever we spend more, Christ will supply. Motivated by a growing first love we must be willing to spend and be spent for one another (2 Cor. 12:15), to submit to one another in the fear of God (Eph. 5:21), and to contribute sincerely to the likemindedness and unity of beliefs of the Brotherhood (1 Cor. 1:10; Phil. 2:2). As Christ has nourished us, so also should we willingly nourish each other by utilizing the resources of His Word and the Holy Spirit which He has left in ample supply.

The church at Ephesus was commended for many good things, but they had left their first love (Rev. 2:4). Thinking they were implementing God's commandments to the utmost, the Ephesians sought to expose false apostles (teachers) and doers of evil (Rev. 2:2). They were correct in these efforts but became obsessed with enforcement and with their own accomplishments while neglecting their roles as evangelists and teachers, as well as failing to fulfill other important duties for the edifying of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12). Jesus had admonished the Pharisees for a similar overemphasis on certain works and neglect of other important matters. He told them, "... for ye tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgement (what is right) and the love of God: these ye ought to have done and not to leave the other undone" (Luke 11:42). The Ephesians may have developed an attitude of self-righteousness based on their many good works. If first love is to be retained, a believer's justification must rest entirely on what Christ has accomplished on Calvary's Cross. So serious was the error of the Ephesians that they were called "fallen" and were advised that their candlestick (holy standing) would quickly be removed if they didn't repent (Rev. 2:5).

The church in Thyatira was acknowledged as having retained a measure of its love and good works, but it was tarnished by neglect (Rev. 2:18-29). They had allowed the teachings of Jezebel to enter in which caused some of the brethren to be misled and fall. God then gave them an ultimatum: either repent or suffer spiritual death (vs. 22-23). If they would have prevented the false teaching and taught sound doctrine instead, they would have avoided the ultimatum and strengthened the believers so they could overcome the temptations of Satan.

The responsibility of the church regarding maintenance of the first love of its members is to encourage each one to function as an active, vital component of the body of Christ. We, as members of the inn, are the ultimate beneficiaries of the pence (spiritual resources) which are generously given by Christ. We then should be good providers to others, nourishing and strengthening the personal relationships that exist between each of us and our brethren (Eph. 4:15-16).

A very important checklist for evaluating our first love is in the “love chapter,” (1 Corinthians 13). The major ingredients are patience, a caring attitude toward others, humility, chaste behavior, endurance and joy in the truth of every passage of God’s word (vs. 4-7). Absent from first love is envy, boastfulness, unstable temperament, selfishness, enjoyment of evil, and distrusting any part of God’s word (vs. 4-7). As we compare our life to the scriptural virtues we should look for the strengths of the attributes, rather than simply their presence. If we notice any negatives, we must seek to eliminate them.

“Follow after charity (pursue love), and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy (teach and assist)” (1 Cor. 14:1). This Scripture emphasizes teaching and helping as being complementary to pursuing love and as being more favorable than desiring spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are given to us by God, but the teaching and helping we do for others is mostly dependent upon our use of the pence (resources) that God has provided. “And let us consider one another to provoke (stimulate) unto love and to good works” (Heb. 10:24). Assistance toward the spiritual welfare and maturity of another person is one of the most loving acts that anyone can give. If motivated by genuine love for Christ and appreciation for His sacrificial love, it is an excellent indicator that our “first love” has been retained and is flourishing.

Dying Unto Self

We are taught in the Bible that the concepts of death and dying must be applied to certain matters other than the death of the body in order for salvation to be our ultimate lot in life. Though it is not an exact quote from the Scripture, “dying unto self,” typifies the renouncing of self-willed and presumptuous conduct (2 Pet. 2:10). The principle of dying unto self is clearly founded in the Word, “. . . but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (Rom. 8:13).

Jesus experienced a sequence of unpleasant events that were necessary to fulfill God’s plan. They offered no comfort or advantage to Him, but His submission to them set a flawless example for us to follow. Each of the recorded temptations of Jesus in the wilderness resulted in denial of self. Had he satisfied His hunger at the devil’s instruction it would have been self-service with no recognition of, nor involvement from God, somewhat like the Israelites who “. . . sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play” (Ex. 32:6). He could have easily ruled all of the kingdoms of the world, but again, it would have been serving self, and God wanted Jesus’ kingdom to be “. . . not of this world” (John 18:36). Jesus could have been protected by angels in a fall from the pinnacle of the temple, but He would have been recklessly using God’s resources to demonstrate what He could do for Himself, satisfying His flesh instead of honoring God. His “dying unto self” is also described in these Scriptures, “for even Christ pleased not himself” (Rom. 15:3), and “for in that he himself hath suffered being tempted he is able to succour them that are tempted” (Heb. 2:18).

In the same manner that Jesus personally accomplished the victory over his Adam-like nature, it is our personal responsibility to identify, teach, and practice selflessness. “Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?” (Rom. 2:21). We can’t ask others to do this for us. We are encouraged that Jesus, who won victory in this matter, is our helper if we trust Him (Heb. 2:18). Some of the temptations that we must deal with are more easily definable than others: “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). Fornication is specific, but the possibilities for covetousness are highly varied and innumerable. We can covet (desire or use passionately) many things including money, property, power, authority, praise, and physical capabilities.

Are we guided by godliness or covetousness when we report our earnings, property, etc. for tax purposes? Are we content with being only legally correct or do we base our decisions on the moral law (as defined in the Word)? In business do we use unquestionable integrity in preparing invoices and statements which require payment from others? We must not confine our honesty to friends or brethren. “Provide things honest in the sight of all men” (Rom. 12:17).

Are we able to restrain ourselves when “self” seeks honor in everyday life? The Word deplors those who “love the praise of men more than the praise of God” (John 12:43). We all have satisfying successes in life, but the satisfaction is quickly diminished if God is not credited. Jesus said, “the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works,” (John 14:10). When we hold an office or have an assignment in the church, or in church-related activities, in community affairs, or in an occupational organization, we inevitably become more visible and more influential than other people. Do we resist our human urging to promote ourselves? “Self” becomes difficult to subdue under those conditions. Dying unto self is one of the believer’s greatest struggles.

When decisions are made among groups and our own sentiment is with the majority, do we flaunt it and create aggravations or do we pursue peacefulness? If our sentiment happens to fall with the minority, do we feel resentment and become uncooperative, or do we contribute support toward success and peacefulness?

Do we willingly heed the advice of God-ordained church authority (Heb. 13:7, 17) or do we insist upon our own way? We may justify ourselves in the name of personal conviction or lack thereof, but perhaps it is selfish reliance upon our own opinions which is our guiding force. The Apostle Paul warned, “be not wise in your own conceits (opinions)” (Rom. 12:16).

Paul set an example for us by presenting himself as a weak brother (1 Cor. 9:22) instead of the capable, knowledgeable, and skilled apostle, teacher and communicator that he was. His unselfish approach was for the sole purpose of helping others to gain salvation.

The ease by which we can slide into selfish disobedience is demonstrated in Peter’s error when he separated himself from the Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-12) because some Jews came from James, the apostle at the Jerusalem church (Acts, 21:18). Peter’s error was dissimulation which is pretence or hypocrisy (Gal. 2:13). He also failed to apply the teaching that “God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34) which had been revealed to him in a profound way. He had even used that lesson to present a very convincing case to that same Jerusalem church on behalf of full acceptance of the Gentile believers (Acts 11:2-18).

The rebuke from Paul was fruitful (Gal. 2:11-17). Peter later expressed respect for Paul by writing, “. . . even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you” (2 Pet. 3:15). If someone with Peter’s experience can momentarily succumb to “self,” it should be a lesson to us to be alert to our own conduct. No amount of experience, wisdom, faith, love, or any other virtue will exempt us from the need to guard against self-will. We should aspire to that self-less frame of mind portrayed by the Apostle Paul when he wrote, “I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8).

Making Decisions According to God's Will

There are times when we find ourselves seeking direction from God to make a decision. There are also times when God seeks to be an influence in decisions that we are making, even though we haven't specifically asked Him to be. Often we don't mean to neglect seeking God's will but our personal decision making becomes so routine that we don't take the time to seek God's will as we should. Or perhaps we become too self-sufficient to continuously seek His will, even in minor matters.

We should include in our prayers, "... not my will, but thine be done" (Luke 22:4). In doing so we are beseeching God to direct us in pathways that are pleasing to Him, and which are best for us in His sight. "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and He will direct thy paths" (Prov. 3:6).

The methods that God uses to impart His messages to us are numerous and sometimes unusual. Examples of the ways that the early believers received direction from God include: preaching and martyrdom, as in Stephen's sermon and subsequent stoning which impressed Paul (Acts 22:20) and spread the gospel by scattering the church; advice from a third party, as in the case of Paul's letter to Philemon; opportunity as Paul's sermon at Mars Hill on the "unknown god"; reasoning together as in the Jerusalem council, the conclusions of which caused the church to rejoice; and personal advice, as in James' recommendation to Paul to purify himself along with four brethren to conciliate the Jewish Christians.

These examples demonstrate that our submission and readiness are necessary if we are to benefit from God's special ways of helping us decide on important matters in our lives. The Word teaches, "now therefore perform the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to will (of the mind), so there may be a performance also out of that which ye have (are capable of doing)" (2 Cor. 8:11).

It should not be difficult to make decisions about the doctrinal truths that serve as the foundation of our faith in God. Teachings such as: repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38), and "no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15) are easily discerned. However, not every statement in the Bible is that conclusive. Believers must often make decisions about issues of life which are not addressed specifically in the Word. We are capable of doing this because "we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16), and because He has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth (John 16:13), and He has provided the church which is "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15) to assist us.

Some examples of issues that require us to make decisions regarding the application of doctrinal teachings include: When do I speak to my friends about the gospel? (Mark 5:19), Under what circumstances do I greet with a kiss? (1 Cor. 16:20), What qualifies as an adequate head covering? (1 Cor. 11:4-13), Where is my place in teaching all nations? (Matt. 28:19-20), How long is long hair for a man: for a woman? (1 Cor. 11:14-15), What is anger? (Eph. 4:26), What constitutes modest apparel? (1 Tim. 2:9). These and other items have been addressed by our church leadership by reasoning together, not unlike the Jerusalem council, and many helpful exhortations and guidelines have been given. They also involve individual decisions and performance under many different circumstances. Each person, however, has the responsibility to make decisions that show respect and concern for all of the brethren and not simply according to personal preference. "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than the themselves" (Phil. 2:3). Making and keep peace (Matt. 5:9) must also be included as a major ingredient in all of our decisions. In doing so we cultivate a deeper sense of unity and help to avoid schisms. "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another" (Rom. 14:19).

Decisions made in all aspects of our lives should be subject to the guidance of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). Employers making decisions that affect their employees should do so with consideration and respect (Eph. 6:9). For employees, the decisions made in the work place should be done in true dedication to their employer (Eph. 6:5-8).

We must be very careful that we do not become so set in our thinking that we are not open to the voice of God through brotherly counsel in making decisions. We could get into a habit of thinking there is only one right way—which is our own way. The Apostle Paul listed the characteristic of being implacable along with other very serious sins (Rom. 1:31). If we are implacable, we are unyielding and cannot be reasoned with.

We should also not be so stymied that we can hardly make a decision for fear that there is only one choice which fits God's will. If we stay close to Him and are prayerful and sincere, He will help us along many different paths which we may choose as long as they do not violate His Word. When in retrospect we realize that we did make a poor decision, it is discouraging, but all is not lost. We should seek to learn what we can from the experience. John Mark recovered from his decision to desert Paul (Acts 15:38; 2 Tim. 4:11). Peter recovered from his decision to walk out on the Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-12) and grew from this experience. (See also Gal. 2:9 and Rev. 21:14.) Many of our most unforgettable lessons are learned this way and we grow in humility when we confess our fallibility.

God wants us to use our minds (2 Tim. 1:7) as well as His Word (2 Tim. 2:15) and good counsel (Prov. 11:14) in making a decision. Consistent prayer and diligent study of the Bible will refresh our memories and keep us alert to "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). The most important step in this entire process is the "renewing of our minds" so that we "may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2).

Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself

We believe strongly in the scriptural truth that we should abstain from violence and never take another person's life. The Word teaches that hatred is much the same as murder. "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15).

It is hypocritical to say that we are peace-loving, non-violent people and then to allow "war" in our personal lives or among brethren. The Apostle Paul warned: "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another" (Gal. 5:14-15). He also wrote, "...live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you" (2 Cor. 13:11).

How can we establish and keep good relationships in which love and harmony abound? In order to have the right attitude we must love and feast upon God's Word. "Let your conversation (conduct) be as it becometh (is worthy of) the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27). During our repentance we had a clear vision of our own failures and the good in other people. We should retain this attitude.

We must also be realistic and acknowledge the sobering fact that life upon this earth is quite temporary, and thus our greatest emphasis should be upon spiritual matters. The Apostle Peter wrote of the day of the Lord coming as a "thief in the night" and he urged us to consider our priorities: "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness" (2 Peter 3:10-11).

Strong, loving relationships are formed and nurtured by good communication. "Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man" (Col. 4:6). This Scripture indicates that we should pray before we speak, especially in stressful circumstances; then we will have grace to choose the proper words and avoid hurt and misunderstanding. We can also ask the other party to repeat what they believe we said so that we can be sure that we expressed ourselves clearly.

Our tongue can be an instrument of good or it can be an evil weapon, "full of deadly poison" (Jam. 3:8). Angry words can create deep and lasting wounds in another person's heart. How can we honestly say that we despise violence, if we harm another person with our tongue? The Apostle Paul wrote, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth" (Eph. 4:29), and he also warned, "be ye angry and sin not: let not the sun go down on your wrath" (Eph. 4:26). Anger is a human emotion we all experience, but we must learn to redirect this feeling in a way that will keep us from sinning. We sing in one of our beautiful hymns, "Angry words, Oh let them never, from the tongue unbridled slip; May the heart's best impulse ever check them ere they soil the lip. Love is much too pure and holy, friendship is too sacred far, for a moment's reckless folly, thus to desolate and mar." (*Hymns of Zion #65*)

If we should slip and allow anger to bring forth harsh words, the scriptural remedy is very clear. We must humble ourselves promptly "before the sun goes down" and seek forgiveness. Loving our neighbor as ourselves also requires us to forgive as we would wish to be forgiven. "And be ye kind one to another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32).

Building strong relationships requires special effort to encourage our loved ones and to avoid unnecessarily discouraging them. All of us are somewhat weak and are susceptible to Satan's efforts to cause us to grow weary with the burdens of life. Unwarranted criticism adds greatly to these burdens. It takes no special talent to criticize or belittle another person.

This does not mean that we should refrain from kind and loving admonition when someone has clearly erred or is demonstrating an ungodly lifestyle. This should be done after prayer and self-examination, and it should be motivated by love (Matt. 7:1-5). There can also be a great blessing in making a special effort to encourage and edify one another by our words and deeds. “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another” (Rom 14:19). Let us also be willing to offer an honest compliment when the opportunity arises.

Good communication requires careful and sincere listening so that individuals can feel free to be open about their feelings. It is not sufficient to discuss only behaviors, we must move to a deeper emotional and spiritual level and talk about what we believe and feel and how our struggles relate to the teachings of God’s Word and the church’s direction. A helpful guideline in choosing an effective approach is to consider how we would like to be dealt with if our roles were reversed. Jesus said, “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Matt. 7:12).

Finally if we are going to be able to properly love and respect others, we must have a healthy attitude about ourselves. Our self-concept must be based on the fact that God made each of us as a special person, deeply beloved by Him. True humility reflects an accurate self-concept— not putting one’s self down or becoming proud. Paul said, “by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15:10). With this kind of attitude we will not spend much time thinking or talking about self, but we, like Christ, will focus on what we can do to love and serve one another.

If we as individuals and as a brotherhood put forth a valiant effort to fulfill these scriptural truths, we will send forth a clear missionary message to the many lost sinners all around us. Jesus put it very simply when He said, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35).

Participation in Social Activism

There is little doubt that in America today there is a serious decline in traditional morality. Although we claim to be a nation “under God,” there is a clear trend away from the Christian influence which in the past formed the foundation of our social-moral outlook.

The degree to which our nation’s moral structure is weakening can often be distressing to believers in Christ. The very fact that 1.5 million babies are aborted each year causes anguish in a believer’s heart. Likewise, the growing promotion of homosexuality, the high incidence of venereal disease, the availability of pornography, and the general anti-Christian bias and moral wantonness in the arts and media are dismaying to those seeking to uphold biblical truth.

The rapid rate of moral decline and family breakdown may tempt a believer to become involved in social action. Distraught hearts may be drawn into the fray of public discourse, attempting to better society through various means of confronting the forces of social decline, without considering the many implications of such activity.

It may be helpful to view the present social decay from a historical perspective. Many nations have never known the influence of biblical truth as part of their moral foundation. In addition to abortion, some have practiced infanticide and left their elderly to die unattended. Moreover, in some societies acts of public sexuality were commonplace. History indicates that war, plunder and “ethnic cleansing” took place on the soil of many nations. Political despotism, injustice and religious persecution resulted in victims being tortured, beheaded, and burned at the stake. They had no civil rights. However, we live in a democracy which retains a sense of fairness and justice and still guarantees religious freedom.

Much more importantly we should view this subject from a biblical perspective. The Lord Jesus’ short life span was during a time of harsh political oppression. There was no democracy. A rigid class system favored the ruling elite. Slavery existed along with other grave social injustices. Individuals who did not conform to the rigid standards of oppressive rulers were unmercifully persecuted.

Yet, Jesus quietly endured these inequities. He did not offer an agenda of social and political reform. He said, “If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight” (John 18:36). His vision pointed beyond this short life. His focus was on that long and endless eternity; and He promised a home in heaven for all who would humbly repent for their sins and follow Him.

The mission for followers of Christ remains the same today. The primary objectives of the church are first, saving souls and then, nurturing them spiritually in the warm bond of brotherhood, so they can overcome sin and remain faithful until life’s end.

Entering into the fray of social activism presents many risks for the devout Christian. Almost invariably this results in strife and contention. The Apostle Paul taught Timothy that “...the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient” (2 Tim. 2:24). He also said that the “good soldier of Jesus Christ” does not entangle himself with the “affairs of this life” (2 Tim. 2:4). The arenas of social activism are not conducive to the virtues of restraint and gentleness. Instead there are outbursts of temper and strong, self-willed expressions which bring reproach to the name of Christ. The Word teaches, “Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go” (Prov. 22:24).

Loud, boisterous and partisan demonstrations are manifestations of the works of the flesh (reveling and variance) and are in no way reflective of Christ’s gentleness and lowliness of mind. Even a

calm show of force (as in an orderly march) is nonetheless a form of intimidation and can cause a contentious reaction.

Perhaps one of the most distressing changes in our society is the loss of respect for biblically-based truths. There seems to be a growing hostility toward Christian values. Many consider organized efforts to promote Christian influence as an imposition by the “religious right,” which is deeply resented.

What can be done? If sincere believers seek to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-14), the true and gentle spirit of Christ will enable them to offer constructive and meaningful influence. First and foremost should be sincere prayers for “all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Believers can also convey thoughtful suggestions to public officials and teachers, write respectable letters of concern to elected legislators, and record their preferences at the ballot-box. Creative ideas, void of extremes, can be forwarded to an array of decision-makers. These low-key actions can allow a separated believer to exert an effective influence in society while maintaining the respect of fellow citizens in a Christ-like manner.

All power is of God (Rom. 13:1). It is He who installs and replaces political power. The Bible teaches the believer that no matter what state he is in he should be content (Phil. 4:11). We can be very thankful that even in the midst of a time of deterioration, the true believer can find contentment. We can also be comforted by the assurance that “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom. 5:20).

The cautious, low-key approach advocated by our church does not imply submission to any earthly authority or ordinance which would require our disobedience to God’s Word. If this conflict should arise someday, we must say as Peter, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), no matter what the cost. We can be assured that we will be able to withstand every test and trial, if we put our trust in the power of God and walk in humble obedience to His Word.

God's Plan for Family Unity

The traditional family as described in the Bible (father, mother and children) has been deteriorating noticeably in America for several decades. Broken marriages are common and single parent families are on the increase. Probably as many as 50 per cent of the children in America today will not be living with both natural parents when they reach their 18th birthday.

This was not part of God's plan for His people and it certainly need not be that way in a godly family. The difficulties experienced by so many families do have a solution. Although we are not promised a life of ease free from all trials, we are promised that God will provide for His people. Proper family structure can be preserved. Husbands and wives, parents and children can live together in a peaceful atmosphere with harmony and joy if they base their lives on the Word of God and build their homes on the foundation of God's principles. A series of articles will be presented here on this important topic.

From the beginning of man's existence, the importance of the family structure has been emphasized. "And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him" (Gen. 2:18). This is reinforced in many places throughout the Scriptures. "Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favor of the Lord" (Prov. 18:22). In Ephesians, Chapters 5 and 6, the sacredness of family structure and unity are emphasized. We are also instructed that "...a prudent wife is from the Lord" (Prov. 19:14).

The high priority given by the Bible to the human family and the spiritual family (the children of God) working together to achieve God's plan for His people is strong evidence that God never intended for the "alternate life styles" and the "blended family" concepts so prevalent today.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of a solid family unit with husband and wife each displaying concern for the spiritual benefit of the other, is the help that family members can provide in encouraging other family members to work out their soul's salvation.

The Apostle Paul, while cautioning against the evils that can result from a relationship based on the flesh, emphasizes the opportunity for husbands and wives to be a spiritual help to their spouse. "For what knowest Thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?" (1 Cor. 7:16). The most valuable service that a family can provide is spiritual support for other family members. The selfish attitude of "me first" leads to spiritual shipwreck and family disintegration. This selfish attitude has not only brought heartache and sorrow to husbands and wives, but it has fostered the concept that children bring additional stress to the family.

In our society for so many people, children are looked upon as a burden. Official planners would have us to believe that each family should have no more than two children and that having only one would be preferable. The thought of many is that children are such a constraint on their lifestyle that they would rather not be bothered. The Bible teaches us otherwise. Rather than looking at the birth of a child as a financial burden or a contest of wills between parent and child, the birth of a child should be viewed as an opportunity to teach another soul about the love of God and as a chance to add another servant to God's labor force.

Children are a gift of God and can bring happiness and fulfillment to a family. "Lo children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them" (Ps. 127:3-5). Too often parents are made to feel that it is wrong to have a large family; but the Bible tells us, "they shall not

be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate” (Ps. 127:5).

The Bible gives us many examples of God’s people who viewed their children as a special gift from God. Jacob, in meeting his brother Esau said that those who were with him were “the children which God hath graciously given thy servant” (Gen. 33:5).

Likewise, Joseph, upon meeting his father in Egypt after years of separation, said in response to his father’s question, “They are my sons, whom God hath given me in this place” (Gen. 48:9). Israel’s response was “Bring them, I pray thee, unto me, and I will bless them” (Gen. 48:9). Also, the heart of the daughter of Pharaoh was moved to compassion when she saw the babe, Moses, in the ark among the flags by the river’s bank. After he was cared for by his mother for a time, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and “he became her son” (Ex. 2:10).

Jesus also emphasized the importance and blessedness of children when He said, “suffer little children and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:14). He also warned about the seriousness of teaching children properly and of the need to protect them from evil. “And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Mail. 18:5-6). Our heavenly Father holds children in high esteem and we are instructed that “...it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish” (Mail. 18:14). The charge to parents and to each of us is quite clear: Children are to be loved, provided for and instructed in a way that will give them the opportunity to attain their soul’s salvation as they reach the age of accountability.

God's Plan for Family Unity - II

This second in a series of articles considers the blessings of the extended family as well as the great need for guidance from the Lord in bringing up children in a godly manner.

The value of the God-given family structure extends beyond the nuclear unit of parents and children. Grandparents and other extended family members and friends can also reap benefits from, and be blessed by, our children. They can help bring generations together and provide a special joy to grandparents. "Children's children are the crown of old men" (Prov. 17:6).

The experience of godly grandparents and other faithful older family members and friends can be a valuable source of advice as young parents seek to raise their children according to God's will. Much can be learned by spending time talking with and seeking advice from those who have successfully guided their children to adulthood. Children also can benefit from time spent with grandparents and other older faithful servants of God. As our children grow to adulthood, we must not overlook the valuable resource God has preserved for us in these experienced soldiers of Christ.

As valuable as the relationship between generations is, there are, however, pitfalls to be avoided. Parents must not take unfair advantage of the grandparents in placing too much of the responsibility for raising the children on the grandparents. They have raised their family and should not be too tied down with excessive babysitting for grandchildren.

Grandparents, on the other hand, must be careful that the advice and assistance they provide for their children does not become overbearing and meddling. Too much influence can cause friction within the family and a lack of confidence in the parents. Godly wisdom and restraint are in order and a realistic balance must be sought. Grandparents must be careful that they do not undermine the authority of the parents with well intended but misdirected compassion when children are in need of parental discipline. Also, the excessive showering of material gifts must be avoided. Cooperation, love, and understanding are in order as we work together to teach our children the proper relationship they need to develop with God.

Although children are a blessing from the Lord, being a parent is a responsibility that at times can seem overwhelming. The physical needs of children must be supplied, the emotional needs must be tended to, the social development is a challenge, and most of all, the spiritual needs of children are of great concern. The pressures brought on by a very materialistic and worldly society can cause parents to lose focus and to have inappropriate priorities. The advice from many modern day child rearing professionals runs so counter to the Word of God that it can cause a great deal of confusion. We really should not seek the counsel of ungodly people, especially as it relates to rearing our children. "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful" (Psa. 1:1). The salvation of the souls of our children is far too important to entrust their future to the ungodly or to those who espouse questionable doctrines. God gave us our children and he expects us to teach them properly.

God did not place this tremendous responsibility upon His people without providing instruction on how to accomplish this task. His Word provides the principles upon which we can build a solid, stable family structure. However, since these instructions are not conveniently located in one place, one must search the Scriptures for the guidance that is needed. "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little" (Isa. 28:10).

Preparation for parental wisdom should begin before the first child is born. The first step in

fulfilling parental responsibilities is self-examination. Many times in the Scriptures God's people are advised to examine their lives in the light of God's Word in order to be at peace with God. "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves" (2 Cor. 13:5). "Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then we have confidence toward God" (1 John 3:21). In His sermon on the mount, Christ explained very clearly how important it is for us to cast the beam from our own eye so we can see clearly to remove the mote from our brother's eye (Matt. 7:4-5). If our lives are not in good spiritual order, it will make our task as parents much more difficult. If we are not submissive and obedient to God's Word and are not supportive of the church, how can we expect our children to learn obedience and submission to their parents?

Prayer for guidance in raising children should begin very early - prior to a child's birth. Manoah, the father of Samson, prayed fervently that God would show him and his wife how to raise their child, "O my Lord, let the man of God which thou didst send come again unto us and teach us what we shall do unto the child that shall be born. And Manoah said, Now let thy words come to pass. How shall we order the child, and how shall we do unto him?" (Judges 13:8, 12). Likewise, Hannah, the mother of Samuel, prayed fervently that God would bless her with a child, and she promised to lend him to the Lord as long as he might live (1 Sam. 1). These early prayers can help us focus our attention on the importance of entrusting our children to God's care and keeping and teaching them by word and by example of God's plan for the life of each of His children.

A life of much prayer and sincere dedication to this sacred task of childrearing will bring boundless blessings to a family circle. Although the Apostle John spoke of spiritual children, his profound words echo the heartfelt longing of every believing parent: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (III John 4).

God's Plan for Family Unity – III

This third in a series of articles on the family deals with the major impact of role models and peer influence on children. It also discusses certain key areas in the healthy emotional development of children and the long term consequences of their ability to make proper choices.

Parental influence by example can be either very negative or very positive. The sad account of a particular king of Israel was that he “did evil in the sight of the Lord and walked in the way of his father” (1 Kings 15:26). The evil influence of ungodly fathers was passed on from generation to generation.

Herodias’ evil influence on her daughter caused her to ask for the head of John the Baptist in a charger when she was given the opportunity to ask whatsoever she wanted, even to the half of the kingdom (Mark 6:22-28).

On the other hand, the faith of the grandmother (Lois) and the mother (Eunice) of Timothy was so strong that Paul was persuaded that this unfeigned faith was also evident in the life of Timothy (2 Tim. 1:5). It is therefore vital that parents establish a strong relationship with God and that their faith and trust in Him be unwavering. Children need to see from the very beginning of their lives that God is in control and that His influence is evident in the lives of their parents. We simply cannot begin too early to teach our children of the love of God.

Most of the emphasis of the series of articles, “God’s Plan for Family Unity” is focused on the parental duty to teach and to train children in the spiritual aspects of life and proper conduct of children. There are, however, other responsibilities of parents that are not totally “spiritual” even though the way we carry out these other duties will have a strong impact on the spiritual lives of our children.

Parents obviously have the duty to provide for the material needs of the family, “...for the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children” (2 Cor. 12:14). Yet we must not overemphasize the material things of life by laying up treasures on earth and not treasures in heaven. Jesus said, “for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21). If we place too much emphasis on the pleasures of this life, our children will not develop the proper priorities for their lives.

Parents must also provide for the emotional and social stability that children need. Children must not feel forsaken by their parents. Parents need to spend time with their children, just as Jesus took time for children (Mark 10:13-16). Children must learn that they can depend upon their parents for emotional support and sound advice.

A child’s relationship with his parents is usually his first exposure to authority figures. This makes a lasting impression on the child’s attitudes toward all forms of authority. If the child experiences inconsistency, unreasonable demands, unnecessary harshness, or lack of praise for worthy accomplishments, he will fail to develop proper trust and may even feel resentment and anger toward his parents and other authorities. The Apostle Paul directed a specific warning to fathers: “Provoke not your children to wrath” (Eph. 6:4). Rather, parents should make sincere effort to establish reasonable, but firm and consistent standards for their children to work toward. They should try to always speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), and they should not hesitate to give kind words of encouragement and praise when they are due (1 Cor. 12:26).

Children must be taught that their friends have a strong influence on their lives and they should be careful with whom they associate. The prodigal son would have had a much better life had he not spent time with those who influenced him to do wickedly. The impact that sin has on a person’s life may extend

far beyond the specific sin itself.

The consequences of sin can last a lifetime, even though the individual repents of the sin and is forgiven. Sin can ruin a person's health, can bring permanent injury or some other lifelong consequence. God's people would do well to teach this very important fact to their children.

The prodigal son repented of his sin and was forgiven by his father, but after returning, he was more like a servant than a son in certain aspects of life. His father said to the older son, "all that I have is thine" (Luke 15:3 1). The younger son was forgiven but his earthly inheritance was not restored. Peer pressure is powerful and this influence can last a lifetime. Parental influence, however, is more powerful and can last throughout eternity. Parents need to be ready and willing to combat peer pressure and to give their children a foundation that can help them overcome any negative impact their peers may have on them.

Parents need to control the activities of their young children and exert more influence than their friends. The Lord said of Abraham, "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment" (Gen. 18:19). As head of the household, fathers should gain the respect of their children through God-given strength, wisdom and tender affection which they convey to their children through unwavering love.

There is a very important lesson for fathers in the parable of the prodigal son. Even though the wayward son was a great disappointment to his father and no doubt caused much suffering, there was an abiding love which endured this difficult trial. Our children should always be assured of our unconditional love, even though they may at times fail very badly. Just as in the case of our beloved Saviour, such love reaches out in a special way to those who seem to deserve it the least. The Lord Jesus spoke of a man leaving ninety and nine sheep to find the one which had gone astray (Matt. 18:12). If we are guided in our parenting by constant awareness of our own desperate need for the Saviour's love, we will bring much comfort and assurance.

Members One of Another

When we become converted to Christ, the Word teaches us to become assimilated into the church, which is Christ's body. All of us can testify of the wonderful loving warmth we felt from God's people when we first came into the faith. This warmth and love is to be ongoing!

As believers became one in Christ they gain strength. When brothers and sisters come together to comprise a larger body (the church of which Christ is the head), we benefit by the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love and we also find a safer haven from evil. By being united in Christ, we become stronger in our mutual efforts to face a devious, evil enemy—Satan!

Our spiritual life in Christ is not to be self-oriented. There are many people in our society who express belief in God, but who are emphatic in stating they don't need the church. To a great extent in modern American protestantism, it is stressed that one's religious faith is solely a private matter between God and man, and it should not interfere with one's personal choice of lifestyle. This is the opposite of true brotherhood and bears no resemblance to the Bible's pattern for the family of believers.

An individual believer's relationship to God, while personal in certain aspects, is also corporate (combined into a body). It is vertical (man to God and God to man) and horizontal (man to man, i.e. brotherhood). Because all true brothers and sisters in faith have God's Spirit within them, it is important that they relate to one another spiritually in this unique horizontal relationship. In a sense, as we relate to God's children, we are relating to God. Jesus said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done unto me" (Matt. 25:40).

When we approach God and serve Him in the brotherhood, we are beneficiaries of each other's strengths and experiences. Such a support group can help us in our understanding of the distinctions between godliness and worldliness. It will also help keep us from error and from naively turning onto pathways that are spiritually harmful.

As fellow-believers in Christ, we are accountable not only to God, but to each other. We have many responsibilities to each other as "fellow-citizens" of the household of faith (Eph. 2:19): We are to share each other's joys and sorrows (1 Cor. 12:26); We are to comfort one another (1 Thes. 5:11); We are to be subject one to another (1 Pet. 5:5); We are, lovingly and with meekness and patience, to admonish and exhort one another when necessary (Col. 3:16); And in our lifestyle we are not to offend one another (Rom. 14:2 1) or put a stumbling block or occasion to fall in our brother's way (Rom 14:13); Nor are we to judge our brother (Rom 14:4).

The Bible is explicit in stating that God's people—those who have repented for their sins and have been truly converted—are members of Christ's body, the church. "Member" is defined as part of a larger whole. Our personal bodies are made up of many members, and so is the church; therefore, the members, in both instances, are to function cooperatively. "So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Rom 12:5). In this composition, individual members are given various God-ordained gifts and talents. From this, everyone in the body can benefit. There are "many members" in one body (Rom. 12:4).

As brethren we are under an umbrella of kindly spiritual authority. We are placed in the body of Christ (the church) as God sees fit: "But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him" (1 Cor. 12:18). Also we are to obey those in the brotherhood who rule over us and lead by example (Heb. 13:7, 17). And we are to submit one to another in the fear of God (Eph. 5:21). We are not independent entities walking on personal and isolated spiritual pathways.

Christ and the church are inseparable. Christ is the head of His body, the church (Eph. 5:23). We are members one of another. As a part of a body we cannot separate ourselves from this body and assert that we are following the Bible's pattern. If we go our own way or begin to "do our own thing" we are like a physical body part trying to exist on its own without benefit of all the various parts of the body being perfectly joined together.

The "unity of brotherhood" concept helps to perpetuate the faith from generation to generation. Keeping the faith and passing the torch to succeeding generations is very important—and especially so in our time when relativism and rationalism tend to undermine any type of absolute beliefs.

The enemy of our souls (Satan) is determined to undermine the virtues which are essential for a body of believers to thrive. Through the ages his goal has been to send individualism into the church. His tactic is to do it through seepage, not in a noticeable flow. To resist Satan, and to protect the holy church, we are to be obedient children, not fashioning ourselves after our former lusts (1 Pet. 1:14).

We are to be one bread and one body (1 Cor. 10:17). The concept, spiritually, of becoming one bread can be likened to physical bread. In making bread, a baker takes various ingredients, mixes them, kneads them (presses into a mass), and then bakes the dough into loaves.

Spiritually, we come as various individuals into the church. We are kneaded as we became crucified with Christ and the old man is pressed down. Finally, as the old man dies, and we come into the warmth of the Spirit and the brotherhood (the baking), we are blended into one bread and one body. Our fleshly individualism (the old Adam) is destroyed and we become yielded unto God (Rom. 6:11, 13), and only then do we truly function as members one of another according to the biblical pattern.

The Message of Outward Holiness

The Lord Jesus, in reminding His followers that they were the light of the world, said, “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

The implication here is clear that the believer is to outwardly reflect those godly values that are cherished in our hearts. Not only will the inner joy of salvation be “outwardly” noticed in the form of a cheerful, loving and friendly personality, but one’s inner commitment to virtue, restraint and purity will be outwardly manifested by choices in clothing, hairstyle, our home, the way we dress our children and other aspects of life style that are patterned after New Testament standards and principles.

The scriptural mandates regarding outward holiness are especially important today amid a culture that more and more reflects a style of outward unholiness, demonstrated by patterns of dress that reflect immodesty, sensuality, sloth, and sloppiness.

It is well established that non-verbal forms of communication convey subtle but powerful messages. It is said that “actions speak louder than words,” and often the modest and orderly patterns of outward godliness portrayed by sincere believers serves as a powerful means of silent, spiritual communication, “perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1).

We as believers in Christ Jesus are to walk in the light of God’s countenance (Psa. 89:15). We are image-bearers. We are ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). An ambassador (in governmental circles) is one who is carefully chosen, who is able to communicate with discretion and who is very careful in dress and manner, so as to avoid bringing even the least amount of reproach to his nation. The same principle applies to our lives as ambassadors for the Lord.

Defined patterns of outward appearance are not confined to the realm of faith. In the military, in scouts and among certain entertainers and athletic teams uniform modes of dress and appearance prevail. The intent is to be “uniform;” that is, to be “united in form.” Such a pattern gives a message of solidarity, special identity and allegiance. The Apostle Paul commended the Colossians for their order and steadfastness of faith (Col. 2:5). The word “order” in this case signifies an orderliness which is characteristic of unified groups such as well disciplined soldiers.

In matters of faith, attire and appearance are important, not merely for the sake of symbolism but because the Bible directs souls to be holy, both inwardly and outwardly. “Be ye holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16). Also, we are to “be holy in all manner of conversation” (1 Pet. 1:15). In this instance, “conversation” refers to lifestyle, not just to verbal expression.

The world’s patterns of outward unholiness are often enshrouded in sensuality, pride, vanity, rebellion, extravagance, sophisticated fashions, and consumptive living. These are all patterns which are to be laid aside at conversion. The “former lusts” (done in ignorance) are abandoned for the much higher standard of godliness (1 Pet. 1:14).

The true believer seeks to please God, not man. Accordingly, he or she realizes that the “fashion” of this world passes away (1 Cor. 7:31). Therefore, dress and appearance should comply with the patterns of the Word rather than with those of an unregenerate world.

A basic biblical teaching which applies to the subject at hand is sanctification. This means to be set apart as holy. It was the Apostle Paul’s prayer that the “very God of peace sanctify you wholly” (1

Thess. 5:23). Sanctification's foundation lies in the cleansing power of the blood of Christ and is made evident when we "put on the new man" (Col 3:10). Another biblical teaching associated with sanctification is separation. The believer is advised: "come out from among them, and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing" (2 Cor. 6:17); and he is to cleanse himself from all "filthiness of the flesh and spirit" (2 Cor. 7:1). Thus, we are to separate ourselves from suggestive styles of dress and attire that would instigate lust and sensual desire in those who observe us. Finally the principle of outward distinction of the sexes must be honored. This is an ordinance of God (1 Cor. 11:2-15) which is reflected in hair length, prayer covering and dress. An example of perversion of this sacred distinction is listed among the works of the flesh as being "effeminate" (1 Cor. 6:9).

Even though these biblical principles have little respect in our modern society, we must remember the warning of the Apostle Paul: "Be not conformed to the world ..." (Romans 12:2).

A sister in faith, in realizing that her calling is one of modesty (1 Tim. 2:9) and chastity (Titus 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:2), seeks to follow the church's helpful guidance in the application of these pertinent Scriptures. Her long hair, gathered modestly and free of artificial enhancements presents a time honored and widely recognized pattern of dedication to godliness. "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety: not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works" (1 Tim. 2:9-10).

Outward holiness motivated by a sincere love for Christ conveys a clear message to the world. It tells the world that we are committed to Christian beliefs, that we have rejected the sensuous and self-pleasing patterns of the culture, and that we are willing through self-denial, separation, and nonconformity to live according to the Bible's enduring ideals of holiness and sanctification. It clearly identifies us with the church, which is Christ's body here on earth.

The Armor of God

A believer's life is on the one hand an ongoing quest for peacefulness (2 Tim. 2:22; Heb 12:14) and on the other hand a warfare against evil that must be engaged continuously (1 Tim. 1:18). These seemingly contrary pursuits require strong determination and can be mastered only by the grace of God.

Our quest to maintain peacefulness involves our relationship with God and with our fellow man: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1) and "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12:18).

However, our warfare (Eph. 6:12) is "against principalities [Satan's dominion as in Col. 2:15], against powers [worldliness as in Eph. 2:2], against rulers of the darkness of this world [ungodly secular leadership], against spiritual wickedness in high places [deceptive leadership in spiritual matters as in 2 Tim. 4:3]." The purpose of the armor is to ward off spiritual deception: that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Eph. 6:13).

Preparation for a lifetime engagement in this spiritual battle begins when an individual repents and becomes a truly converted and dedicated soldier of the Cross. "No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier" (2 Tim. 2:4). The phrase "stand therefore" (Eph. 6:14) is indicative of a well grounded, fully prepared soul, unquestionably ready to put on the whole armor of God. Armor includes all equipment needed to win the battle, both protective elements (such as the breastplate and helmet) as well as an aggressive weapon (the sword).

To have the loins girded with truth signifies the strength which is derived from truth (Eph. 6:14). One cannot "grow in grace" (2 Pet. 3:18) without building upon the solid foundation of biblical truth. This requires that we give diligence to "rightly dividing the Word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15), which means carefully, prayerfully and correctly interpreting the Word of God.

Perversions of the truth include tactics that are within the boundaries of the civil law but are not altogether aligned with the law of righteousness (1 Cor. 10:23). We are not to give moral or financial support to those who pursue activities in the name of Christianity but whose doctrine is not altogether founded on the truth (2 John 10). The child of God is to practice total honesty in everything: "Provide things honest in the sight of all men" (Rom. 12:17). There is a saying that "honesty is the best policy." For the believer honesty is the only policy. Our behavior toward everyone should be Spirit-motivated, kind and without partiality: "The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (Jam. 3:17).

The "breastplate" (Eph. 6:14), consists of righteousness (right living, correctness) and is the major protector of the heart (the inner man). It is displayed in our personality, emotions and other aspects of our character. It is readily observed by others: "... let your conversation [behavior] be as becometh the gospel of Christ ..." (Phil. 1:27).

A soldier in Bible times with "feet shod" (Eph. 6:15) had his sandals tightly bound giving him good speed and sure footing. This is figurative of the believer's readiness of mind and body to lay hold of the grace of God, to "stand fast in the faith" (1 Cor. 16:13), and "to be ready to every good work" (Tit. 3:1).

"The shield of faith" (Eph. 6:16) denotes sincere belief that is firmly grounded in the truth of God's Word. The shield of faith has the capability to protect us from all tactics (fiery darts) which the evil

principalities and powers would use against us. Since quenching the fiery darts doesn't diminish the source, the use of the shield requires persistence, alertness, and skill that can only come from unwavering loyalty to Christ and His Word. As Joshua of old, we must continually affirm that, "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15).

"The helmet of salvation" (Eph. 6:17) is figurative of the preservation of our blessed hope: "If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard..." (Col. 1:23).

"The sword of the Spirit" (Eph. 6:17) is the fulfillment of God's promise to give each believer aggressive power over sin. We use the sword (God's Word) to sever unfruitful and unholy things from our lives. There should be no ambiguity in our dealing with impulses to compromise with Sin: "For the Word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword. . . and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 3:12).

Even after being wholly armed, full success will still require much prayer and watchfulness on the part of all the brethren. We should dedicate ourselves to praying for all the saints. We all deeply appreciate other's prayers and should be mindful of the fact that the fierce spiritual battle in which we are all engaged requires marshalling all of our forces in a united effort against the enemy of our souls. "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints" (Eph. 6:18).

Competition

Competition normally exists either as rivalry between persons or as a driving force within one's self for personal achievement. Few of our ambitions or efforts in life are completely free from exposure to competition. An ideal competitive inclination was expressed by the Apostle Paul when he wrote, "...but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13). However, not all competitive ambitions are that pure, and many are detrimental to virtuous conduct.

Our competitive inclinations likely have roots in our early childhood experiences when we were striving to learn to walk, talk and play with other children. Our parents and others who helped us in those challenges taught us that kindness, patience, and reason should control our competitive desires.

In school we were encouraged to be intensely competitive. This benefited our progress as a student, but along with that striving for achievement, we had rules to guide us in the management of our behavior. Obedience to those rules helped us to build upon the fundamentals of sound social ethics that had begun in us through the exemplary teaching of our parents. A person with a regenerated heart uses that same principle of laying a foundation and then building upon it when he uses God's Word for the rule and God's Spirit for the power to gain control over all of his human desires: "Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection" (1 Heb 6:1).

Believers in Christ should be motivated by the Holy Spirit in all their endeavors. This was true for Paul, who when heading for Jerusalem could say, "and now, behold, I go bound in the spirit (Acts 20:22). They should live by a higher and more perfect standard than either civil law or social ethics: "all things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not" (1 Cor. 10:23). Adherence to this divine guidance in controlling our competitive desires brings with it a divine promise: "But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed" (Jam. 1:25).

Inherent with becoming a believer is to have the devil as an adversary (1 Pet. 5:8). He is a master at promoting competitive indulgences. If Satan has success with this approach it will be manifested in a variety of forms such as strife between brethren (Gal. 5:20); excessive desire to increase personal wealth, prestige or power, "I will pull down my barns and build greater. (Luke 12:18); and competitive activities for personal entertainment, "ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton (given to enjoyment of the senses)" (Jam. 5:5). To prepare us for this struggle, Christ has provided us with His very own mind by which we can discern between spiritual and carnal motives (1 Cor. 2:16; 3:3).

Competitive striving against others is evidence of pride as "only by pride cometh contention" (Prov. 13:10). Athletic competition generally requires that an opponent be defeated or suffer loss. The prideful motivation of excelling at someone else's expense is sternly warned against in the Word: "For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (2 Cor. 10:12). To present oneself to others as someone more worthy or more capable than they, reduces our own effectiveness and creates a burden to others. Rather, the Word teaches: "he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord. For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth" (2 Cor. 10:17-18).

For us to humbly, rather than contentiously, make use of our personal abilities to serve Christ and His church is a delight to God: "...what does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Micah 6:8).

In occupational pursuits it is often necessary for us to compete in order to get the job, obtain the advancement, sell the product or get the contract, etc. Although this can be acceptable and may be expected in some instances, we must be very careful that it is done within the guidelines in the Word (Eph. 6:5-9). Paul expected Onesimus to be profitable to Philemon (Philmn. 11, 16). He also expressed his confidence to Philemon that he would be fair to Onesimus, not using his leadership role in the church (vs. 1, 7, 21) or his wealth to a competitive advantage aimed at making gain at the expense of Onesimus. Their spiritual relationship as peaceful brethren was greater profit to both of them than anything that could have been gained from their occupational relationship (vs. 16-21).

Competitive entertainment such as athletic contests poses dangers to the believer in several ways besides the wasting of precious time. It promotes revellings, emulations, strife and seditions (divisions) (Gal. 5:20-21), all of which are to be crucified in those who belong to Christ (Gal. 5:24). To indulge ourselves in highly emotional events for fleshly enjoyment creates a filling of the heart with an “evil treasure” (Matt. 6:21; 12:35). If we sow to the flesh, we shall “of the flesh reap corruption” (Gal. 6:8).

Alternatively we should put our efforts into those things that fill our hearts and minds with good treasures, such as love, peace, long-suffering, gentleness and temperance (self-control), which are fruitful (Gal. 5:22). It is the grace of God which teaches us that “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Tit. 2:11-12).

The Good Samaritan

Parables are easily understood stories that use earthly circumstances to convey spiritual meanings. A parable may have one or more intended applications. Sometimes certain parts of a parable can also be used as teaching aids, but not every detail of the earthly circumstances in a parable has direct application to our lives.

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) is an excellent model of a person's spiritual life. The believers make up the inn (church). The unconverted are on the road to Jericho in the form of priests, Levites, thieves, citizens of Jericho, or if they are fortunate, they are personified by the man who was robbed.

His point of origin, Jerusalem the holy city, indicates the innocent beginning that we all have. The direction of travel toward Jericho, the city of self-reliance (Num. 13:28,29), is symbolic of the path that we all place ourselves on as we grow out of innocence. On that path we yield to the temptations in the world around us, allow our sinful nature to take control and bring on full responsibility for our sin.

The thieves represent the deception of the world: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Col. 2:8) and "Let no man beguile (rob) you..." (Col. 2:18).

The brief duration of the assault in the parable doesn't always fit the reality of the assault of the world upon our faith (1 John 5:4). Instead, it is by Satan's design perpetual, sometimes subtle, and always attractive to our natural mind. The ruthlessness of the thieves, though, is a very accurate depiction of the tenacity of Satan, who never retreats from drawing as many people as possible into his clutches.

The victim's condition after the assault is typical of our condition as we become choked by the "care of this world" (Matt. 13:22), still having some life (half dead— Luke 10:30), but being unfruitful (Matt. 13:22). We too are stripped when our innocence departs and is not naturally replaced by virtue, and we become wounded (afflicted) by a growing acceptance of, and cooperation with, the ways of the world. The Word teaches that "the friendship of the world is enmity with God" (Jam. 4:4).

The priest who looked on the victim and passed by could be seen as representative of the false doctrines and false teachers that exist in our time as well. The Levite could represent the masses that support and practice those false doctrines (Matt. 7:13). Since these men were not harmed by the thieves it seems that false doctrine (priest and Levite), worldliness (thieves), and unbelief and self-reliance (Jericho) all cooperate as arms of the adversary in ways that disguise their treachery. Together they pose an overwhelming force. Jesus, however, has never been overwhelmed by this worldly force. We are encouraged by the truth that "greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Likewise, "thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57).

The assaulted man should not be considered as one having no choice. He found the mercy of God and became willing to be healed. He submitted to the healing and cleansing (oil and wine) (Luke 10:34) of the blood of Christ (1 John 1:7). His change from serving the world to serving God occurred openly, for anyone to see. Likewise, conversion marks our beginning of publicly separating ourselves from worldliness and giving our lives into the service of the Lord.

The inn that received this sin sick soul is a place that welcomes strangers (see Luke 17:15-18). The inn (church) must provide guidance through God's Word to help nourish faith in Christ and love for

the Saviour and for all mankind. When the Lord brings any broken contrite soul to the inn, we dare not refuse him (Acts 11:9) but as workers together with Christ must receive him with tender care.

Each member is included in the work of providing care for needy souls. “Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous” (1 Peter 3:8). The Word also teaches “that the members should have the same care one for another” (1 Cor. 12:25). We cannot pass off the responsibility of the keeping of the inn to any one person or any group (such as elders and ministers). The host (elder/ministers) did accept on behalf of the inn the nourishment necessary for the church to grow in faith and number by “holding (fast to) the Head (Christ), from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God” (Col 2:19).

Part of our work in the inn is to maintain separation from worldliness. This provides many benefits to the believer. It also demonstrates to unbelievers a clear distinction from, and a rewarding alternative to, their current lifestyles. A member of the inn that becomes lax and reclaims some of the image of the world causes confusion in the brotherhood and makes it difficult for the seeking soul to identify the inn. The care that should be thriving in the inn is addressed in Titus 3:8: “This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works.” “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him” (Col. 3:17).

The Role of a God-fearing Woman in Modern Society

It is important today, perhaps as never before in the history of Christianity, to clarify and define the biblical responsibility a God-fearing woman has in the life of the church, the family and society.

Before defining the believing woman's role for today, it is perhaps equally important to clarify what it is not, because today's worldly forces are drawing women into a role that is inconsistent with biblical teachings. The sense of what a woman is to be, or is to become, is shifting—and society is suffering because of it.

Radical feminism, “equal rights”, usurping authority over men, self-assertion, careerism, and even reproductive rights are but a portion of a misguided agenda that is strongly influencing women. It is causing a revolution in how women act and pursue life. These misconceptions stem, in large part, from feminist studies curricula that dominates many universities. Such are contrary to biblical perspective and it behooves the discerning, faithful, believing woman not to be taken in by them.

There are fundamental precepts in the Word that must be understood before one can truly grasp the believing woman's duty for today. They are at odds with the feminist agenda.

The woman was created for the man, is the glory of man, and is under the authority of the man (I Cor. 11:7, 9; Eph. 5:23). While believing women are of equal value with believing men in God's sight, for the sake of divine order the Bible's godly authority must be followed (I Cor 11). Lest anyone think that a man's leadership position is one of dominance, they should become familiar with the Apostle Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 5:25,28 “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it; ... so ought men to love their wives as their own bodies.” Thus, despite man's leadership responsibilities, his head-ship role is to reflect mercy, empathy, compassion, and Christian love.

The woman's role is not one of mindless, unqualified subordination to the man. To the extent that she is obedient to God, to Christ, and to the teachings of the Word, she will be able to make enormous contributions to the church, to God's glory. Thus, she functions under an aura of true Christian beauty, purity and holiness “which becometh a woman professing godliness” (1 Tim. 2:10).

Included among the believing woman's high calling in Christ Jesus is that of being a “keeper at home” (Titus 2:5). A “keeper” is one who maintains an establishment. A keeper insures continuity from generation to generation. The Word teaches a woman to be a keeper “at” home, not merely a keeper “of” the home (perhaps spending her days at a career that takes her away from her children). Except in unusual circumstances, her family profits most when her special gifts of nurturing can be expended on her children all day, every day.

As a keeper at home, the believing woman can wield a major influence in the family. As she “reverences” her husband and recognizes his headship, and offers support to him along with wise counsel in everyday matters, her contributions can be many (Eph. 5:23). As she is subject to her husband, and he is devout in his love and respect for her, both will benefit.

One of the godly woman's most important roles is to seek virtue. Proverbs 31:10-30 is an apt description concerning a woman's daily duties and objectives. Her fulfillment is found in service to others. Her godly sense of self-denial in preference to the care and welfare of others far exceeds the short-term rewards of a career or involvement in feminist causes contrary to scripture. Proverbs 31 directs her to a life of diligence, redemption of time, thrift, charity, honor, wisdom and compassion.

The godly woman is also a teacher. While she accepts her role to be “silent in the church with all subjection” (I Tim. 2:11), she recognizes her teaching duties in the home, and the wide influence she can have in the daily training and spiritual nurturing of her children. As her children, God willing, become converted she has an equally important task of diligently teaching them, especially if she has converted daughters. She is to teach her daughters eight important things as found in Titus 2:4,5: “that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the Word of God be not blasphemed.”

Single women can be diligent in the work place and make enormous contributions to the cause of Christ, both financially and in portraying and teaching godly values to all who are subject to their influence. With less family responsibilities, our single sisters often have the opportunity to be a good light as they help those who are in need.

A godly woman will see the importance of outward holiness that reflects both her gender distinctiveness and identity as a believing woman. In order that she may be “chaste”, “modest”, and “shamefaced”, it will require a true devotion to God’s Word and appreciation for the church’s helpful guidance (I Tim. 2:5,9).

Regarding sexual distinction in dress, I Cor. 11 re-enforces the distinction God makes between male and female, and I Cor. 6:9 points out the sin of being effeminate. Beware of Satan’s craftiness and avoid gender cross-dressing (Deut. 22:5). Also, a believing woman’s long hair brings glory to her (I Cor. 11:15), and when it is gathered neatly in a godly manner, it inhibits the potential for being sensual and it places her in harmony with God’s Word, “Be not conformed to this world” (Romans 12:2).

Perhaps one of the clearest instructions to women in the New Testament is found in I Tim. 2:9,10 which is still applicable for today’s sincere, believing woman: “In like manner, also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array, but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works.”

The world is beckoning believing women to turn from godly characteristics as recorded in God’s Word, for a freer and less circumspect lifestyle that blurs the differences between a believing and a non-believing woman. May our dear sisters in faith resist these temptations.

The Danger of Values Clarification

The true and sincere believer in Christ Jesus exists today among a multitude of philosophies and spiritual forces, many of which are nothing more than falsehoods as revealed by the eternal and unchanging truths revealed in the Scriptures. The concept of “values clarification” is one such worldly force that has exerted enormous influence in society at large, and can unknowingly creep into a believer’s life causing him to think and act in ways that are inconsistent with biblical values.

Values clarification is a popular teaching method designed to foster independence in making personal moral choices. The key to values clarification is to question everything! In an educational setting, this gives the student maximum choices and total autonomy in choosing his or her moral outlook.

As Christians, we are to walk by faith and not by sight and are not to lean on our own understanding (II Cor. 5:7). We are to commit all our cares to God in prayer and then wait in patient trust that He will resolve the things that concern us. We petition Him often for guidance that we might fulfill His will, and obey His directions. We place ourselves in the hollow of His hand. At the same time, we must fight against the natural man’s tendency to lean on our own understanding, and to habitually depend on a reason-oriented and experience-dominated method of finding our way through life’s many challenges.

There is a danger today of values clarification with its worldly traits and concepts creeping into our lives, affecting the way we think, respond and react. If we are not careful, it can lead us into disobedience and a tendency to depend on our own reasoning powers.

Biblical truth, instilled in youth by parents and church is not accepted as “truth”. Biblical truth is especially subject to challenge. Consequently, a student is taught to “clarify” his values to determine what is true to him; that is, to “discover”, largely based on his experiences and preferences, what is right for him. In such a method, enshrouded in relativism rather than in biblical truth, there is no right or wrong. In this reasoning, what is right for one person may be wrong for another person and vice versa.

Values clarification is rooted in relativism and situation ethics. Choices are made based on the individual’s life experiences, not on the direction given in God’s Word. The education and media systems in America, two leading influences of our society, are deeply-rooted in a relativistic and values clarification outlook. We, as converted believers in Christ, are subject to their values clarification patterns if we are not watchful.

The Word offers sufficient warning that it is possible to be seduced, not only by religious confusion, but by deceitful philosophical patterns as well. “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God” (Rom. 10:3). Also “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful: but became vain in their imagination, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools” (Rom. 1:21-22).

In adopting values clarification, the individual, rather than God and His Word, becomes the ultimate authority. The Word’s messages, if recognized at all, then become optional. If we are not careful, we as believers can begin to “pick and choose” which portions of Scripture to follow, a pattern that is widespread among many in nominal and evangelical Christianity. As we are misled to “clarify” God’s divine messages based on our experiences, we may “choose” to dismiss portions of God’s Word because, from a situational basis, it is inconsistent with our personal preferences (and our experiences). Thus, we

may decide it is inapplicable to our life. We have then become disobedient because we, perhaps unknowingly, have set ourselves up as a higher authority than God's Word.

Values clarification is undergirded by the relativistic precept that nothing is absolute. "Truth" is not absolute according to this viewpoint, but is true only as it relates to changing factors. This false theory of ethics or knowledge maintains that the basis of judgment is relative and differs according to events, experiences, etc.

God, through His Word, which we accept by a simple, childlike faith, surely advises us concerning such falsehoods (Col. 2:8). Many Scriptures exhort the believer to avoid philosophical falsehoods (I Tim. 4:1-6). Paul warns us to be aware of those "who exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25). John wrote "If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book" (Rev. 22:18), and "He that rejecteth me and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day" (John 12:48).

If we are careless, we can unknowingly be implementing values clarification in our lives. If we dismiss certain portions of Scriptures as irrelevant, or if we are casual in following the ideals and direction of the church, then values clarification may have crept into our lives; we have personally "clarified" spiritual guidance as irrelevant and inapplicable to our spiritual lives. In this, values clarification destroys spiritual unity: it lifts up the individual and can be destructive to the warmth and welfare of the brotherhood.

There is a tendency today in nominal Christian circles to dismiss the literal meaning of the Bible. A "higher criticism" method of interpretation has been the forerunner to today's relativistic outlook toward matters of transcendent faith. From this liberal way of looking at the Bible, has come the many forces of philosophy that are destructive to God's ways: relativism, values clarification, situational ethics, and strong reliance on personal understanding. Only as we become more and more submissive to God in simple faith, and accepting His Word in the spirit of humility can we overcome any tendency we have to allow values clarification to cause confusion in our lives. Humility, submission and trust in God far supersede values clarification in our quest for a life pleasing to God.

God's Plan For Family Unity - IV

Part IV in a series of articles on the family deals with the duty of parents to nurture, to love, and to teach their children.

We are taught in the scripture to bring our children “up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). To nurture means “to promote the development of” and it involves all of the environmental factors to which an individual is subjected. Since nurturing involves such an all encompassing influence on the lives of our children, it behooves us as parents to try to be the major part of that influence. We cannot promote the development of our children’s lives if we are not actively involved with them. Nurturing requires time, patience and diligence. If we do not nurture our children, someone else will.

Perhaps the first and most obvious element of nurturing is the love that parents must have for their children. The Apostle Paul wrote to the aged women that they should “teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children...” (Titus 2:4). There are many stirring examples in the Bible that depict a parent’s deep love for their children. David’s response to the illness and death of his first child by Bathsheba portrays the love and dedication of a father for his infant son (II Sam. 12:15-25). Jacob had a similar reaction when he lost his son, Joseph, through the deceitfulness of Joseph’s brothers (Gen. 37:31-35). Jacob’s subsequent devotion to Benjamin displays additional love of a father for his child.

Other examples of parental love are Hagar (Gen. 21); Jochebed, the mother of Moses (Ex. 2); Hannah, the mother of Samuel (I Sam. 2); the Shunammite mother (II Kings 4); the father of the prodigal son (Luke 15:20); Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist (Luke 1); and Mary the mother of Jesus (Luke 2).

We can learn a great deal about love for our children if we review these examples carefully and frequently. It is natural that parents who love their children want them to learn to discern between right and wrong.

In Proverbs we are taught to “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). “Train” does not merely mean “tell”. It means to instruct so as to make proficient. Therefore, instruction must be done over and over until the lesson is mastered. Training our children in the way they should go requires patience, persistence, clarity of instruction, diligence and a willingness to be a good example so we do not destroy the lesson of our words by being a poor example. Children receive mixed and confusing messages if our actions and words are inconsistent.

Training also means to dedicate, to consecrate (set apart for a purpose), to make skillful by teaching and practice, to discipline and to instruct to be useful and obedient, to bring to a particular position, to grow in a particular way and to develop. We cannot expect to train our children if we only spend a few minutes each day with them.

Although we must be serious and diligent in training our children, we must be careful that we are not unreasonable and in the process, “provoke your children to wrath” (Eph. 6:4) “lest they be discouraged” (Col. 3:2 1). It must be tempered with love, with compassion, and with an understanding and forgiving spirit.

The most important goal we can have for our children is for them to learn to love and serve the Lord. The importance of diligently teaching our children about God’s plan for His people cannot be over-

emphasized. Part of training is discipline, a concept that is certainly misunderstood in our day. The root word of discipline comes from discipulus which means “training that develops self control, character or orderliness and efficiency.”

Another word that comes from discipulus is disciple, “a pupil or follower of a teacher or a school of religion.” If we want our children to be disciples (followers) of Christ they must be taught God’s Word and they must be trained to be temperate and submissive so they can follow their teacher.

The goals of discipline are to teach our children the truth of God’s Word, to teach them the need to repent and to serve the Lord, to teach them about God’s love for mankind and our love for God and for them and to teach them to be submissive to God. The goals of discipline also involve helping our children to deal with the pressures of life and to help them develop feelings of self worth (to be worthy of God’s love, not an egotistical self-esteem).

Moses related this important concept to the children of Israel as he taught (and admonished) them as they approached the end of their forty year journey in the wilderness. He was concerned that they would forget the lessons they had learned in the wilderness. He admonished them to “...keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them thy sons, and thy sons’s sons;” (Deut. 4:9). A further admonition is given to teach the children of God’s commandments. “And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes” (Deut. 6:7-8).

As parents diligently fulfill the responsibilities of rearing their children, scriptural directives must be followed. The love that Christ has for His followers must be evident in our lives. Christ taught by Word and He taught by example, the most powerful method of teaching. Just as Christ patiently worked to mold the lives of His disciples so they would be able to carry on His work, so parents mold the lives of their children by providing them with godly training, discipline, love and example.

God's Plan for Family Unity – V

Part V in a series of articles on family unity deals with teaching by example and presents a few general guidelines about human nature as it relates to discipline within the family.

Although we do not model our lives after the imperfect example of man, it is encouraging to read about the faithful servants who followed the Lord. The Lord said of Abraham “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; ...” (Gen. 18:19). Paul taught us that we are to be examples for others, “... be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (I Tim. 4:12).

As parents, we serve as powerful examples, either positive or negative, to our children. We must carefully examine our lives and eliminate carelessness, inconsistency and discord from our lives to avoid the negative impact that these would have on our children. Husbands and wives must be in godly harmony “... that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Cor. 1:10).

This admonition is also for the church. If children see inconsistency, division or a lack of harmony in the home or in the church, it causes confusion and provides Satan an opportunity to turn them away from our primary objective: teaching our children to serve God.

Although it is probably not possible to give an exact “recipe” for teaching our children, it certainly is possible to find many general principles and specific guidelines, based upon the Word of God, that can be very beneficial to parents as they deal with the task of raising children in an evil and powerfully influential world. Many of these scriptural principles and guidelines are contrary to what the world and many “professionals” would have us believe.

A few general statements about godly order in the home and some principles of discipline as they relate to human nature may help prepare our hearts for more specific Bible teachings that believers should follow.

The scripture makes it very clear that a family is not a democracy. Parents must work together with the father being the leader and the mother giving loving support. This does not mean that we do not listen to our children nor does it mean that we do not consider their feelings and wishes. It simply means that parents are responsible to see that the atmosphere of the home is one of godliness and that the decisions that are made are based upon the Word of God. Perhaps it is realistic to say a family should be a theocracy, an organization ruled by God.

People (children) tend to repeat activities that get them what they want. If parents, or other authority figures, bow to pressure and give in to requests or demands brought on by unacceptable behavior, the likelihood of unacceptable behavior being repeated is increased. We need to overcome the temptation to “buy” short term peace at times of difficulty brought on by inappropriate behavior. This can send a strong signal to our children that we are unwilling or unable to take a firm stand on matters of right and wrong and could lead to further rebelliousness and lack of submission.

It is generally not the severity of punishment that gets results, but the certainty of it that changes behavior. If we are inconsistent in enforcing the rules our children are to follow, they soon learn that most of the time there will be no consequences for improper behavior. This sends an unclear signal to a child and increases the likelihood that the child will ignore or defy the parents, causing significant conflict and confusion in the home.

Discipline and punishment are not the same thing. Proverbs 22:6 teaches us about training a child (discipline) while Proverbs 23:13 emphasizes the need for correcting (punishing) a child. Punishment can be part of discipline but it is certainly not the entire process. It is one way (among many) of enforcing discipline.

Parents should anticipate changes in their children's need for training and correction as they mature. As an infant, a child makes no decisions, other than to announce hunger or discomfort, and takes no responsibility for his behavior. Parents are totally responsible for the care and welfare of the child and make all the decisions that affect the child. As a child matures, that situation gradually changes until ultimately the child becomes an adult and makes his own decisions and should accept responsibility for those decisions. The time during which this transition occurs can be quite trying as parents struggle with the realization that their child must begin making more and more decisions and the fear that they will not always make wise choices.

Not all children learn at the same rate and not all children respond to the same techniques of training. An additional complicating factor is that techniques that work with a child at one point in time may not work with the same child at a different time. This can be a frustrating experience for parents but if we are sensitive to the changes that are taking place in our children's lives, we will be better prepared to successfully respond to these changes.

Although it is not realistic to expect all children to follow the same pattern as they mature, it is likely that most children will experience several phases of maturity, and parents need to be aware of these phases. The ages of these changes vary from child to child but fit roughly into the following categories: birth to three years old; four to six years old; seven to twelve years old; thirteen to eighteen; and over eighteen years old.

The examples we set for our children and the clear, consistent expectations we have for them will help reduce some of the anxieties and uncertainties we face as we work to set our children on a godly path of life.

God's Plan For Family Unity – VI

This sixth part in a series of articles on family unity focuses on the importance of parental self-examination, an early beginning, of being consistent and the consequences of inappropriate behavior.

As we prepare ourselves for the responsibility of parenthood, it is important that we examine our lives in the light of God's Word to make sure that our lives are in order. In His Sermon on the Mount, Christ reminded us that we must remove the beam from our own eye that we might see clearly to remove the mote from our brother's eye (Matthew 7:3-5). Surely we should do no less for our children. Children are very quick to notice if our actions are not consistent with our words. If we expect them to obey us, we must set the example by being obedient to God's Word.

It is also very important for fathers and mothers to be in unity concerning the training of their children. A "... house divided against itself shall not stand" (Matthew 12:25). Children learn very quickly to recognize these differences and can, very early in life, use those differences to cause anxiety for parents. If one parent permits a certain kind of behavior, and the other parent tries to prevent the same kind of behavior, it will cause confusion in the home. The confusion that results from a lack of unity can be devastating to the stability of a home. The importance of unity and harmony between parents can hardly be over-emphasized.

It is important that discipline begins early in the life of a child. The Bible teaches us to start training our children before the world has an opportunity to influence them. "Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying" (Proverbs 19:18). "Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). Too often parents wait until a child is "old enough to understand" and then try to reason with him. Learning the meaning of "no" can begin quite early. Even very young children are capable of learning right from wrong. Young and tender hearts are much easier to mold than older, more rebellious hearts. Age appropriate discipline, including punishment, can be quite effective if applied with love, compassion and firmness. If we wait to begin to enforce godly standards until children are old enough to sit down and reason together, we make the task much more difficult and significantly reduce the chances for success.

In dealing with our children, we must be fair in our words and actions. We should also be consistent from day to day and we need to be consistent with each of our children. Inconsistency causes confusion and brings instability, "A double minded man is unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8). "My son, fear thou the Lord and the King; and meddle not with them that are given to change:" (Proverbs 24:21). Although being consistent sounds simple enough, the day to day pressures of being a parent can make this very challenging to achieve.

Being consistent does not mean that we should be unforgiving and completely inflexible. We all need to be treated with compassion and forgiveness, but in the process we must make sure that compassion is not permitted to cloud the difference between good and evil.

Be firm, be kind, mean what you say and say what you mean. Just as God patiently corrects us many times, we also need to correct our children without becoming weary. "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of his correction; For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth" (Proverbs 3:11-12). Firmness does not require a great deal of volume. Far better is it to be calm, clear and concise in giving instructions than to lose control and allow a situation to degenerate into a shouting match. "A soft answer turneth away wrath; but grievous words stir up anger: (Proverbs 15:1).

Words that are spoken must then be enforced. We should not make promises or threats that we cannot, or do not intend to carry out. James 2:12-26 goes into significant detail about the futility of words without action.

Just as a child of God recognizes that there are consequences for sin, our children must learn that there are consequences for disobedience. “Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment” (Eccl. 11:9).

The consequences for disobedience should be just strong enough to make it more advantageous to obey than to disobey. The correction or punishment should be appropriate to the offense. Also, the consequences for disobedience should be applied as soon after the incident as possible. “Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (Eccl. 8:11). This probably means that mother will need to enforce most of the discipline because she will most likely be with the child most of the time. It also means that fathers must be willing to be available to help as much as possible in the evenings and weekends. This will provide some relief to mothers and it will reinforce, to the child, that the parents are united.

Although the influence of the world on the lives of our children is very powerful, God has not put His people in an impossible situation. He has provided a way whereby we may be at peace with Him. He has provided a family structure that provides for orderly authority (father as head of the home and mother as the support). He has also provided instruction through His Word that helps us understand what our duty is as parents. With an early start in teaching our children right from wrong, with clear, consistent instruction and with godly discipline (including consequences for inappropriate behavior) in our children’s formative years, we can approach the task of training our children knowing that God will be our constant guide.

Comfort Ye One Another - I

We are living at a time of rapid transportation, almost instant communication, abundant material possessions and technological advances that make our lives easier. The world offers us “instant” gratification, fast service and encourages us to participate in the good life. There are more “helping” professionals now than ever before in the history of mankind. In spite of all these things that are supposed to make our life happier and in spite of all the help that is available, loneliness, discouragement and depression are affecting an ever increasing number of people, including the children of God. We often feel our inadequacies as we try to deal with this situation. However, we should realize there is no need for the believer to despair and become overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem. If we look to the world for help, we most likely will fail but God’s people need not fail because help is available through our Lord and Saviour. “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly,…” (Psalm 1:1). God will not desert us nor will He place us in a situation where we cannot do according to His will. The Spirit of God will not lead us where the grace of God cannot keep us.

Many times when we are in need of help, God provides what we need through His people. Each of us has a duty to help those in distress. We are instructed in God’s Word to “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people…” (Isaiah 40:1). In many places in the scripture we are encouraged to comfort one another and to “Bear ye one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2). Throughout the scripture we see the harmful results of avoiding this important responsibility as Cain tried to hide his guilt by asking “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9). In Matt. 25:45-46 we read the indictment of the King to those on his left “Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment.”

How can we comfort one another? How can we be our brother’s keeper without becoming meddlesome in the lives of those who need help? Throughout the scripture, and especially in the book of Job, we can find valuable instruction that can help us as we try to be of comfort to those who are in need.

When Job’s three friends heard of his afflictions they went “to mourn with him and to comfort him” (Job 2:11). Their initial response was appropriate and undoubtedly helpful as they wept with him, they sat down with him and they took the time to make themselves available to him. For seven days they were very patient, giving their total support. However, as soon as Job expressed his concern, and began to share his burden, his friends reproved him. They made many and grievous accusations against him which proved to be unfounded. They did not take the time to listen to what Job had to say, nor did they take the time to find out if their accusations were true. They took turns chastising him and adding to Job’s grief. As may be expected, this tended to make Job defensive and thereby contributed to the problem rather than to the solution. Let’s be careful that we don’t become “miserable comforters” (Job 16:2).

Perhaps one of the great lessons to be learned from this is that when a soul is in deep distress, they need someone to listen to them with an uncondemning heart. They need someone who cares enough about them to take the time to hear their concerns and to help them through the situation. We may not agree with what they say, and we may find that there are things in their life that need to be changed, but the time of crises is not the time for reproof. It is a time for additional compassion, patience and prayer. If reproof is needed, it can come later.

In time of such distress, we may feel that it is our duty to “solve” their problem and immediately tell them what they have done wrong and what they should do about it. Under difficult conditions it is usually best to take time to pray about the situation and seek for God’s direction. “Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord.” (Psalm 27:14).

By speaking too quickly we may well be trying to solve the symptom before we know what the problem is. Many times when people are in distress, they do not expect us to solve their problem—they just need to know that someone cares and that someone will listen to them and be available. At a time of distress, godly companionship is often the most valuable help that we can give.

After listening to what they initially have to say, it may be best to try to ask questions that will encourage them to continue to talk about their problem. When they have talked as much as they seem to need to, we should respond to them carefully, being aware that if someone else is involved, we should hear them also. The book of Psalms is a great resource to give comfort and direction. Psalm 31:22 is a blessing to many: “For I said in my haste, I am cut off from before thine eyes: nevertheless thou heardest the voice of my supplications when I cried unto Thee.” Encouraging words of comfort that provide spiritual support will do much to assuage the grieving soul.

It is not easy to know what to say to try to encourage someone who is sorely distressed. We often cannot find the right words to say. That is why God’s Word is so necessary. The Word of God provides us with the most valuable resource on earth to heal the distressed and brokenhearted. “Wherefore comfort yourselves together and edify one another, ...” (I Th. 5:11). To edify means to build or construct, to instruct or improve morally or spiritually. Someone in deep distress needs to be encouraged that God loves and cares for them and that there is hope for them. We need to encourage them that time has a way of healing even the deepest of wounds if we can continue to be faithful “... for the Lord preserveth the faithful...” (Psalm 31:23).

This topic will continue in the next editorial.

Comfort Ye One Another - II

As we seek to comfort one another, it is important to never underestimate the power of God and His boundless love and mercy. He is able to heal all wounds and to provide comfort and strength in the most difficult situations. In times of deep distress, the grieving soul often becomes so discouraged that it is difficult for them to pray or to read God's Word. The very time when someone least feels like praying and reading God's Word is the time when it is needed the most. If we can encourage them to continue praying and reading—perhaps by praying and reading with them it will help them draw closer to God. We have His promise that "...His mercy endureth forever" (Psalm 136). We can be comforted by the example of the children of Israel when they were in dire straits and "... they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!" (Psalm 107:13 & 15).

Satan will use any method he can to bring grief to the children of God. If he cannot lead us into sin, he may try to make us believe that we have done wrong even when we have been faithful. We need to be careful that we do not become judgmental. If someone is depressed, we dare not assume that they have sinned. Depression can be caused by a variety of conditions which may include long-term illness, significant amounts of stress or other non-spiritual factors. It may be that there is a spiritual problem but if there is, time, prayer and patience will reveal it. If it becomes apparent that there is a spiritual problem that needs attention, encouragement should be given to the troubled individual that they seek spiritual counselling from their Elder or minister. If they are unable to go alone, offer to go with them. It is best not to apply too much pressure, but neither should the problem be allowed to go on too long. Although the situation is not exactly the same as those described in Matthew 7:1-5 (removing the beam from our own eye so we can see clearly to remove the mote from our brother's eye), or Matthew 18:15-17 (approaching a brother about a trespass), the advice in the Word is certainly applicable as it teaches us how to approach situations in which cleansing and forgiveness are needed.

It is critically important that, rather than heaping guilt upon a distressed soul, they need to be reassured that where there is sincere repentance there is forgiveness. "So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow" (II Cor. 2:7). This is not to say that sin should be ignored nor covered but rather that it be dealt with using love, compassion and forgiveness.

We may feel we have so little to offer that we should not even try to help. However, let us not overlook the value of even a small amount of help. When Christ was in the wilderness with the multitude, He didn't provide them with a large supply of food. He only gave them one meal and then He sent them away (Matthew 15:32-35). In the parable of the talents, the master did not require that every servant gain ten pounds. He was satisfied with a small return by those who did the best that they could do with what they had (Matthew 25:23). Christ also reminded us that "...whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward" (Matthew 10:42). One talent properly used, one cup of cold water given in love or one meal provided to the hungry will be blessed by the Lord.

Sometimes problems are such that an individual may need professional help. Some situations are very delicate and require special care and consideration. If we are uncertain about the need for the individual to get professional help, we should seek the advice of someone who has had more experience. Getting involved in problems that are too deep for us to handle could cause additional problems or allow the existing problems to go on longer than is necessary.

Finding the right kind of professional help is very important. Many professional counsellors do not understand the importance of faith and the value it has in the healing process. Counsel from the ungodly can cause serious confusion and could lead to spiritual shipwreck. There are individuals within our brotherhood who have training in these delicate areas and who will give godly advice. Limited counselling is available through a special service that was established for our brotherhood. Initial help in this area is available by calling 1-800-747-9049. Those in the brotherhood who are providing this service will try to put the inquiring individual in contact with someone who can provide the kind of help that is needed. This service is not intended to replace the spiritual counselling of the Elders and ministers. It is designed to be used when there are problems that may not be of a spiritual nature. The world has forsaken godly counsel and has turned to the knowledge of man which sometimes may be harmful instead of helpful. Read Psalm 1.

Satan is cunning and is seeking whom he may devour but God is still in control. Although Satan brings much distress upon the world and even upon God's children, God's people have the privilege and duty of being our brother's keeper and helping those who are in need. By taking the time to be available, by listening with a compassionate heart or by helping someone in distress to find godly counsel we can help comfort one another.

God's Plan For Family Unity - VII

This seventh part in a series of articles on family unity addresses the issues of clear, reasonable expectations, recognizing the positive side of discipline and our response to our children's unacceptable behavior, such as temper tantrums.

Much has been said about the importance of unity and consistency in training our children. Although it is vital that parents are united and consistent in their approach to training their children, unity and consistency are not enough. Children need to know what is expected of them. Parents must be sure that the expectations that they have for their children are very clearly defined and explained in a way that children can understand them. They cannot know unless they are taught.

The Bible makes it abundantly clear that it is the duty of parents to teach their children the commandments of God, to pass these commandments from generation to generation and to be sure that our children clearly understand the difference between right and wrong. "And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children ..." (Deut. 6:7) "That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born;" (Psalm 78:6). "And they shall teach my people the difference between the holy and profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean." (Ezekiel 44:23).

In an age when society is blurring the line between right and wrong and approving many alternate lifestyles that are thoroughly condemned by the Word of God, it is vitally important that God's people always recognize and make the distinction between right and wrong. Our children must understand that it is never right to do wrong and never wrong to do right.

In addition to being clear and consistent, we must be reasonable and realistic in the expectations that we have for our children. An unreasonably harsh taskmaster can cause discouragement. Just as we want and need forbearance from our Heavenly Father, we need to extend it to our children. "And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven;" (Eph. 6:9). Age, maturity and ability are all factors which should be taken into account. A child should not be punished for what he is unable to do. Overreacting, unrealistic expectations and unreasonable punishment can bring rebellion and defiance.

Be careful in the use of extremes. When we use the words "always", "never", "forever" and others similar to them, there is little room for adjustment if we realize that we have made an error. It is possible to be clear, firm and precise without being extreme.

Sometimes as parents we make the mistake of focusing too much on the negative. While it is appropriate that unacceptable behavior has its consequences, we need to recognize when our children do what is right. Often children are more in need of words of praise and appreciation than words of rebuke. We need to share words of approval for good behavior. "Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it" (Prov. 3:27). If we use rewards for good behavior, caution must be exercised to provide assurance that the technique of reward does not become bribery. How we approach our children in this matter is vitally important. If we use a reward as a way of recognizing and sharing our appreciation for good behavior after the behavior has occurred rather than promising them a reward if they behave during a certain event, it is less likely to become a bribe. Most of the time we should recognize good behavior with words rather than gifts or treats. This also will help keep things in their proper perspective. If children reach the point where they expect a material reward each time they do something well, we may be bribing instead of rewarding. This should cause us to reexamine our approach and make the necessary adjustments,

Frequently children learn that they can get what they want by threats or temper tantrums. This may cause parents to yield to their demands or to try to “negotiate” with their children to gain peace or acceptance by the child. We ought not to negotiate in matters of right and wrong. The end result is trouble. “And he gave them their request: but sent leanness into their soul” (Psalm 106:15).

To allow a child to get what he wants by having temper tantrums simply encourages inappropriate behavior in the future. Our response to that kind of behavior should be firm, calm and crystal clear so the child knows that it will not be tolerated. It is very important that we do not become too angry with our children in these situations or we will be guilty of doing the very deed that we are trying to prevent our children from doing. We must confront the situation but we must do it in an acceptable manner. “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger” (Prov. 15:1). “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him.” (Prov. 26:4).

Children often misbehave when they know it will be very difficult or embarrassing for parents to do anything about it, such as in a grocery store or restaurant. If this occurs, it may be necessary to try and find a place that offers reasonable privacy to handle the situation. If there is no place available, it should be dealt with as soon as possible after getting home. It is important that it not be ignored; problems that are ignored tend to grow.

Parents who are clear, consistent and reasonable in their expectations for their children, who provide a good example and who recognize and respond positively to appropriate behavior will do much to help their children learn to do what is right.

God's Plan For Family Unity – VIII

Part VIII in a series of articles on family unity focuses on fair treatment of our children, security of a loving atmosphere and good communication.

Perhaps one of the more difficult tasks for parents with more than one child is to be “fair” to all of our children and not to show favoritism. Some children try our patience more than others do. As a result, it is easy to overlook some things that the well behaved child does and let him or her get away with more than the one who gives us the greater challenge. Favoritism brings contempt and must be guarded against very carefully. “Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours. And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him and could not speak peaceably unto him.” (Gen. 37:3-4). Jealousy, anger, bitterness and rebellion can be a result of a child's perception that he has been treated unfairly. Parents need to frequently reflect upon their responses to their children, especially if one of them is difficult to control, to make sure we are treating all of our children fairly. It might be beneficial to ask our teenage children if they feel we are being fair. Visit heart to head and try to find out why they feel as they do.

Sometimes as parents we make hasty decisions and find out later that we have made a mistake. We should not be too proud to admit to our children that we have made a mistake nor should we be too proud to apologize for it. “Confess your faults one to another...” (James 5:16). “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). This does not mean that we should apologize for punishment properly administered but rather when we do it in error.

Children should have the security of knowing that their parents love each other and that they love their children. When children misbehave, we should never threaten to withhold our love from them. Withholding our love from our children is not an option that godly parents have. In teaching the importance of sound doctrine, Paul instructed the aged women to “be in behavior as becometh holiness,...That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children,...” (Titus 2:3-4). Words are important and we should tell our children every day that we love them.

However, far more important than words are the deeds that accompany them. Do we love our children enough that we spend time with them or are we always too busy or too tired? Do we love them enough that we will read Bible stories to them and sing hymns with them? Do we love them enough to establish daily family worship? Do we participate with them in wholesome activities so there is less desire and time for them to engage in unwholesome activities? Do we love our children enough that we are willing to say “no” when circumstances dictate the need?

The Golden Rule should be applied as we discipline our children. Now that we are adults and have children of our own, we appreciate the discipline our parents provided for us. Undoubtedly, we remember some times when our parents made mistakes, Rather than being angry, we should use this insight as a learning experience to help us as we teach our children.

Knowing that the Lord chastens us because He loves us, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten” (Rev. 3:19), we ought to do the same for our children. If we want the Lord to chastise us so we can be fitted for the kingdom of Heaven, by applying the Golden Rule, we are required to chastise our children in love and with compassion. A frequent cause of difficulty in many areas of human relationships is poor communication. Good communication is as important in our relationship with our children as it is at work or in the church. Communication involves much more than simply talking. The specific words we

use are often less important than the way we use them.

One of the fundamental principles of good communication is that of being a good listener. Too often we are thinking of what we will say in response to someone's comments rather than listening to what they say. When Job's three friends could find no answer, Elihu said, "Behold, my belly is as wine which hath no vent; it is ready to burst like new bottles. I will speak, that I may be refreshed;..." (Job 32:19-20). Would Elihu have provided a more valuable service to Job and his three friends if he had been more concerned about the situation than about his own relief?

Although we need not always agree with our children, we do need to be willing to listen to what they have to say. This does not mean that children should be permitted to become argumentative or disrespectful, nor does it mean that every excuse should be listened to. It simply means that we keep in touch by finding out, from time to time, what is on their minds. The Bible teaches us that we have a God of compassion (Heb. 5:1-2). If we display compassion with our children as we communicate with them, we will increase the likelihood that they will be willing to talk with us when they have concerns. Compassion involves understanding, not necessarily agreement. If we are compassionate, our children are more likely to accept our opinions and respect our requests. If we are compassionate, we will try to make sure that our responses to our children are delivered in such a way that they will know that we love them. They will come to understand that the decisions we make are based on our concern for their welfare and on our desire to fulfill our God-given responsibility rather than on simple authority.

Good communication requires that we speak the truth in love. (Eph. 4:15). When we say "no", a kind and sound explanation is appropriate. Our children have a right to know that when we are talking to them, what we say is true. If we give them reason to doubt our word, it will destroy their confidence in us. Once lost, confidence is only slowly regained.

Fair treatment, the security of a loving compassionate home atmosphere and good communication all contribute to a peaceful, stable family relationship.

God's Plan For Family Unity - IX

This final article in a series on the family focuses attention on the importance of the proper home atmosphere, the consequences of neglect and the rewards that obedient children bring to their parents.

In a world filled with strife and anguish, we can give our children a great blessing if we provide them with a home that has a Godly atmosphere. Our children need a refuge from the world. They need the security of knowing that their home is free from the turbulence that is characteristic of so many homes today. If our children are not able to notice a difference in the atmosphere in our homes as compared to the atmosphere they feel in school or other places, we need to examine why our homes are like the homes of the world.

The characteristics of a Godly environment should be evident in our homes. Our homes should be a place where we and our children want to be; it should be a place where we find a balance of individuality and group activity; it should be a place where we feel a part of each other's lives and yet we are recognized for our individuality.

Most of all, perhaps, is the need for our homes to be a place where the Lord is the centerpiece of our home, and He must be not only our Saviour, but also our Lord and Master. We can learn from the example of Joshua who said, "...choose you this day whom ye will serve ... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15).

Our homes should be a place where our children's friends are welcome. While this must be limited to a reasonable amount of time, welcoming their friends to visit could provide an opportunity to expose other children to a Godly atmosphere who otherwise may never have that opportunity.

In Psalm 39 and 90 we are reminded to number our days, and time with our children is short. We must make the most of the opportunities that we have to teach our children and to be with them. They will soon have other interests, and time that is gone can never be regained. How sad it would be if we spent our time trying to provide the material blessings for our children and failed to provide the spiritual blessings. We may realize too late that we have made a sad mistake.

Among the lessons that we need to teach our children are the responsibilities that children have to their parents. Children must learn to "Honor thy father and mother," as God commanded (Matt. 15:4). One of the definitions of honor is one whose worth brings respect. This implies that honor must be earned. Certainly, we should teach our children to honor us, but our behavior and attitudes must be such that we are worthy of the honor.

Obedience to parents is another lesson that must be taught "Children obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right?" (Eph. 6:1-3). It must be remembered that the only way for children to obey this commandment is for parents to be in the Lord. We undermine our own authority if we do not live in the Spirit and walk in the Spirit.

Jesus himself offered us an example of obedience to parents. Obedience to godly parents helps children learn to be obedient to God, to the church, and to appropriate civil authorities. The Bible teaches us that obedience to God is necessary for entrance to the Kingdom of God. If a child never learns obedience at home, it is questionable if he will ever learn obedience to God.

It is also necessary for children to learn obedience to a God-fearing, Bible-believing church. "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that

must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief..." (Heb. 13:17).

Children must also be taught to be obedient to government. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. 13:1). The only exception is when a law of the land is in direct conflict with the Word of God.

The consequences that parents and children face as a result of the neglect of parental duty are serious. In Proverbs we read, "A wise son maketh a glad father but a foolish man despiseth his mother" and "There is a generation that curseth their father, and doth not bless their mother" (Prov. 15:20; 30:11). Not only can neglect bring shame to the parents, but the consequences are felt for generations to come. "... for the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me" (Deut. 5:9).

Sometimes faithful parents see their children go astray and we wonder what went wrong. At times like these we take comfort in knowing that we have the promises of God that our efforts are not in vain. "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6). We also have the promise that "with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37).

Although the responsibilities of raising children are great and can at times seem overwhelming, the rewards of faithful parents are beyond measure. After all the work of raising our children we have one final reward to think upon, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (III John 4). Every effort that we make in teaching our children the ways of the Lord are not in vain, as they lead to the greatest reward of all---eternity with our Lord.

Being Christlike in Business and Commerce

The Word of God strongly exhorts the believer to “let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

The implication is that as one conducts his life, the light of Christ will come forth during interaction with others. The end result is that if we let our light shine, God will be glorified.

Our daily responsibilities provide many opportunities to glorify God as we interact with others through our families, our employers and employees, and in a host of other ways. Every hour of every day affords the believer unique opportunities to show forth the light of Christ, and as believers, we should always be conscious that this is our calling.

The areas of business and commerce provide opportunities whereby we can be either a shining light, or a “poor” light for the Lord. A bright light is a powerful influence for good and brings much honor to God. Conversely, a poor light can bring reproach to His holy name.

In the general area of commerce, both among buyers and sellers, a child of God has a high standard of godliness to uphold. As an ambassador for Christ, he should be guided by biblical principles: by the golden rule “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matt. 7:12), by not only focusing on the things which are seen, but on the things which are not seen (II Cor. 4:18), and by the words of the Lord Jesus, “Take heed and beware of covetousness; for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.” (Luke 12:15). The Word further exhorts that the trait of “covetousness”, which is a form of idolatry (Col. 3:5), is not to be named even once among the saints (Eph. 5:3). The traits of graciousness, respect for others and uprightness should describe our business/commercial endeavors. It grieves our heavenly Father when we who are called to be ambassadors for Christ fall prey to the fleshly patterns of seeking undue advantage and selfish gain in our buying and selling even though we might not always be aware of it.

As we follow Christ, may we remember that three of His greatest teachings center around turning the other cheek, going the second mile, and being willing to give our overcoat along with our coat, when asked. We are to be totally unselfish.

To be possessive and selfish in commerce demeans the character of Christ and His marvelous, perfect ways. As we try to gain a little edge here, and a little edge there (always at someone else’s expense), we cast a shadow on both our testimony as a believer and on the Spirit of Christ which dwells within us, thereby grieving the heart of God. A believer’s reputation suffers as he demonstrates selfishness, discourtesy, insensitivity, and a lack of concern for the business/financial welfare of others in commercial interactions. As one’s reputation declines in this regard, it also extends over onto the church and brings a measure of reproach to God’s people as well as to the Lord Himself. This is a difficult “reputation” to shed. We must all take care to guard against becoming salt that has lost its savour (Luke 14:34).

A good measure of our Christlikeness in business occurs after we complete a retail transaction. If we purchase a refrigerator, an automobile, or even a small, everyday item, what do the store sales-persons say about us when we leave their place of business? Or, what do store clerks think when they see us coming into their business establishment? Do we live our life in a manner that others can see the light of Christ in us, or are we seen and remembered for our worldly selfishness and overbearing self-centeredness? We must all take great care in evaluating our lives in this regard, because we all engage in a type of commerce almost every day. Knowingly or unknowingly, we are building a reputation in the

minds of those who observe us. We must continually remind ourselves that we are to be a good light for Christ.

In all of this, if we are persistent and insistent in driving a hard bargain for “a better deal”, we should realize that at life’s end what little gain or advantage we have achieved amounts to only a pittance and surely will not be worth reflecting a bad light or bringing reproach to Christ’s name.

Rather our motive along life’s way should be to glorify God and to realize that we are a part of Christ’s body, the church. As such, we exist together as a “chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a peculiar people” (I Peter 2:9). In the business realm, our dealings should exude from the fact that we are as a city “set upon a hill which cannot be hid” (Matt. 5:14). We are to shine forth in a positive manner for all to see.

The businessman also has a duty to eliminate any tendencies to be overly competitive in his dealings which may lead to misrepresenting the quality or value of the product or service that he is providing to the customer. He should be upright and charitable and ensure that the customer is satisfied. The seller should stand behind his product, treating the customer as he would like to be treated, both in price and service. Both believing sellers and buyers should avoid covetousness at all costs. They should realize that life is soon over and a better home beyond the river Jordan awaits the true and faithful.

In commerce and business, we can be effective vessels for Christ if we truly set our affection on the things above and not on the things of the earth (Col. 3:2).

Let us never forget that, spiritually, he who loses his life shall find it (Matt. 10:39). As we surrender our own will each day to God and focus on the things we cannot see, instead of selfishly dwelling on the things we can see, we can glorify God in business and in His church, reflecting the Holy Spirit’s power. Doing this will glorify God, thus fulfilling the reason we exist as believers here on earth.

Building Up One Another in Faith

The fact that we, as believers in the Lord, exist in brotherhood supports the doctrine that we are to build up and strengthen one another as we strive each day to bring glory and honor to His name.

Individually, we are built up by His grace (Acts 20:32). We are to walk faithfully in His ways, “rooted and built up in Him, and established in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving” (Col. 2:7).

In considering “building up one another,” one must remember that we as believers can become weak and vulnerable. We are in battle, daily, with the forces of darkness and spiritual decline. We live in spiritual peril wherein a raging enemy strives to undermine our faith in God.

Thus, it is to our advantage to live in brotherhood as “members one of another” (Romans 12:5). From brotherhood we gain added protection through spiritual insight, added strength because there is strength in numbers, added support in the form of encouragement, and added caution that we can do his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13). Our duty as a fellow-believer in Christ is to fortify, to edify (Romans 14:19) and to build each other in faith. Our lifestyle and our overall daily motivation should be to please God and strengthen each other (Romans 15:2-3).

We, as fellow-believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, should realize that to “build up” is to indeed fortify each other in faith and doctrine. We help each other when we provide support that will strengthen our resolve to fight the good fight, to emphasize and better understand our beliefs, and to assist one another in maintaining them by God’s grace.

We must strive to be equally yoked together, pulling in the same doctrinal direction. As we do so, we encourage one another to be diligent and to inspire one another in a common outlook and purpose. As we give a consistent witness to the world, it strengthens each believer, and it strengthens the witness we are seeking to portray.

The biblical concept of believers building up one another is manifested in Acts 20:32, “And now, brethren, I commend you to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.”

The first requirement for building up is not to tear down. We have an enemy who seeks to overthrow our faith and who will use a variety of subtle, hard to detect tactics. Among his strategies of deception are the traits of individualism, self-assertion, and cultural diversity. In this, Satan belittles the biblical concepts of humility, submission, and obedience. When worldly patterns of individualism and self-assertion begin to emerge in the household of faith, upbuilding is undermined. Unity and self-denial are the teachings we find in the Bible, not self will, self indulgence and such like.

Because we are waging a spiritual battle with the corrupt forces of darkness, we must labor diligently to strengthen and build up one another so each of us might become a more effected soldier for the Lord.

We build up each other in faith when we uphold common viewpoints pertaining to faith and life. Believers are instructed in the Word to be “perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Cor. 1:10). The prophet, Amos, posed the question, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3).

As we strive to remain united in common beliefs, if some brethren take exception to those beliefs, it begins to create division. It causes heartache for those who try to uphold the faith. Spiritual independence and variance can cause offense, wherein a brother or sister is made weak causing the opposite effect of edification and building up.

The scripture for strengthening one another finds root in the verse that teaches us to please our neighbor for his good to edification (Romans 15:2). Even in our strongest state, we as believers are weak (II Cor. 12:10). We need daily strength, both from God's Spirit and in the form of encouragement from God's children. We are to exhort (encourage) one another "and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25).

Again, because we are weak, we need the advice found in Hebrews 2:1, "Therefore, we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we let them slip." Our faith and our doctrine are important, and we should encourage one another in these beliefs.

Among the more practical aspects of upbuilding are friendliness and personal warmth. We should show these traits to each member of the body. In I Tim. 5:21 we read that we are not to prefer one before another, but we are to accord the same love and godly affection to each brother and sister in faith. To show respect of persons is sin (James 2:7) and can drag down, rather than build up, a fellow-believer.

In everyday life when we receive encouragement from others in earthly tasks, we are heartened and feel a sense of being built up in our endeavors. In our spiritual life, when we are encouraged in matters of faith and godly living, and upbuild one another in faith, we are helping our fellow believers along the road to the glories of Heaven, which is our goal.

We should not underestimate the value of encouraging, exhorting, and up-building one another. As we exercise these qualities toward one another, we do it unto Christ (Matt. 25:40). That is why we should love one another with a pure heart fervently (1 Peter 1:22).

To Obey is Better than Sacrifice

We are surrounded every day by individuals and institutions who have a relative outlook on nearly every situation they encounter. God's Holy Word unfailingly holds before our eyes the truth, which sets us free (John 8:32). One of the keystones of our Father's message to us is obedience to His will for our lives. His repeated calls to obedience lamentably are frequently unheeded, and the consequences of the sin of disobedience fill chapter after chapter in God's Word, ever an example for us (I Cor. 10:11).

One of the most direct accounts of our Father's displeasure when His Word was not obeyed is found in I Sam. 15. God had commanded King Saul to destroy the Amalekites, a people who had repeatedly harassed the children of Israel over an extended time period. King Saul had fulfilled much of what God wanted him to be but had not completely carried out God's will. The prophet Samuel was made aware of God's extreme displeasure and was sent to Saul to pronounce judgment. When questioned, Saul maintained he had done God's will. Samuel asked why animals and the Amalekite king still lived. Saul's protestation that he and the people had saved the best as a sacrifice to God was met with the strong question "Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams" (I Sam.15:22).

We know of God's love for us (I John 4:16). We know of His wisdom (James 1:17) and when He demands obedience, we know He unquestionably knows best and what He directs is for our good. We remember the apostles' words to the authorities in Acts 5:29 that "we ought to obey God rather than men" and we must unfailingly choose His will. Our Father makes it clear in His Word that often obedience to Him means submission to authorities He has set in place. Whether to parents (Eph. 6:1) or church leaders (Heb. 13:17) or Christian home authority or governmental authority (Titus 3:1), there is eternal wisdom in God's Word that we obey His will.

As believers, we should never view these Godly directives to obedience as burdensome or oppressive; but rather, we should see His wisdom in structuring our lives so that we can most effectively live in harmony and peace with each other throughout the household of faith. In addition, we therein find freedom to better serve Him and carry out the work of His Kingdom here on earth, free from the incessant bickering and fighting brought about by lack of submission to authority and outright disobedience. Indeed, the scriptural concept of obedience rests firmly on our trust in God and our heartfelt belief that He knows best.

In this day of grace through our Lord Jesus Christ, we do realize that the exact types of sacrifice that Saul had in mind are no longer a requirement in our worship of God. In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, there is the beautiful chapter about charity, or Christian love. In it there are numerous references to the things of sacrificial nature which without love would be hollow and without effect. We similarly need to understand that if we engage in conduct that we feel to be sacrificial in nature that is in disobedience to God or His ordained authority, we miss the mark and cannot rightly expect His blessing.

In order to obey, we need to be still and listen. God's words from Samuel were that "to hearken (listen)" was better "than the fat of rams". As believers, we love God's Word. We believe in the guidance and prompting of His Holy Spirit as we read His Word. Our sincere prayers to Him are answered through His Word and if we truly listen, the results are rich blessings for us and those we humbly serve.

Certainly, a most sobering aspect of the account of Saul and Samuel is the conclusion Samuel brought relative to the disobedience. Here is portrayed a willful disregard of God's Holy will and direction. Evident in Saul's actions and his stubborn defense of them is the all too human element of

pride. In fact, he was so persuaded of the rightness of his action, he seems almost not to have realized he had disregarded God's will. Regardless of what God had said, he had selectively decided to disregard it. This is precisely the sort of deception Satan uses on individuals today. If God and His will are acknowledged at all, it is secondary (or worse) to the wisdom and purposes of men.

God, of course, was emphatic in describing the sin to Saul through Samuel, "For rebellion (disobedience to God's will) is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry" (I Sam. 15:23). How sad to be so deceived and face such judgment at the end. The consequences of rebelling against God—whether refusing His loving call in the first place or selectively ignoring His voice throughout our lives—are usually evident in our life but are much worse in eternity. We need only reflect on how abhorrent witchcraft and serving other gods is to our Heavenly Father to realize just how closely we should take His instructions to obey Him in all things. Saul ultimately lost his life and his kingdom, but for years he followed a declining path away from God's will that led him to turn from those who loved him and finally to commit the sin of consulting a witch.

God's Word is so very full of good and wholesome counsel. He promises to reveal His will to us and asks us to follow closely, listening each day as He speaks to us through His Spirit and Word. If we are obedient to His holy will, we will save ourselves much grief and heartache.

Ye are the Salt of the Earth

In the gospel according to St. Matthew (5:13), we read that Jesus said, “Ye are the salt of the earth; but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.” This is part of what we call the Sermon on the Mount and is followed by Jesus saying, “Ye are the light of the world.” This editorial is to examine why Jesus would call His brothers and sisters salt and how it is that we should act if we would indeed act or react as salt does.

We see that salt has been used for various purposes from ancient times. Its use as a preservative and as currency shows that people of old knew of its value. When Christ called us to be the salt of the earth, He acknowledged that we were of significant worth or value. We also find that salt was used as part of the worship service under the law of Moses (Lev. 2:13, Ezra 6:9, Ez. 43:24). The Bible speaks of a covenant of salt or as a sealing of a promise given to David, that his family would continue to reign over Israel as long as they would serve God (2 Ch. 13:5 and 2 Sam. 7:12-16).

So we see that salt was and is considered to be a substance of value and something whose identity is known and does not change easily. When Jesus calls us the salt of the earth, He expects that our identity will not change or become influenced by our surroundings, but rather that we as believers in Him would influence those around us. To insure that we are not changed or bent by our peers, we need to have our faith and our thinking established on teachings that do not change. In this dark world wherein we abide and journey, the only teachings that are sure and do not change are found in the Bible. Thus, we find a great need to be grounded firmly on the Rock of our salvation, Jesus Christ, and His teachings, that are just as wise and relevant today as the day He spoke them.

We also find that for salt to be effective, it must be spread around or mixed in. We do not always understand why the Lord places us in the circumstances in which we find ourselves in this life. Wherever we find ourselves, we can be effective workers and examples for the Lord if we do not lose or give up our identity as one of those that have been redeemed by His shed blood. The apostle Peter tells us that we should “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15).

The proper conditions must be met or become available for salt to work. Salt is of little use on a dry tabletop but just a small amount in a boiling pot of food is of great use. If we are well grounded in the Word of God and allow Him to bring us to the right time and place, we can be that salt that is of some use. In Deuteronomy 29:23 and Judges 9:45 we read of the harmful effects of misplaced and misused salt that was applied in excess. Without God’s help and direction we cannot be effective. This teaches us to wait to be asked or selected before we attempt any teaching or leadership role in the church. The converse is also true; when we are selected to teach or to lead, we should do that in God’s strength. In 1 Chronicles 28:20, King David instructs Solomon about building the temple: “Be strong and of good courage, and do it: fear not, nor be dismayed: for the Lord God, even my God, will be with thee; He will not fail thee, nor forsake thee, until thou hast finished all the work for the service of the house of the Lord.”

Sometimes the children of God become discouraged because it seems that so few people are really willing to be totally submissive to God and willing to put Him first in their lives. With the overwhelming odds seeming to favor Satan rather than God, we may be deceived into thinking that our influence will be so slight that it really doesn’t make any difference.

When comparing the amount of salt with the amount of food that the salt seasons, we know that it is very small. It is so small that we would never be able to see the difference by looking at the prepared

food; we can only tell if the salt has been effective if we taste the food. Even though the amount is very small, the impact is powerful. Our life may appear to be so very insignificant that we may feel we will have no impact at all; but just as a small amount of salt has a big influence when used properly, so may our lives have a big influence in a dark world.

Not only does salt season the food we eat, but it can also make us very thirsty. Does our life portray the kind of example that makes others want to drink of the water of life? Does anyone want a drink of spiritual water after they have been in contact with us? Do we express joy and contentment as children of God or does our attitude give others the impression that the life of a Christian is not the best gift, a gift that should be coveted (1 Cor. 12:31)?

If we are the proper salt of the earth, our lives will bring forth the fruit of the spirit: “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance:” (Gal. 5:22-23).

The Lord goes on to say that if this salt has lost its savour or identity “it is good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.” If our salt has lost its savour, our life will bring forth the works of the flesh instead of the fruit of the spirit. The result will be disaster for ourselves and those who are influenced by our example. Surely we would not desire to be in this state, where nobody around us can tell that we are a child of God! Rather, it should be our desire that we would continue to be recognized as one who fully depends on God and is as unchangeable as His Word.

If the Watchman Blow not the Trumpet

The watchman on the wall is responsible for the safety of his people. The Bible is clear that this responsibility includes more than watching for an enemy who would destroy us with weapons of war. This responsibility also includes protection from an enemy who would destroy the unity of God's children and spiritually starve them by depriving them of the privilege of feeding on the truth of His Word.

The technological advances we've become so accustomed to often make it difficult to fully appreciate some of the accounts and analogies from Scripture. With our nearly instantaneous access to news and weather reports, we can hardly imagine how critical the role of the watchman on the wall was as we read of it in the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 33. The situation in view was one of imminent peril because of invasion of the enemy. The responsibility required early warning to provide time for flight to safety or to make full preparation for the impending battle, thereby avoiding being overtaken by surprise assault.

We do not strain the interpretation of this vivid account when we compare the watchman's duties to the ministry of God's Word, especially as carried out by those who have charge over us. Indeed, "they watch for our souls, as they that must give account" (Heb. 13:17). Likewise, the responsibility for sounding the trumpet that rested with these ancient watchmen, also rests with those who minister the Word today and are exhorted in Paul's letter to Timothy to "reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (II Tim. 4:2).

In our denomination today we "take a man of our coasts and set him for a watchman" (Ez. 33:2). There is absolutely no question for believers today that there is danger at every quarter, a spiritual warfare of immense proportion, an enemy bent on destroying the faithful. Wherever practical, our elder brothers ordain other elders in every congregation (as the elders of the 1st Century did so from city to city). Without doubt, the individuals chosen as watchmen were aware of their awesome responsibilities, as we must be today. As the watchmen were set on the wall, they could see far greater distances. The Scriptures give account of those who seemed to have a gift of God to be able to distinguish even individual runners or chariot drivers (II Sam. 18:27) (II Kings 9:20). We are often in awe of the many grave dangers that those who have watched for our souls have seen and have sounded the warning at a great distance (in our case, a distance of time, of years or decades). In both situations, the responsibility to sound the warning is emphasized. Failure to sound the warning brought stern judgment from the Lord, a fact that rests on the hearts and minds of our shepherds.

Perhaps more appropriate to the early church than to ancient watchmen with trumpets was a variety of trumpet calls. The ancient trumpet blasts brought quick response; the armies and cities of the 1st Century AD recognized a variety of trumpet calls indicating various alerts and necessary maneuvers. Regardless, the necessity for clarity of call and certainness (loudness) was imperative so all could hear and act accordingly. We are called upon as believers to pray and support those ordained of God to these weighty tasks (I Thess. 5:25).

Ezekiel gave stern warning to the hearers also. It really didn't matter why they did not heed the warning. Excuses were irrelevant and unacceptable. The clear fact was that they heard the sound of the trumpet, and did not take warning. Their blood was on their own head, and the responsibility was theirs. It would seem that in so critical a scenario as portrayed here, no one would fail to take the warning. The very fact that our Heavenly Father chose to emphatically outline such a sad situation makes it clear that such things happened. We are not exempt from the very same admonition. If we think we are standing fast and firm, we should take heed, lest we fall (I Cor. 10:12). The dangers are real, the consequences for ourselves and those we love are tremendously grave. The ancient watchmen were set because the people were acutely aware of the presence of evil and danger around them that was life threatening in most cases.

As we pray for those faithful watchmen on our walls today, may we recognize just as acutely the spiritual danger and the eternal life threatening menace of Satan and his minions.

The ending verses of the 33rd chapter of Ezekiel are extremely sobering to believers today. After God had freed Himself and had shown them how they could serve Him and do His will, and had revealed the consequences of failure to heed His warning, the people essentially made light of the whole situation. They would turn out in goodly number to hear what the Lord had to say. They would whisper about the message bringer and poke fun or demean the message. Insincere as they were, they had no intention of following the Lord's directive. The whole situation became as one big entertainment, not to be taken seriously. They would hear and, lamentably, ignore. Sad to say, when the terrible consequences of their folly overtook them, when the clear warnings of the Lord were proven to have been on the mark and they realized how wrong they had been, it was too late. How very much of the work of the Kingdom goes undone because of the folly of the very people who should best know the clarity of the admonitions God unfailingly sends!

The sound of the trumpet must also include encouragement and admonition that God's people would be united as one, with God's Word as the foundation upon which the unity is based. Faithful shepherds (watchmen) must continue to sound the warning. Sheep that are not warned, or who do not heed the warning, will be scattered and destroyed by the enemy. The watchman who clearly sounds the warning, who feeds the flock and who strengthens the weak fulfills the directives that God places upon them. It then becomes the responsibility of the flock to heed the warning.

All of God's children would do well to study these scriptural accounts, heed the warning and fulfill our duty as watchmen on the wall.

Self-Denial In An Age of Self-Indulgence

Self-indulgence is a spiritual disease that is rampant in America today. The negative consequences that it has on a Christian's conduct has an impact on the individual and on those who are influenced by that individual.

As believers in Christ propose to practice self-denial in our current age of self-indulgence and self-gratification, a focus on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ is necessary. All of what He taught rejects the rampant materialism that exists in the United States today.

As we learn from scriptures, the Lord Jesus was free from the heavy yoke of materialism. He had no personal possessions. He had no special place of His own to sleep: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head" (Luke 9:58).

One of the core principles of following Christ is the denial of self. The Lord Jesus plainly said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it" (Luke 9:23-24).

As believers, our goal, with a renewed heart and mind, is to seek the things that are not seen rather than the things that are seen: "While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18).

A key concept in understanding self-denial is the realization that anything earthly (that which is seen) is temporary. This word is defined as, "short lived, transitory, and lasting for a time only". Therefore, as we become converted, and take on a new value system, our outlook thence changes from a narrowminded one (one that focuses on temporary; seen things) to one that has expanded to include both time and eternity; and our major focus is on eternity and the lifestyle patterns that enhance our journey to Heaven.

Our general consciousness comes to realize that our soul will exist infinitely longer in eternity than in time (i.e., in the here and now). Consequently, as Jesus' followers, we should feel compelled to follow His example in dismissing the things that are seen as unimportant and insignificant. We come to realize that beyond the grave we will take nothing material into long and endless eternity.

Our challenge today is unique compared to those fellow believers who existed over the many centuries since the early church. We in America face a threat of widespread materialism never experienced by our faithful forebears. They did not live in an age when materialism and self-indulgence was a way of life.

Today, in our prosperous nation, we are lured into the web of potential self-indulgence from a variety of fronts. There are malls, mega-malls, strip malls, superstores, and a seemingly endless avenue of retail outlets. In America, 9000 new retail products are introduced each year. This poses a great temptation for almost any true believer.

Likewise, an aura of prosperity combined with clever and convincing advertising methods hovers virtually at our every glance. We, as believers, are bombarded with a host of appealing messages, both via radio and other communication media such as newspapers, magazines and direct mail. On Sunday, our newspapers bulge with a thick handful of advertising inserts which are all designed to create wants. The

door to materialism is “wide open” for believers to indulge their flesh. Credit and the ability to “charge it” fuels materialistic tendencies.

As a result, we can become so desensitized toward accumulation we hardly realize it. Before we know it, we can easily come to love the life of needless extravagance. We become deadened to the prospect that excessive possessions are the antithesis of Christ’s example of self-denial, and represents poor stewardship.

Possessions, idle pleasures, and worldly entertainments (which abound in our time) do not satisfy the inner man. The more we possess, or the more entertainment we indulge in, the more we want. Materialism breeds more materialism. The more excessive we become, the more difficult we make it for our less able brother who likely feels the pressure to “keep up”; or we might actually be “offending” our weaker brother as we naively fall into a pattern of materialism, and the love of worldly entertainments and contests.

Both self-indulgence and self-denial can be traced to the root concepts that are dominant in our hearts relative to flesh and spirit. The question arises, “Is our heart guided/ruled by the concepts of the flesh (i.e., self-indulgence and self-gratification) or by the Spirit (i.e., self-denial and the daily crucifying of the flesh)?”

In seeking the biblical precept of self-denial, we need to grasp the Apostle Paul’s exhortation, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

If we really propose to follow Christ, we will consciously abandon any inclination we might have to put value on obtaining excessive possessions-or to live beyond our needs. This is true because anything we have left over beyond our basic needs is the Lord’s. If we indulge the flesh regarding material possessions, often we are spending the Lord’s resources, not our own. We will have to account for this pattern! The prophet wrote, “Woe unto them who are at ease in Zion” (Amos 6:1). This verse is very instructive to us today-we who live in outlandish comfort amid endless and ongoing opportunities to accumulate material things.

Let us resist the temptation to purchase those things we do not need. The challenge to practice self-denial, even amid the traits of self-indulgence all around us, has never been greater. “...greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (I John 4:4).

When The Pain Won't Go Away

There are times, even in the life of a sincere child of God, when events happen in our lives that cause us such intense pain that despite fervent prayer, the pain seems as if it just won't go away.

Perhaps something has happened to us or to someone in our family or to someone who is very close to us and we are tempted to ask "why?". We pray and still the pain and anguish linger. We search God's Word and can't seem to find the answers. We plead with God for courage to go on and our prayers seem almost as mockery.

In such situations we may be tempted to ask "Where is God when we really need Him?" "Why do I feel so separated from Him when I have sought Him so diligently?" In very distressful situations we can even get to the point where we feel lost and separated from God. Prayer and reading God's Word become more difficult at the very time when we need to feel the comfort and consolation of His promises the most. We also may feel guilty about our feelings, thinking that surely we are displeasing God and that no one else could ever understand how we feel.

There are examples in the Word of God that tell us that this is certainly not a new problem. Faithful servants of God have experienced this situation for many generations. For example, King David felt this separation as recorded in Psalm 10 when he asked the Lord why He stood afar off, especially in time of trouble. Likewise, Isaiah felt that God had hidden Himself (Isaiah 45:15) and Elijah felt alone and feared for his life (I Kings 19:14). Perhaps when we feel so alone and separated from God we need to remind ourselves of God's reassurance to Elijah that "...I have left me seven thousand in Israel that have not bowed unto Baal..." (I Kings 19:18).

Even Christ felt deserted and separated from God at His most severe trial as He cried "...My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

When we feel this separation and aloneness, it seems as though it will never end. Again, David asked, "How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily?..." (Psalm 13:1-2). Habakkuk (1:2) and Zechariah (1:12) also felt the effects of prolonged trial.

Although realizing that others, even those who were pillars of faith, have felt similar pain may give us a bit of reassurance, it doesn't stop the pain. What can God's people do in such situations?

We can find comfort and encouragement in God's Word and from God's people. Special passages of Scripture such as Psalm 23, Psalm 46, The Sermon on the Mount in St. Matthew's gospel (ch. 5,6,7), and many other places offer encouragement to a discouraged soul.

The Word of God contains many promises that are so beneficial in times of distress. Christ has promised to intercede for us as He did for Simon Peter when He said "...Satan hath desired to have you that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not..." (Lk. 22:31-32). We have been promised a way of escape in I Cor. 10:13 that "... God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way of escape..."

Also, in times of distress we should not overlook the comfort we gain by visiting with loved ones in our families and in our precious brotherhood. Satan would like to convince us that it is a sign of weakness or a lack of faith if we need to share our burdens with others. If Satan is successful in keeping us from this counsel, he has robbed us of a powerful source of comfort, for we know that when we share

our burdens with those we love they can become lighter. Proverbs 18:24 reminds us that “there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.” Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 encourages us in that “Two are better than one; because they have good reward for their labor. For if they fall one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.” All of these passages of Scripture remind us of the value of walking in sweet communion with fellow believers.

Time can also be a powerful ally in our battle with discouragement. We are reminded in I Peter 1:6 that our trials are not going to last forever but rather they are for a season “...though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness...” and “...in his favor is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

Although we need help from others in time of great distress, we also are required to put forth effort to get help. It is necessary that we do things that will help us when the load is heavy. “Seek the Lord and His strength...” (I Chr. 16:11). “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” (Mt. 7:7). “...Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you” (James 4:7-8). “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Prov. 3:5). Believe in the Lord for “...all things are possible to him that believeth” (Mark 9:23).

God’s people can find comfort, as David did long ago, that even in the darkest hours, God does not forget nor desert His people. We would do well to study Psalm 77 as the psalmist describes deep distress and anguish and yet in the end he is comforted because he found that God “...leddest Thy people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.”

If we continue to seek the Lord, if we continue to trust in His healing powers, if we continue to walk in His ways, if we continue to serve Him with all of our heart and soul and mind, if we continue to do what is right based upon His Word even when we do not feel like it, the Lord will lead us through the valley of the shadow of death. He will not lead us to this valley and then leave us helpless, hopeless and vulnerable to Satan.

He will be our refuge and strength and even when we are at our wit’s end, when we cry unto Him, He will deliver us out of our distresses.

Submission vs. Hypocrisy

Christians are challenged on nearly every facet of their faith in this time when society encourages free thinking and a self serving attitude.

An issue that is so critical that is confronting our precious Apostolic Christian brotherhood today is that of submission. So often we hear it said by someone that if they do not have a conviction about an issue, whether it is doctrine, tradition or custom, then there is no responsibility to submit to that particular issue. This erroneous logic is carried to its ultimate extreme. When souls feel free to ignore an issue, they justify their behavior by claiming that not only do they feel a lack of obligation to submit, but they must not submit because doing so would be hypocrisy. Clearly the Word of God condemns hypocrisy; these people justify themselves and set aside the need to do something that they simply prefer not to do. There appears to be a serious misunderstanding of the meanings of hypocrisy and submission.

Hypocrisy is a pretense, a pretending to be what one is not. Jesus utterly condemned the scribes and Pharisees because they were concerned only with outward appearance while allowing internal corruption. God's children would do well to carefully study the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 23, where numerous times Jesus said "...woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites..." because they required the people to do something that they were not willing to do themselves.

Christ condemned the scribes and Pharisees because "...they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers" (Matt. 23:4). He condemned them because (1) their actions were preventing others from entering the kingdom of heaven, (2) they were practicing extortion against widows, (3) they were spreading false doctrine and (4) they were being outwardly devout while inwardly they were "...full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (Matt. 23:28).

It is important to note that Christ did not say that a clean outside is not important. He did not say that the outside of the sepulchers should not be white. He did not say that they should not "...pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin...". What He did say was "...these ye ought to have done, and not to leave the other undone" (Matt. 23:23). He emphasized very clearly that outward cleanliness by itself was of no value. Inner cleanliness and devotion to doing God's will are vital, and the absence of these characteristics leaves us without eternal hope.

It would be hypocrisy today for an individual to make outward changes that make them appear to be Christlike while they remained inwardly unconverted, proud, vain and full of sin.

Submission, on the other hand, is the quality or condition of being obedient or yielding to the power or control of another. It is critically important that God's people exercise extreme caution in becoming submissive. Being under the power or control of an evil force is a great spiritual concern and would cause us to lose our salvation. However, Christians often must submit to the authority of our land, when there is no contradiction to the Word of God, even though we would rather not submit. We find ourselves submitting to the power of the government in many areas in which we have no particular conviction. Many people pay their taxes because they are willing to be obedient to the government rather than because they have a conviction that taxes are a good thing.

Although we certainly do not put submission to the government on an equal basis with submission to Christ and the church, we must remember that Jesus said, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21).

Submitting to the teachings of the church in things that are sometimes referred to as the small and unimportant matters or to those things which are sometimes called merely traditions, can go a long way toward unifying the brotherhood and preserving the identity that helps keep us separated from the world. Many of our traditions and customs are very helpful in providing a spiritual protection that helps keep us farther from the evil that is so prevalent in the world today. None of us would recommend to our children that they get close to physical danger as long as they don't become ensnared. We advise them to stay far from danger. We should do no less spiritually.

In Ephesians 5:17-21 the Apostle Paul writes "...be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord isSubmitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God." In Hebrews 13:17 he writes "...obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." Peter tells us "Likewise ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" (I Peter 5:5). Perhaps there are some who feel our precious faith is too restrictive and places too much emphasis on things of minor importance. Those who have been placed in positions of responsibility in the church will be called to give an account of their stewardship. They must sound the warning and keep their flock in spiritual safety. It is for this reason that loving caution is urged and submission to the teachings of the church is encouraged.

Jesus was very submissive to the will of the Father in going to the cross for our sins. It is clear in the gospels that He would have preferred to not suffer as He did but He said "...nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39).

There are undoubtedly things in this life that we would rather not do. The example and teachings of Jesus Christ should serve as our model in helping us submit even in some areas where we would rather do our own will.

Pleasing Others for Their Edification

The idea of pleasing others for their edification covers a wide range of activities and brings to mind many different thoughts. The concept is simple enough for the most newly born to begin practicing, and difficult enough to drive the most mature and seasoned believer to his knees. The immediate rewards for pleasing others can be as small as a casual thank you, or as far reaching as a life-changing repentance. And, of course, we have no assurance of an immediate reward at all. Indeed, for the well disciplined believer, there should be no thought of reward, other than the satisfaction which comes from pleasing the Lord.

To gain a deeper understanding of the subject before us, a thorough definition of the word edification is in order. It refers to the process of spiritual growth or spiritual strengthening. To edify means to make one stronger in the things of the Lord. It also refers to building up, to instructing and improving, especially for good example.

The benchmark scripture of our study is surely “Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification” (Romans 15:2). Here the Apostle Paul focuses the teachings of previous messages of following the things which make for peace and things wherewith one may edify another.

This verse challenges the efforts of a Christian to be greater because the requirements seem to be a little higher. Now we are reminded that we must give up our own pleasure in order to please our neighbor, but this is where the demands of the scripture jostle hard against the selfish desires of human nature with friction as the likely result. Do we have sufficient grace in our lives to lubricate that friction? We who have put on Christ are now given opportunity to show just how much we appreciate what Christ has done for us by how willing we are to please others. Can we forebear with others or yield to their wishes at those trying moments when our desires clash with those around us?

Understanding that we are always to edify or strengthen each other spiritually is really a cornerstone of our faith. All through the epistles the theme recurs. “Let all things be done unto edifying” (1 Cor. 14:26). “Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do” (1 Thess. 5:11). We are reminded that not everything that is lawful is edifying (1 Cor. 10:23). Knowledge tends to cause pride, but it is charity that edifies (1 Cor. 8:1).

These scriptures all set the tone for a life of sacrificial yielding of self. But this tone reaches its highest pitch when the extra qualification “to please his neighbor” is added. This is where man’s natural pride is most likely to come to the forefront because often we do not like to think that our neighbor has a right to interfere in our personal decisions. Those of us who are reared in a democratic society may, without realizing it, have accepted the notion that large areas of our lives are outside the proper domain of churchly influence. This is one of the chief reasons why church discipline and close brotherly concern one for another are so hard for some to accept. To those unfamiliar with the scriptural foundation for these practices, accountability to each other will seem like a license for busybodies in other men’s matters. The scriptures, however, allow for no such confusion of purpose. In 1 Peter 4:15 a busybody is denounced on the same plane as a murderer or a thief!

In recent years, an increased emphasis has been placed on asserting our rights as individuals and being “true” to ourselves. Increased emphasis is placed on teaching that we should all “assert our rights” and “be true to ourselves.” Acceptance of these concepts will bring us headlong into collision with our text “Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification.”

In this teaching there are two distinct areas of emphasis which can be overlooked in a casual reading. First, in using the word “neighbor”, the Apostle points out the great likelihood that the person we must please may not be our Christian brother or sister. This neighbor might be a very disagreeable person - one we would rather avoid as much as possible. It could be someone who delights in finding and broadcasting every real or imaginary fault in us, and it is almost certain that at some point in our lives, we will have extended contact with someone who makes it a point to belittle those things we hold dear. This type of person will scoff and scorn at every attempt to help himself come to a positive attitude toward the faith we love so much. Here, in our time, is the patience of the saints. This is where we must bite our tongue and suffer some of these indignities in silence. But there comes a time in such relationships that we must call to mind the other area of emphasis - let us please our neighbor for his good to edification. Perhaps after much longsuffering, there comes that point when we can no longer please our neighbor and have it be for his good. At this point, there can be no more attempt at merely pleasing our neighbor, if what pleases him is to get us to participate in activities that are unacceptable for believers. We have applications of Old Testament teachings dressed up in their New Testament exhortations. “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit” (Pro. 26:4-5). Through a proper understanding of our text and by God’s gracious Spirit, we may understand when and where we answer a fool according to his folly, not by cleverly conceived one-line put downs, but rather, “For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men” (I Peter 2:15). “But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Heb. 13:16).

These last verses show us that a consistent practice of good works and good communications will enable us to fulfill our scriptural obligations of self-denial and pleasing our neighbor for his good to edification.

Judging Within the Brotherhood

“Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matt. 7:1-2). “Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest...for thou that judgest doest the same things” (Romans 2:1).

From these passages of Scripture, we receive strong admonition that we are not to judge one another. Yet these questions often arise in the mind of a child of God, “How do we deal with inappropriate behavior if we are not to judge? What authority, or responsibility, do God’s people have concerning matters of behavior?”

It is very clear in the Word of God that sin cannot be tolerated in the house of God. “If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are” (I Cor. 3:17). From the very beginning, Satan tried to convince mankind that God did not mean what He said and that sin was not something to be avoided. In the garden of Eden, the serpent told Eve, “Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4-5).

To understand our duties in the area of judgment, we must understand that judging has a variety of meanings. Our responsibility is dependent upon the particular meaning of the word that is used. Among the meanings of the word judge are: to condemn; to give sentence; to assume the office of; to undergo the process of a trial; to be involved in a lawsuit, to administer affairs, and to form an opinion or to make a resolve.

The responsibility to judge, depending on the meaning that is used, seems to fall into four distinct categories: 1) the responsibilities that are reserved to God and to His Son, 2) the responsibilities that are assumed by government, 3) the responsibilities that are placed upon the church, and 4) the responsibilities of individuals.

Clearly in the first category the JUDGMENT OF THE HEART OF MAN IS LEFT TO GOD. “But after thy hardness and impenitent heart, treasurest unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; who will render to every man according to his deeds: (Romans 2:5-6).” “...Behold, the Lord cometh... to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly...of their ungodly deeds...and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him” (Jude 14-15). The reader can gain additional understanding in this area by reading Jude 16-25; Matt. 25:31-32; Heb. 9:27; II Peter 2:9 and 3:7; and I John 4:17. The judgment which is the final rendering of the fate of the soul of man must be left to the Lord. Man has no authority nor responsibility in this decision as the Word makes clear.

Secondly, to maintain civil order, CERTAIN AUTHORITY HAS BEEN PLACED UPON GOVERNMENTS and we are instructed to obey them.

“Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil... For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. (Romans 13:2-5).

Unfortunately, governments have not always done what is right. A child of God has the duty to obey governments, even those we may not like, as long as we do not disobey God in being obedient to

government. “Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor” (Romans 13:7). See also Eccles. 10:20; Acts 23:5; 1 Peter 2:17.

THE CHURCH IS ALSO GIVEN CERTAIN RESPONSIBILITIES AND AUTHORITY in the third category of judgement. “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19). A similar statement occurs in Matt. 18:18. Ultimately, the church and the authorities who have been placed in positions of leadership must carry out responsibilities according to the Scriptures. We are advised in Proverbs 11:13 that “...in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” Decisions made by church authorities certainly must be made in the fear of God and with the advice of counselors. Therefore, our brethren do well to meet and discuss these weighty matters that confront the church.

Furthermore, we are taught to “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17).

Finally, what RESPONSIBILITY DOES THE INDIVIDUAL HAVE IN THE AREA OF JUDGING? All of us must make decisions in matters of right and wrong. We are confronted daily with many of these decisions, and we are called upon to make them in the light of God’s Word. We must make decisions that help us discern between good and evil.

Likewise, if we make judgment concerning our behavior and if we allow ourselves to be chastened of the Lord, we will spare ourselves of the condemnation of the world. “For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world” (I Cor. 11:31-32).

We will be judged as we judge, but this is not to say that we should never have concern about the behavior of our brother. In chapter 7 in the Gospel of Matthew, we are clearly instructed that we should be concerned about one another; however we are instructed that we should first remove the beam from our own eye so we can see clearly to remove the mote from our brother’s eye (Matt. 7:3-5). James 2:13 instructs us that we must also shew mercy.

If we judge ourselves properly, we will have a charitable attitude toward others. “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves” (Romans 15:1). A godly concern for others will enable us to respond appropriately to the concerns we have about the actions of others.

Judging in a biblically sound manner is sometimes a difficult task. We do not want to be too harsh lest we weary or antagonize nor do we want to irresponsibly ignore those behaviors that could lead someone into sin. The proper balance between compassion and watchfulness is necessary. We are our brother’s keeper, but not our brother’s spy. In the church our judgments are based on our Lord’s words “...That ye love one another; as I have loved you...” (John 13:34).

Godly Sorrow

We are living in a time when pleasure a very high priority in the lives of many people. To think that sorrow would not only be tolerable, but even a privilege, would be unthinkable in the minds of those who do not know the meaning of godly sorrow.

Sorrow is mental suffering, sadness, grief or regret that is brought on by loss or disappointment. Godly means “of” or “from” God. Therefore, godly sorrow is mental suffering, sadness, grief or regret that is from God. One who is unfamiliar with God’s love and mercy may find it difficult to understand the benefit of sorrow that is of God.

The scripture tells us “...godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death” (2 Cor. 7:10). We find two distinct sources of sorrow with eternally significant differences.

The sorrow from the world worketh death. Romans 6:23 tells us that death is the wages of sin. James 1:15 tells us that: “...sin, when it is finished bringeth forth death”. Thus, the world has only one solution for the sorrow it offers and that is death, which results in eternal separation from God.

As the world tries to eliminate the consequences of sin, great effort is made to try to find an excuse to justify inappropriate behavior (sin) because if it is possible to justify the sin, then there would appear to be no need for guilt. There is an attempt to blame inappropriate behavior on some event, or series of events, that makes it impossible for the individual to avoid inappropriate behavior. If the individual cannot control his behavior because of some “affliction”, then it is deemed to be a “disease” or a “condition” that the individual has. Therefore, there is no responsibility, and hence, no need for guilt. Certainly there are some people whose mental or emotional condition makes it impossible for them to control their behavior, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

Unfortunately, the deceptive logic of the world offers only a temporary relief from accountability. The scripture very clearly explains that “...every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Romans 14:11-12). We cannot escape the certainty of the judgment of God. “Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants” (Matt. 18:23). Those who would try to deny the need to deal forthrightly with their behavior must answer to their “... vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called:” (1 Tim. 6:20).

Since worldly sorrow brings death and death brings separation from God, we need to consider the alternative. We need only to read one verse of scripture to learn many benefits of godly sorrow. “For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter” (2 Cor. 7:11).

Although there are many times in our lives when these benefits of godly sorrow are evident in a child of God, there is undoubtedly no time when it is more evident than at the time of repentance. To repent means to feel so contrite (sorrowful) over one’s sins as to change one’s ways and attitude toward sin.

The world would tell us to simply accept Christ and rejoice in our salvation. Surely we should rejoice in our salvation, but first we must “Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance...” (Luke 3:8). Since “...godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation...” (2 Cor. 7:10), one could hardly expect a truly

repentant soul to be immediately joyful. One can hardly repent with a light heart. This does not mean that a child of God is forever sorrowful. If we look carefully at 2 Cor. 7:11, we can see the benefits of this godly sorrow and the joy it ultimately brings.

When we repent with godly sorrow, it brings to mind many of the deeds we have done that need to be removed from our lives. It brings a carefulness to us that helps us focus our attention on a detailed examination of our lives so we can thoroughly and completely eliminate Satan's dominance over us. This carefulness will bring a "clearing" of our minds; thus helping us to think on the things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of a good report (Phil.4:8).

When we allow ourselves the privilege of godly sorrow and we realize the control that Satan and the world had on our lives, we could feel a measure of indignation toward Satan because his goal is our eternal destruction! This should cause us to be very indignant toward him. It will bring fear. We will be fearful of the condemnation that awaits us if we turn back to sin and thus separate ourselves from God and have only eternal destruction to look forward to in all eternity. It also brings a godly fear as we think of the tremendous love and compassion we have from our Heavenly Father.

When we think of these things, we will want to flee from Satan's control. This is possible through our personal faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to His Word, remembering "...the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance" (Romans 2:4). We will find that obedience to the Holy Spirit simply will not allow us to ever again be caught in the clutches of Satan.

Godly sorrow will enable us to look at the joy, the peace, and the eternal benefits that await a child of God. This will bring a zeal and a vehement desire to do God's will. It will help us to want so much to serve God, and to help others to do so, that the time and energies once spent on the pleasures of this life will be used to the honor and glory of God.

Sorrow is not always negative. It opens the door for God's grace and brings a humble heart. Sorrow of a godly nature helps us to build a firm foundation upon the rock of Jesus Christ, so that when the storms of life prevail, our house of faith can stand, and we by His grace can remain faithful and bring our ship of faith to a blessed end.

Fret Not Thyself Because of Evil Doers

As the world becomes more evil, as sin becomes an accepted way of life and as Satan becomes bolder, it is possible for a child of God to observe the sinfulness of the world and to become quite discouraged. What at one time was regarded as being totally unacceptable behavior, even by the standards of the world, are rapidly becoming accepted by many as just another example of an alternate life style.

The insistence upon the right to almost unrestricted freedom of speech, increased personal freedom of actions and an increasing unwillingness to accept responsibility for self-discipline have made it possible for many to rationalize almost any kind of behavior as being acceptable. Carried to its extreme, almost nothing is outside the bounds of acceptability. Not only are we pressured to tolerate evil, our government is encouraging the total acceptance of multiculturalism - the embracing of all beliefs and practices of those who are from a different culture. While we must be careful that we do not condemn others simply because they are different from us, we must be careful that we do not fall into the trap of deception, embracing idolatry and other forms of sin in the name of multiculturalism and acceptance of diversity.

What is a child of God to do under such conditions? There are a number of responses that will help us keep our courage and faith. First of all, we must not allow ourselves to become so overwhelmed by discouragement that we are unable to respond to these challenges in a responsible manner. We are taught in the Word of God that we should "Fret not thyself because of evil doers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass..." (Psalm 37:1-2).

To help us discern between right and wrong, we must know the source of truth. As Christ was facing His trial and crucifixion, He plainly told His followers of this source. In His prayer to His Father in Heaven for His apostles, knowing that they must carry out the work of spreading the gospel, Jesus said "...Thy Word is truth" (John 17:17). The standards of right and wrong are based upon the Word of God and they do not change. To help us deal with the increased evil, we must also realize that this is a fulfillment of prophecy. More than seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah warned that this would happen, and he warned us of the fate of those who allow themselves to be deceived.

"Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! ...which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him! Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the Lord of Hosts, and despised the Word of the Holy One of Israel." (Isaiah 5:20-24).

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul warned us that "...The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned to fables" (II Tim. 4:3-4).

Corruption and sin are certainly not new. God's people have had to deal with sin and temptation from the very beginning. Early in the Bible we are instructed that "...God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, the end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth" (Gen. 6:12-13).

God's people can take courage because He has not put us in the midst of evil without giving us a way of escape (I Cor. 10:13). Although we cannot entirely escape some contact with evil unless we are taken out of this world (John 17:15), we need not be consumed by it.

In dealing with sin, Peter wrote "...the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God..." (1 Peter 4:17). If we want to overcome the evils of the day so our faith can be preserved, so we can find our soul's salvation, and so there will be a faith for our children, we must be willing, even insistent, that evil be kept out of the house of God. If we allow the world to invade and corrupt our faith and have a negative impact on our church, we are opening the door to Satan and ensuring that he will be successful.

The only way to keep sin out of the House of God is to keep it out of the lives of His people, and we must start with ourselves.

In Chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew, we are warned that offenses will come from the world (v. 7). We are instructed to separate ourselves from these offenses (v. 8-9). We are also provided with a plan that will separate us from sin.

In I Cor. 11:28, 31-32, we are exhorted to examine ourselves to assure purity of mind and spirit. If we examine and judge ourselves, we need not be judged by others nor condemned with the world.

Having examined ourselves, we find instruction in Matthew 18 to help our brother if we have concerns about offenses:

"Moreover if thy brother trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he neglect to hear them, tell it to the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican" (Mt. 18:15-18).

With this loving and compassionate approach available to us for use in dealing with concerns about the evils of the day, we have the opportunity to keep ourselves pure, to help our brother and to keep the House of God pure. We may not be able to eliminate or even have much impact on the evils of the world, but by humbly submitting to the scriptural teachings, we can keep evil out of our lives, out of His Holy church and ensure that salvation will continue to be available to those who come after us.

Offer Unto God Thanksgiving

“O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good:...” (Psalm 107:1). “In every thing give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (I Thess. 5:18). These two verses are so much alike and yet so different if quoted in isolation. Thanking God for His goodness is such an easy commandment to obey, however, there are times when it is difficult to thank Him for “every thing”.

As we approach the end of the harvest season we often focus our attention on Thanksgiving Day and the many blessings we enjoy in our land. We are fortunate to live in a land that recognizes the need to pause and give thanks to our great God for the many blessings He bestows upon us.

Although Thanksgiving Day did not become a legal federal holiday until 1941, the tradition of setting aside a special time to give thanks to God is deeply rooted in our nation’s history, beginning in the early 1600’s. Our Thanksgiving celebration grew out of the tradition established by the colonists to set aside a special time after the harvest to thank God for the bountiful provisions that He had given them. They recognized that God was good to them, and they appreciated what they had even though by our standards their existence was a rather meager one.

As we pause and reflect upon the material blessings that we have, most of us could count many reasons to be thankful. We have abundant food, more than adequate clothing, beautiful and comfortable homes, labor saving conveniences that the early settlers could never have even dreamed of having and other devices that make our life more comfortable. Medical science has progressed to the point that many of the diseases that claimed the lives of many children have been nearly eliminated. It would be nearly impossible to list all the reasons we should be thankful.

Although we appreciate the material blessings that we have, they pale to insignificance when compared to the spiritual blessings. We live in a land in which we have the opportunity to worship God as we believe the Scripture instructs us to do. We have a precious brotherhood that has been preserved by those who have gone before us, keeping a simple faith in a loving God and preserving the plan of salvation that enables us to be free from the bondage of Satan and draw close to God. Most of us have been born into families who have taught us the truth of God’s Word and who have helped us develop a faith in this great and loving God. With all of these advantages, how could we not be thankful?

It is easy to give thanks when conditions are as we would have them. It is easy to thank God when a loved one repents. It is easy to thank Him when we are sitting in church, under the sound of His Word, surrounded by faithful brothers and sisters. It is easy to repeat I Thess. 5:18 when the trials of life are light and well spaced. But how do we respond when the hand of oppression rests heavily upon our shoulder?

It is clear in the Word of God that we are to give thanks to God even when the load is heavy. Job, after having heard a series of very devastating reports about his family and possessions, was able to say “...the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). After being struck with sore boils from the sole of his foot to his crown and having been ridiculed by his wife for retaining his integrity, Job said “...shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?...” (Job 2:10).

The apostles were often faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles as they spread the Word of God, yet they looked upon their afflictions as a privilege. After having been beaten and commanded to not speak in the name of Jesus, “...they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41).

Likewise, Jesus, about to face the most severe trial and burden that any man ever faced, encouraged and comforted His disciples when He said “Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me” (John 14:1). Furthermore, as He was nearing death, He was able to pray for His executioners “...Father forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

How can we, as children of God, give thanks in everything? How can we praise God and sincerely thank Him when we are hurting, either physically or emotionally, so much that we think we can't go on? There are also many Scripture passages that provide us with encouragement and promise us God's help.

If we make even a brief search of the Scriptures, we find many reasons to be thankful, even in the most difficult situations. The Bible teaches us that “...having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (I Tim. 6:8). Giving thanks or being thankful is referenced over 100 times in the Scriptures.

Too often we overlook the very simple and basic needs of life and neglect to be thankful for them, perhaps not realizing that a significant percentage of people in the world do not have even these basic needs. We have been so surrounded by an abundance of material blessings that we tend to take the “basics” for granted and think that if we have not been bountifully supplied that we have not been blessed.

If we would take the time to sit down and write a list of all the things we have received from God and then give Him thanks for all His goodness, we would undoubtedly be overwhelmed by the task of making the list.

It is true that a child of God may be asked to carry a heavy load. It is also true that Satan can come and bring discouragement. When these occur, we must look to the promises of God to sustain us and to help us put the events of our life in order. “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed;” (II Cor. 4:8-9). Surely the faithful promises of God make it possible for His people to say “O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever” (Psalm 136:1).

For Unto Us a Child is Born

For approximately four thousand years, God's people were looking for the fulfillment of the promise made in the Garden of Eden that the head of Satan would be bruised and that Satan would ultimately be defeated (Gen. 3:15). The promise of the coming of the Messiah, the one who would judge the nations in a manner that would cause them to "...beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4), was anticipated with sincere longing.

The prophets, by the inspiration of God, wrote of the signs of the coming of the Son of God. "...A virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,..." (Isaiah 7:14). "But thou, Bethlehem...out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be a ruler in Israel;..." (Micah 5:2). "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt" (Hosea 11:1). "...He shall be called a Nazarene" (Matt. 2:23). Meeting all of these conditions seemed nearly impossible to the mortal mind.

Not only were the prophecies about His coming a mystery, so also were the prophecies concerning the purpose of His coming. "...The government shall be upon his shoulder..." (Isaiah 9:6). "...He shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles" (Isaiah 42:1). "...A King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth" (Jer. 23:5). "...The God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed:..." (Daniel 2:44). "...Because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives..." (Isaiah 61:1). "...He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2)

Would this Messiah come to rule the world in an earthly sense? Would He come as a harsh judge who would bring judgment upon all who have sinned? Would He come as a powerful and rich ruler who would set up a kingdom that would last forever? Would He come to bring good news and a better life for the poor, the oppressed and the down trodden? From studying the writings of the prophets, it seemed as though He would do all of these things.

For those who lived before the coming of the Messiah, the writings of the prophets seemed confusing. How could all of these things come to pass, and how would He save His people?

Those of us who have lived after His birth have a tremendous advantage. We can see that it was a very small thing for God to cause Caesar Augustus to make a decree that would prompt Joseph to take Mary to Bethlehem at precisely the right time to enable Jesus to be born there. Likewise, it was not difficult for God to allow Herod to be jealous of Jesus and to fear that he would lose his power to this obscure infant. And finally, it was easy for God to permit Herod to make decisions that would cause Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt and, later, to Nazareth.

Also, it is now easy to understand that the Messiah did not come to set up an earthly kingdom to free the children of Israel from the oppression of wicked rulers; He came to preach "...the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

This freedom is now available to all who are willing to recognize that they have a need to be set free by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Those who refuse to recognize that they are in bondage can never be set free. There were those among the Jews who said, "...We...were never in bondage...", not recognizing that "...Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin" (John 8:33-34) and is under the most oppressive bondage possible. In explaining this to the Pharisees who questioned their blindness to the bondage of sin, Jesus said, "...Now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth" (John 9:41).

The world is still questioning the mission and ignoring the message of Jesus Christ. Confusion is rampant and faith is weak. Many do not really want to understand His message. There is a reluctance to submit to the simple message of Jesus Christ: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

In our very materialistic society, many are willing to celebrate His birth, but they are not so willing to acknowledge His death and resurrection. Many weeks are spent in preparing for the day we celebrate His birth; however, little time and effort are spent preparing our hearts for His second coming. Those who were hard of heart did not recognize Him at His birth. Likewise, the unrepentant will not be prepared for His second coming.

Certainly the birth of Christ is a significant event in the life of a Child of God. However, it is far more important that we understand the significance of His death and resurrection. The Bible emphasizes this difference: the four gospels all dwell upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but only two mention His birth.

Although Scriptures which tell about the first coming of the Saviour are now clear, often we hear concerns from faithful children of God that they do not understand the prophecies about the end times. Many express concerns about a lack of understanding of the prophetic writings which address Christ’s second coming. Some fear that they will not recognize nor be prepared for His second coming. Certainly we encourage the study of God’s Word because we need to understand the mission of Jesus Christ. Perhaps it is not so vital that we understand every detail surrounding His return. It is highly unlikely that the shepherds fully understood the prophecies of Christ’s coming. Early in the evening they probably could not have answered many questions about His birth nor about His mission. Yet, because the shepherds were faithful and submissive to God, after hearing about the birth of the Saviour, they did not say “Let us go to see IF this is come to pass.” They believed and said “...Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing WHICH IS COME TO PASS, which the Lord hath made known unto us” and “...returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen,...” (Luke 2:15, 20). There was no doubt in the minds of the shepherds that the Messiah had come.

The faithful will also be prepared and recognize Christ at His second coming. As we celebrate another Christmas, let us all pause and reflect upon the love that God has showered upon us. His love is made so clear to us as we read in the Scripture, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

The Education of Our Children - I

Although there are many public schools where sound, fundamental principles are taught, many parents in our brotherhood are very concerned about the impact that education has on the behavior and thoughts of their children. Two editorials will deal with this important issue, discussing the responsibilities parents have for their children's education, some concerns about public education and some possible ways of working with teachers and administrators for those who send their children to public schools. A separate article will deal with alternatives to public education. God established the family unit in the very beginning (Gen. 2:23) and gave parents the responsibility not only to love and provide for their children, but also to teach (Deut. 4:9; 6:7; Isa. 28:9) and to train them (Prov. 22:6). The primary educational responsibility that we are given by the Bible is to teach our children about God. And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine head, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up (Deut. 6:5-7). For most of the time since God put man on the earth, children have learned the lessons about right and wrong and the skills needed to earn a living from their parents. The instruction that parents provided was primarily through their daily example as children observed them in their work and in their behavior. Most children grew up working with their parents, learning the same occupation. Occupational choices were limited and the economic reality in the lives of most families made it necessary for children to learn an occupation early in life. Education and daily existence were one and the same.

Beginning in the 1700's, The industrial Revolution, and more recently the technology and information revolution have made it a much more difficult task for parents to teach their children the skills that they will need to be productive citizens. It is no longer likely that most children will have the same occupation that their parents have. Change is so rapid and so all encompassing that most of today's children will likely have several major career changes during their working years, if the world stands.

The public school system, which was established by the churches in the early settlements of our nation, served us well for many years. Many public schools are still doing a good job. Most schools have dedicated teachers and administrators who work very hard to provide a good education for our children and base their decisions upon sound moral principles.

The primary purpose of the early public schools was to teach children the "Three R's". Because the most important reason for learning to read was to make sure that children could learn to read the Bible, there was very little disagreement about what was to be taught. The vast majority of the children grew up in fairly stable homes where discipline was based upon Godly principles and appropriate behavior was enforced. Most communities were small, the citizens were of a similar background and neighbors were usually quite supportive of one another. Christianity played a major role in the atmosphere of early schools.

As communities became more diversified, it became more difficult for Christians to maintain their influence on the moral atmosphere of our schools. Court decisions have further eroded the ability of teachers and administrators to maintain the necessary control that establishes an environment which enables our children to obtain an acceptable education. Additionally, some special interest groups have pushed for educational reform that brings unacceptable doctrine to our children.

We are living in a time where there is much confusion in the world. The evil influences that confront God's children cause us much concern. It is not only natural, but also necessary, for us as children of God to be concerned about how we can minimize the influence of the world upon our children.

There are many ways in which we can fulfill this need to shelter our children from the world. It is very important for mothers to be home when the children come home from school. Talking to them, listening to their concerns, and providing a refuge or haven from the world is very important, scriptural, and helps fulfill the advice in Titus 2:3-5 that the aged women .”teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home,...” Enrollment in nursery schools may be an unnecessary and premature exposure of children to outside influences. If we are inclined to teach our children at home, then we can teach them the things that they would otherwise learn in 4H, Boy or Girl Scouts, etc. and spare them that exposure to the world. Keeping unwholesome influences such as the television, worldly music, and unwholesome magazines out of our homes is necessary. By doing these kinds of things, we can create enough difference between our homes and lifestyles and the atmosphere of the world that our children will have the opportunity to learn the truth, and they will learn to recognize the untruths that they are exposed to in school or the world.

By exercising caution on the whole matter of educating our children in public, private, or home schools, we need to “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). Regardless of where they are schooled, we still have the requirement to prepare them to live in the world. At some time in their lives, they must learn to deal with other people and to be able to sort out the good from the bad. Jesus prayed regarding this in John 17:15. “I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil.”

This topic will continue next month.

Education of Our Children II

Feb., 1997

The ramifications and feasibility of having our own church-based schools were studied, but the issues are very complex. Because the elder body does not feel clear direction from the Lord, we have no plans to establish church-based schools. The elder body supports the sincere efforts of parents who choose to home school or set up private schools based on the recommendations and guidelines as explained in this editorial and a separate article to follow. We believe that the decision on how our children are schooled is the responsibility of the parents (Deut. 4:9; Deut. 6:4-9; Prov. 22:6). Families who feel they can send their children to the public schools should not be made to feel guilty for doing so if they continue to properly instruct their children in spiritual matters. Families who feel led to home school or to send their children to appropriate private schools should also be able to do so without being made to feel guilty of wrongdoing. We sincerely trust that these choices will not become a source of contention within the brotherhood.

Public education has been available for many generations in our country and probably most of the current members of our church grew up under this system. The requirement to receive a certain level of education to function in our society is not in conflict with the standards of the Bible. Unfortunately, there have been many changes in the public educational system and in some areas the public school curriculum is no longer based upon biblical teachings. In the schools where biblical principles are ignored, much of the information is presented without proper distinction between right and wrong. The New Age influence of humanistic thinking, values clarification, and unproven theories such as evolution which appear in textbooks can affect our children's belief in the Bible.

There are also many changes in our society that are of concern to godly parents today. The impact of television on the moral values of our society creates an influence upon our children through their peers. The increasing number of children from broken homes, the vulgar language, the lack of ethics and other forms of unwholesome behavior create an atmosphere that may cause spiritual harm to our children. Disciplinary techniques have been limited by law and judicial rulings which result in a loss of control in some classrooms. The widespread breakdown of respect for authority across the land is having an affect upon the church as an increasing number of people seem to have less respect for God's authority and the authority of His servants.

What can be done under these circumstances? Since most of our children are attending public schools, we as parents should take advantage of the many opportunities to become better informed and properly involved in our children's education. It is essential that we both TEACH and LIVE the truth before our children. We must also be careful that we do not become influenced by radical commentators and authors. We need to investigate personally and make sure we have accurate information. We must not be confrontational in our interaction with the public schools. Rather than being overly critical, we could pursue one or more of the numerous opportunities for constructive involvement in our children's education by which we can be a positive influence without overreacting.

As our children are exposed to things in school that are not wholesome or true, we have the obligation and opportunity at that time to teach them the truth. There can be some very evil, and sometimes subtle, influences from the world that have impacted the school system, but so much of this depends upon the individual administration and/or teacher. There are many excellent and dedicated teachers in the public schools, including some very faithful brothers and sisters. Brothers and sisters who teach in the public schools appreciate your communication and prayer support.

Parents have a responsibility to make sure that their children receive good spiritual training that is

not destroyed by their secular education. We need to know what our children are being taught in the classroom, and what kind of textbooks are being used. We also need to be alert to the influence on our children's attitudes and beliefs from their friends on the school bus and playground. There are appropriate areas in which parents need to be involved in their children's public education.

These include the following:

- Mothers or fathers can become room parents. Parents' and Grandparents' Days are also opportunities for involvement. This can provide a better awareness of what they are being exposed to.
- Parents can serve as volunteer teacher aides in many different activities as long as they are careful not to attend activities that would reflect a poor light as Christians and as brothers and sisters in the church.
- Brothers and sisters could consider a teaching career as a wonderful opportunity to be a light and witness to their students.
- Schools are looking for help in decision-making. Cautious involvement on school boards, curriculum committees, and parent advisory councils provide that opportunity.
- It is essential that parents become aware of the curriculum and their children's textbooks. Ask questions about what your child is learning, and find out if there are programs or units being presented which conflict with biblical truth. Volunteer for textbook adoption committees.
- Initiate communication with school staff, including teachers, administrators, and other personnel. Privately express your legitimate concerns to teachers and school officials, and refrain from becoming part of a mass protest. When things are done well, give positive feedback to reinforce the good efforts in the public schools.
- Communicate often with our children and pray for the students and faculty.

Perhaps by taking advantage of these opportunities to have a positive impact on our schools, our children can safely attend public schools. A separate article will discuss several alternatives to public education.

Is Obedience to the Church Necessary?

In an era of independent thinking, when the world glorifies individualism and pluralism, the question of obedience to the Church is a timely one.

Diversity has become a standard in the national mindset. Satan would love to make it a standard among the brethren. Therefore it is profitable to search God's Word for an answer to the question—Is obedience to the Church really necessary?

The Church is the body of Christ (Col. 1:18). It is the pillar and ground of truth (I Tim. 3:15). The Church is instituted of God for the purpose of preaching the gospel, preserving godly order, and perpetuating the truth to future generations so long as the Lord tarries.

Clearly defined spiritual direction, offered lovingly and with a “certain sound” (I Cor. 14:8), is given by the leaders of the church because elders are charged with the responsibility to “...watch for your souls, as they that must give account,...” (Heb. 13:17). They do not “...have dominion over your faith but are helpers of your joy:” (II Cor. 1:24).

A pluralistic response to the Church's Bible-based direction undermines the unity and closeness among the saints. As God's people submit to God-given counsel, and serve the Lord in a like-minded way (Rom. 15:5), a much richer sense of brotherhood ensues. The “unity in diversity” concept so profoundly promoted in society today is a contradiction.

Because Christ is the head of the Church, it is reasonable to assume that Christ (the head) and the Church (its members) are inseparable. Thus, obedience to Christ thus obedience to the Church; and obedience to the Church is obedience to Christ. It is a simple truth that stands against a tidal wave of diversity in our time. It rebukes the mistaken pattern that it is acceptable to do “what is right in your own eyes”.

Godly authority in the Church is vested in and administered by elders. In the spirit of Acts 15 they offer deliberate and kindly guidance to God's people. Because the Word is of no private interpretation (2 Pet. 1:20), they seek its counsel and then collectively confirm how it can best be applied in a practical way.

The leadership's intent is to sincerely seek the truth and convey it to the brotherhood. Because the doctrine of “following Christ and the apostles” (as opposed to having faith “only”) is a sound biblical concept, the matter of applying scriptures to everyday life is a sound, essential, and biblical ideal.

The Church, as led by God's Spirit, teaches us that if we want to fulfill the Word, we must apply it to our daily lives. It is important that the individual members of the Church follow this teaching. We are instructed to “Obey them who have the rule over you” (Heb. 13:17).

Hebrews 13:17 also says to “submit yourselves”. In this we are to yield ourselves to those who have earthly authority over us. Additionally, the Bible teaches us to “Remember them who have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the Word of God, whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation” (manner of life) (Heb. 13:7).

As individual members of Christ's body, we are to submit to our spiritual leaders (whom God has placed over us for our benefit). They are accountable to God for their stewardship over us—”...for they

watch for your souls as they that must give an account...” (Heb. 13:17). If we are not submissive to those with God-given authority, it will take away the joy of those in authority and be unprofitable to us.

The scriptural requirement to obey the Church lends a sense of stability to the community of saints, and it further enhances the preservation of the truth of God’s Word and our spiritual heritage, for subsequent generations. Moreover, scriptural obedience is pleasing to God.

Obedying the Church also helps to insure a common application of doctrine. The Bible emphasizes the need for likemindedness (Phil. 2:2) and keeping the same spiritual judgments (I Cor. 1:10). When we are likeminded, the possibility of each brother and sister walking by the same rule and minding the same thing is assured (Phil. 3:16). Our collective yoke is stronger if we all pull in the same direction.

As the Church, after prayerful consideration, gives definition to the Word, a common (like-minded) application of doctrine results. Similar application of God’s Word results in a warmer and deeper spiritual unity. A diminished or diverse application of scripturally based doctrine, where each individual takes whatever liberties they wish, creates a sense of unease among the brethren which results in confusion, spiritual insecurity, and disunity which constitute the very antithesis of what the Bible teaches.

Dismissing Church guidance is injurious in at least three ways: (1) it violates the scriptures, (2) it can cause well-intentioned fellowbelievers to become weak and perhaps stumble, and (3) it blurs/dims a consistent witness to the world and to our children.

We who have repented for our sins and propose to seriously follow Christ’s Spirit (and His Word), are no longer in authority. We have forfeited our fleshly preferences; our old man is spiritually dead (Col. 3:3). We have become crucified with Christ and are to be subordinate to Godly authority; therefore our “former lusts” (I Pet. 1:14) of pride, vanity, highmindedness, stubbornness, and self-will are to be replaced (via an inner presence of the Holy Spirit) with submission, humility, and yieldedness.

Obedience, even if we don’t have a strong conviction, is required for good order in various aspects of life: A child is to obey his parents; A servant is to obey his master; A wife is to submit to her husband (as it is fit in the Lord); Citizens are to honor the king. Kindly authority and a willing response surely create order in the Church and are pleasing to God.

If we disobey the Church, we are exalting ourselves. The Word teaches us that we are to esteem them that are over us in the Lord “very highly in love for their works sake” (I Thess. 5:13). To disobey is to show a lack of esteem.

Finally, our calling to Christ is one of submission. His obedience was unto death. Rather than ignoring those who are in authority, or dismissing their wise counsel, we are to submit, obey and support them by “holding up their arms” of guidance. It is our duty to obey the Church. The Bible tells us to do so regardless of the pressures of society.

Discerning Between Flesh and Spirit

A believer in Christ Jesus should be skilled in discerning the difference between the flesh and the Spirit. It is important because, in addition to the Spirit of God in the believer's heart, there also exists an enemy of the soul who daily works to subdue, undermine and eliminate the Spirit's presence. If the believer is careless, the flesh can gradually become more and more prominent. This reduces resistance to the enemy and invites spiritual destruction.

As followers of Christ, it is a striking reality in our lives that we have a devious and sly enemy who seeks to prevent our overcoming sin and remaining faithful until life's end. Because Satan is so cunning and heartless toward our spiritual welfare and because he's not impressed with the Spirit's virtue in our hearts, it is essential that a child of God learns to recognize his tactics. Before we can resist the enemy, we must first recognize him. Failure to identify the enemy makes it almost certain that we will experience spiritual failure.

One of Satan's ploys is to advance against the believer in unexpected ways. He will not always tempt us with the major, visible and heinous sins. Rather he often uses erosion, weariness and deception to weaken our faith.

He seeks, ever-so-slowly, to wear down the believer's resolve. Worldliness begins to creep into the believer's life. Little by little a broader and more worldly-oriented lifestyle ensues. Many times this leads to a perilous pathway and ultimately to sin.

Satan also uses fatigue to reduce our resolve to press toward the mark and to finish our spiritual race. His continual pressure on God's children sometimes causes weariness which makes resistance to temptation more difficult.

In addition, Satan seeks to disturb true godliness through wayward teachings and inadequate or unsound doctrinal interpretation. Such tactics give a false assurance to those who follow scripturally unsound doctrines. As part of his pattern of deception, Satan has diluted the Word of God through a host of watered-down versions of the Scriptures.

In all of the patterns that Satan uses, the true Christian must be alert and discern between the Spirit and the flesh in order to gauge what is right in God's eyes and must separate what is true from what is not true. In today's highly technical culture, with a multitude of powerful means of influence, the matter of correct discernment becomes vitally important.

Having established the need for spiritual discernment in each converted soul, we seek biblically-prescribed prerequisites to gain discernment. Without these, the potential for clear distinction between flesh and Spirit is reduced.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "And be not conformed to the world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will, of God" (Rom. 12:2).

The criteria for discernment are obvious: (1) The believer is not to be conformed to the world. (2) He or she is to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. What promise does this bring? We are promised that the will of God may be proved. It is thus wise to resist conformity to worldly ways and to strive for a transformed mind. Defining the difference between the Spirit (God's ways) and the flesh (man's ways) is fairly simple if one is serious about following God's counsel.

In our everyday life, anything we see or perceive stems from one of two roots: the flesh (man) or the Spirit (God). “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

The Spirit of God “...will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). The Spirit’s presence will allow us to discern between flesh and Spirit. There are certain traits that will allow for a higher degree of discernment if we humbly submit to these patterns.

Several lifestyle characteristics found in Ephesians 5 will aid us in effectively discerning between the flesh and the Spirit. As we follow God, we are to walk in love. We are to avoid all uncleanness and covetousness, not allowing ourselves to be deceived with vain words. God’s children must not have any fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness. Further, we are to prove what is acceptable to the Lord and to walk circumspectly and not as fools, redeeming the time because the days are evil. Finally, we are to submit one to another in the fear of God.

Because in this life “...we see through a glass darkly...” (1 Cor. 13:12) and often find difficulty in discerning God’s will, we can benefit by strengthening one another in the faith for we are taught that “...in a multitude of counselors there is safety” (Prov. 24:6).

Thus, if we are willing to listen to and obey the authority placed over us in the Lord (Heb. 13:7, 17) we can benefit greatly. We will be able to more effectively separate the Spirit from the flesh and follow the Spirit’s pathways more clearly.

In following collective discernment (i.e., the Church’s guidance), we must realize however that it is not all encompassing but only covers some of the vital pathway endeavors and warns us of danger. Personally, on an everyday basis, we as individuals face a multitude of occasions whereby we must discern between the flesh and the Spirit.

If we are humble and submissive to God, His grace will actively flow into our hearts. With an abundance of God’s Spirit, we will be able to discern between the flesh and the Spirit.

“Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God” (1 Cor. 2:12).

Tithing and Giving - I

The scripture instructs us that “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). The question of how much we are to give is often asked. Since tithing is referred to more frequently in the Old Testament than in the New Testament, does that mean that it is not as important now as it was in the Old Testament days? Two articles in “Light From the Word” will focus on this question.

The word tithing means one-tenth. Originally the tithe was to be given to support the Levites in the temple service and to support the Lord’s work (Num. 18:20-21). Even the Levites who provided the temple service were commanded to give one tenth of this offering back to the Lord (Num. 18:26-27).

Since there were requirements laid out in the Old Testament law that exceeded the one-tenth that refers to tithing, to get a complete picture of the requirements of the old law, it is necessary to consider both tithing and giving. In addition to the tithe for temple service, the Children of Israel were commanded to give more. Although the Bible does not always say how much each of these offerings was to be, we can certainly understand that the total was significantly more than one-tenth. At the end of a three year period, a special tithe was to be given to support the stranger, the fatherless and the widow (Deut. 14:28-29). Another offering was to be given for festive purposes, and additional giving was also required: “...and ye shall bring your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, and your tithes, and heave offerings of your hand, and your vows, and your free will offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and of your flocks.” (Deut. 12:6-7).

Every seventh year the land was to be given a “sabbath of rest” (Lev. 25:4-5). No sowing of seed was to be done and anything which grew of itself was not to be reaped. After seven cycles of seven years there was to be an additional year, a year of jubilee, in which every man’s possessions were to be returned, every man was to be returned to his family and the land was to be given an additional year of rest. (Lev. 25:10-12) Additional giving was required for those who had fruit trees. The first three years, the owner was not to eat the fruit. In the fourth year the fruit was to be holy to the Lord. The owner was permitted to eat the fruit beginning with the fifth year (Lev. 19:23-25).

If we look at the commandments to tithe and give in seven year cycles, we find that far more than one-tenth was required. If we consider the average of the seven year totals (10% every year, 20% the third and sixth years and 100% by letting the land idle the seventh year) the old law required an average of about 25%, not counting the special sacrifices and offerings that were so important at that time.

Those were the requirements of the old law as recorded in the Old Testament. What does the New Testament say about tithing and giving?

The word tithe is only mentioned a few times in the New Testament. Most of those references are made as Jesus was addressing a very negative situation. As Christ was speaking to the multitude about the scribes and Pharisees, he was lamenting their insistence upon good doctrine but the poor example of their lives. “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone” (Matt. 23:23).

Christ also pointed out the futility of tithing if it were done to be seen of men. In the parable of the publican and Pharisee who went to the temple to pray, he reminded us that the Pharisee who boasted that “I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess” did not leave the temple justified (Luke 18:12). The publican who could only utter seven words in a plea for mercy was more acceptable to God than all of the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. Tithing with pride was of no avail.

In one of the few positive references to tithing in the New Testament, Hebrews ch. 7, the Apostle Paul writes of the relationship between Abraham and Melchisedec, king of Salem, wherein Abraham felt that the greatness of this “king of peace” (Heb. 7:2) was such that he should receive a tenth of his spoils. Paul then reminds us in verse 5 of the Old Testament requirement that the Levites were to receive “tithes of the people according to the law”.

Beyond these few references, little is said in the New Testament that is specifically about tithing. However, if we spend even a small amount of time in comparing tithing and giving in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, we see a major difference. In the Old Testament, tithing was an obligation; it was required to meet the expectations of the law. In the New Testament, it is an opportunity to serve God and is usually referred to as “giving” rather than “tithing”. We should count it a privilege to be able to give. We are reminded “...to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

Since we are simply stewards of the material blessings God has given to us, everything we have comes from the Lord and belongs to the Lord. Material possessions are temporal and will pass away. If we trust in uncertain riches our faith is misplaced. “Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (I Tim. 6:17).

The instructions in the New Testament on how we are to give are quite clear. We are to give to our Lord, to our church, to our family, to our brethren, and to our community. We are instructed to give according to what we have. We are to give with simplicity, freely, regularly, cheerfully, honestly, and sincerely. Also, we should give of our time and our talents as well as our material blessings.

These instructions which help us to take advantage of the opportunity to help others while serving God will be more fully developed in the next article in the “Light From the Word”.

Tithing and Giving II

In the previous article in “Light From the Word”, tithing as emphasized in the Old and New Testaments was discussed. This editorial will focus on “giving” as encouraged in the New Testament.

Giving in the spirit as described by Jesus Christ is much more than simply donating one-tenth of our income to charity. Our attitude is important in determining if we are following the scriptural guidelines.

What principles should guide our giving? The Bible helps us understand when we should give, what we should give, to whom we should give, how much we should give and what our attitude should be when we give.

We are instructed to give early and regularly. “Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him...” (I Cor. 16:2). If we plan to give of our first-fruits, we will be certain to have laid up for the Lord so we will have something to give when the opportunity arises. Waiting until the last day of the year may appear to be wise from the business point of view but it doesn’t satisfy the scriptural directive to give early.

Although it is easy to give during prosperous times, the Bible tells us that we should also give during hard times. The Spirit told the disciples “...that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judea” (Acts 11:28-29).

Also, we are instructed that the time to give is when we have opportunity. “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). Sometimes we may need to look for opportunity, but at other times opportunity clearly presents itself. Either way, opportunities for giving must be taken advantage of by a child of God.

There are times when the easiest thing to do is to give money. However, not all needs are taken care of by money.

Giving of our time may be much more difficult and perhaps more valuable. In Matthew 25:36 we are instructed to visit the sick and those who are in prison. Additionally, we are instructed that “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction...” (James 1:27). Often we do well in visiting the sick, the widows and orphans early in their affliction. However, we must remember that after the initial time period, perhaps months or years later they are still a widow, still lonely and still in need of encouragement. Perhaps we are not able to visit as often as we would like, but we can make a phone call or send a note of encouragement to let them know we still remember them and pray for them.

Time and material blessings are important but to give our love is more important than any other gift we could possibly give. In I Cor. 13 we find that all of the other gifts pale to insignificance when compared to giving our love. We could speak beautiful words, prophecy, understand mysteries, have strong faith and give all our goods to feed the poor, but if we do not give our love (charity), it will profit us nothing.

Who should be the recipient of our giving? Although we can give to our friends, the Bible tells us to give to those who are not highly esteemed and who will not be able to repay us. “... Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me”

(Matt. 25:40). "...And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again;..." (Luke 6:34-35). We should "do good to all men, especially to them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10).

We should be compassionate toward those who are in need. "But whosoever hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him" (I John 3:17)?

Although the tithe (one-tenth) was regarded as the starting point in the Old Testament, in the New Testament the amount to give is less precise. In II Cor. 8:12, we are instructed "For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not." Too often we think of all the things we think we need before we can give to others but if we consider all that the Lord has given us, we surely can give from what we have. The Macedonians even gave more than they could afford. "For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; (II Cor. 8:3). The poor widow"...of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had" (Luke 2 1:40). By giving bountifully we shall also reap bountifully (II Cor. 9:6).

Our attitude toward giving is important. We should be willing to give readily and cheerfully. "...so let him give, not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver" (II Cor. 9:7).

Our giving should be done simply, secretly, and without pretense. "...He that giveth, let him do it with simplicity..." (Romans 12:8). "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 6:1). Also, we are instructed to give freely, bountifully and in good measure. "...Freely ye have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8). "Give, and it shall be given to you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again" (Lk. 6:38).

The gospel of Jesus Christ, as presented in the New Testament, does not emphasize so much the per cent of our income we give to others. Although we should look upon the opportunity to tithe as a blessing and a privilege, we must be careful that we do not restrict ourselves to some specific amount. We cannot out-give the Lord. Our giving may not come back to us in a material way but we will be blessed beyond measure if we share the gospel message and our blessings with those who are in need.

Freedom Through the Faith of Our Fathers

The nature of man strives for freedom. The spirit of man also yearns to be free. The nature and the spirit are often in conflict with one another. Until man's nature is brought under control, is converted and becomes submissive to the will of God, this conflict will continue.

The freedom that is sought by the nature of man is freedom from restraint, freedom from political control and freedom to do as the flesh desires. History records many examples of triumph and tragedy as the nature of man strives for this kind of freedom.

The Old Testament records many instances of the bondage of man to man. Many scriptural references are made that explain the treatment to be accorded to those in bondage. In the New Testament, we also find references that instruct "Masters give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven" (Col. 4:1).

We are truly blessed to live in a land where we are free from the bondage of men and where we are free to live somewhat as we choose. However, political freedom is only temporary; at best, it will last a life time, and at its worst it can be terribly deceitful. If taken to its extreme, it leads to anarchy, which is the worst kind of bondage, and it can be taken away by those whose goal is to conquer and rule over other men.

Spiritual freedom, on the other hand, lasts throughout eternity and can not be taken from us by man. There are, however, many barriers that we must overcome to attain spiritual freedom.

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers to spiritual freedom is the difficulty that man has in trying to separate political from spiritual freedom. As Jesus was speaking to a group of Jews, He told them "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Their response was "We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man" (Jn. 8:32 & 33). They failed to recognize that Jesus' mission was not talking about freedom of the natural man. His mission was to provide spiritual freedom from Satan's oppression.

Today, mankind is still confused. The desire for unrestrained freedom often causes us to fight against the wrong enemy. Misplaced priorities cause many to think that if they can be free to do as they please that this will bring them happiness. Happiness comes to those who avoid sin. "Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth" (Ro. 14:22). Thus they fail to recognize the true source of bondage. As Jesus continued his conversation with the Jews, He explained to them where real bondage originates. "Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin" (Jn. 8:34). Just as men resist the truth today, the Jews resisted it in Christ's day. After continuing the discussion for some time, the Jews "...took up stones to cast at him..." (Jn. 8:59).

The Bible tells us very clearly how we can gain true liberty and how we can gain our spiritual freedom. "If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (Jn. 8:36). It is only through the Son of God and through faith in His shed blood that we have any hope for freedom from sin. "For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sin" (Matt. 26:28). "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ro. 5:1).

Just as we must be careful that political freedom does not get out of control, we must also be careful that our spiritual freedom does not lose perspective. "For, brethren ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Ga. 5:13).

We have much liberty in Christ. But the liberty that we have is a liberty to escape the desire to do those things that appeal to the nature of man. We do not have the liberty in Christ to engage in sin and escape the responsibility that comes with sin. If we think that liberty in Christ frees us from restraint, we are willingly being ignorant of scriptural warnings. "But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak" (I Cor. 8:9). We must be careful that we not cause others to fall if we hide behind liberty in Christ. Finally we must also be careful that this liberty not be used in a way that would cause us to mistreat others. "...And not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servant of God" (I Pet. 2:16).

Freedom is a privilege that carries a heavy responsibility. We must hold fast to the faith lest we be the generation that allows Satan to deceive us and cause confusion and eternal condemnation for generations to come.

This year is a special year in the history of freedom for those of us who enjoy the faith espoused by the Apostolic Christian Church. In 1847, 150 years ago, Bro. Samuel Froelich sent Bro. Benedict Weyeneth to America in response to a request from Joseph Virkler, an Amish Mennonite farmer from Lewis County, New York who had requested help from Bro. Froelich in settling some spiritual difficulties that had arisen among the believers in his area of New York.

It was from that request that the churches in Croghan and Naumburg had their beginning. It is also from that request that the Apostolic Christian faith had its beginning in America. Over the past 150 years, many servants have devoted their lives to preserve the faith that allows us to have liberty in Christ Jesus.

We have a special faith based upon the Word of God, a simple faith that separates us from the world. It is only by the grace of God that those who went before us could have the faith, courage and foresight to realize that if they did not hold fast to the faith that was given to them, we would not have the opportunity to escape the bondage of sin.

Likewise, we must realize that our children and grandchildren will only have what we preserve for them. In Deuteronomy 6 we read of the importance of teaching our children the Lord's commandments. We are instructed of the seriousness of holding fast to the faith lest it bring reproach for generations to come. "...For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me" (Deut. 8:9).

The faith of our fathers has provided a foundation that many generations of God's children have used to build their house of faith. Only by the grace of God can this faith be preserved for those who come after us.

Conversion vs. Accepting Christ

Many times in our brotherhood we use terms interchangeably in a way that can cause confusion to those who are not part of our faith. Although there may not be a great deal of harm in some of this interchange of terms for those who are well acquainted with our faith, it is important that we all remember that each of the terms has a separate and important meaning in the plan of salvation. We must also remember that misuse of the scripture could be very damaging to those who are not well grounded in the Word.

Terms that are especially susceptible to this interchange are accepting Christ, repentance, conversion, born again and joining church.

Accepting Christ is a term from the world that is used to promote instant salvation. It is a term that is used to describe an easier way of salvation and can be the source of a great deal of deception. In reality, we must prepare our hearts so Christ can accept us. If a child of God uses this term, it must be done very carefully and perhaps in the sense that the Apostle John meant when he wrote "But as many as received him, to them gave he the power to become the sons of God" (John 1:12) and the "...goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance" (Romans 2:4). It should not be used as a description of the plan of salvation.

Repentance means to bear sorrow for our sins. However, godly repentance is more than simply being sorry. It means to bear sorrow in such a way as to be determined to make a commitment to change our behavior. Sincere repentance will help us reach a level of humility that will make us more likely to submit to the will of God. It will help us to seek forgiveness from our Heavenly Father and from our fellow man.

People repent for a variety of reasons and in a variety of situations. It is possible to repent frequently - both before and after conversion. Some people repent simply because they have been caught in a sin. Although they may be truly sorry, the sorrow does not always bring sincere humility nor does it bring forgiveness and cleansing. It is more an attempt to escape punishment than an attempt to change one's lifestyle.

One who seeks to become a child of God and seeks forgiveness that brings peace with God must repent with a much different attitude. It must be a repentance that not only brings sorrow for sin but also a willingness and a determination to change the way he or she has lived. Repentance is required for salvation.

John the Baptist said "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). Jesus Christ said "...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3&5). The apostles taught, and continue to teach "Repent therefore of this thy wickedness," (Acts 8:22).

One who has been a true child of God and who has been walking in grace and favor with God may find that there are occasions when it is necessary to seek God's forgiveness and to draw closer to God. Thus, they may have allowed themselves to drift and become careless and therefore are truly sorry they have disappointed their Heavenly Father. This is a form of repentance and may occur numerous times in our life.

It would be possible for a soul to repent for an entire lifetime and never find true peace if we repented but did not fulfill the other scriptural commandments for salvation such as forgiveness, becoming converted, becoming submissive, and becoming as a little child.

Repentance must be accompanied by conversion. Jesus said “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). The apostles taught “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19). The old, sinful nature in man must die and be replaced by a new, Christlike nature.

We cannot become a child of God without being converted, and it is impossible for man to convert himself. This must be the work of the Lord but it does not mean that we have no responsibility in the conversion process. We must be willing to be converted and to allow God to completely remake our attitude and to completely remold our lifestyle. We cannot become a child of God without being converted. This is an aspect of salvation that is so often overlooked in this day and time. If we are sorry for a sin and continue to repeat that sin, it is likely that we have not been completely converted. We will not be able to overcome temptation without being converted.

To be converted from the ways of the world and become a child of God, we must reach the point where we are not only willing to give up the pleasures of this life, but we must reach the point where they become repulsive to us. The world will try to entice us to return to “wallowing in the mire” (II Peter 2:22), but one who is converted must recognize the folly of doing so.

Jesus wanted us to understand that the only way for us to escape the flesh and to live in the Spirit is to be “born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Job recognized the brevity of the physical birth when he said “Man that is born of a woman is of few days...” (Job 14:1). Jesus told Nicodemus “...Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). This rebirth enables us to be regenerated and to become a new creature: “old things are passed away; behold all things become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). Being born again enables us to have a new beginning in life. Unlike our physical birth, this new life in Christ will last throughout eternity for those who are faithful.

Although as a new believer we become part of the body of Christ, it is possible to become a member of a church without any significant change in one’s life or attitude. Often when we hear of a new convert, we hear the comment that he or she is “joining the church”. To the world this simply means becoming part of an organization that is called a church. To a child of God it means becoming a part of The Church, the bride of Christ, which requires one to become converted first.

In order to fulfill the plan of salvation, it is necessary for us to repent, become converted, to be regenerated and to become a part of The Church. It is possible, however, that one could become a member of a church or one could repent without being converted or regenerated. We must not neglect any part of the plan of salvation or we will find ourselves walking with the world rather than with the Lord.

Let us be thankful for the kind encouraging words of Jesus, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

The Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments

For those of us who live under the new covenant, the question often arises concerning our responsibilities to the old covenant (i.e., the Old Testament).

Before delving into such a question, we need to be conscious of the scriptural passage found in II Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:”

The book of Galatians very simply describes the difference between the Old and New Testaments: “But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster” (Gal. 3:23-25).

The Scriptures teach over and over that God’s law condemns all men as sinners. But law—any type of law—is not able to save anyone. The Law does have value, however, because it arouses people to recognize their need of a Saviour.

The Apostle Paul states he would not have known what sin was except for the Law’s reminder, “Nay I had not known sin, but by the law; for I had not known lust, except the law had said, “Thou shalt not covet” (Rom. 7:7).

The Gospel of the New Testament fulfills the old Jewish Law of the Old Testament. We, as a new covenant people, see the Old Testament through the eyes (the general understanding) of the New Testament. The Lord Himself listed the two commandments which form the moral code of the New Testament: “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30-31).

The Old Testament attempts to make men conscious of their sin, and to awaken them concerning their need of salvation. The New Testament sharpens God’s moral law and is often more penetrating in its demands than the Old Testament.

Although there are many differences, the two testaments are closely related as the New Testament builds on the moral code of the Old. There are many quotes in the New Testament that are also found in the Old Testament. Approximately 1100 quotes and phrases of the Old Testament are found in the New Testament, thus providing continuity between these two testaments.

In many places, however, the New Testament supersedes the Old. While an eye for an eye was taught in the Old Testament, the New Testament teaches turning the other cheek to violence. Not only was it wrong to swear a false oath, the Lord Jesus taught that all oaths are to be eliminated. Further, while polygamy was present in the Old Testament, Christ taught in the new Testament that a man should have one companion (wife) for life.

Not only does the New Testament supersede the Old, but many of the Old Testament’s teachings were also temporary and were not reaffirmed in the New Testament. For example, it is clear that today’s new covenant believer is free from the ceremonial regulations of the Old Testament such as washings, holy days, unclean foods, the Jewish Sabbath, the new moon observation, feast days, etc.

The old covenant of grace and salvation is precious to us today. We have been made free from the bondage of the law, and if we repent for our sins, we are free as well from the bondage of sin and darkness.

The old covenant has been replaced by the new covenant (Heb. 8:6-7). It is “established upon better promises” (Heb. 8:6). This is the fulfillment of Jeremiah 31. The priesthood has been changed. Today’s believers are not under the Aaronic priesthood, but their priest is the Lord Jesus Christ, whose sacrifice was sufficient to cover the sins we committed while yet in a state of unbelief.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth” (Rom. 10:4). Those who repent, become converted, and walk in sanctification and grace, are made righteous by faith in the shed blood of Christ Jesus. Their right standing before God does not require their keeping the Judaic law.

Nevertheless, the fact that we are free from the Judaic law does not diminish the importance of the moral aspects of the Old Testament. The moral law, as differentiated from the ceremonial law (i.e. washings, observance of holy days, unclean foods, etc.), is still valid and very beneficial for the converted believer in today’s new covenant time. The moral law of the Old Testament, therefore, is validated in the New Testament.

The believer is to follow the moral law of God, but this is done out of love for God, and not to “merit” salvation. The Ten Commandments comprise an integral part of God’s moral law, and new covenant believers benefit by applying these commandments to their everyday life.

While we benefit from the moral guidance and wisdom of the Old Testament, we now look to the cross of Christ and His shed blood for salvation. The new covenant of grace and salvation is precious to us today. We have been made free from bondage of the law, and if we repent for our sins, we can also be free from the bondage of sin and darkness as well.

Fasting Accompanied by Prayer - I

The Lord has provided His people with a variety of tools that will help us in our baffle to defeat Satan, to separate ourselves from the world and its evil influence, to overcome temptation, and to draw us closer to Him. Among the tools that He has provided us is the privilege of fasting.

To fast means to voluntarily refrain from eating or drinking all, or certain foods for a period of time. This sacrifice of food and drink, which is so important to our lives, helps us to understand how dependent we are on God's blessings for our every need and will draw us closer to God if it is done with a proper attitude. To be effective, fasting generally must be accompanied by fervent prayer. If we fast without praying for the proper attitude, it will provide little or no benefit.

Although fasting is generally associated with giving up food or drink, God's Word makes it very clear that anything that is important to us that we would willingly sacrifice for the Lord will bring a blessing. "And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecution; and in the world to come eternal life" (Mk. 10:29-30).

Why should a child of God fast? What can be gained by such an activity? In both the Old and New Testaments much is written that helps us understand the purposes and benefits of fasting.

In the Old Testament days, fasting was approached somewhat differently than in the New Testament times. Food was very important to the people in the Old Testament days. Most people had very few possessions, generally having only the basic necessities of life. Food was one of the few things that they had that could be given up for a period of time. Although there were very few luxuries for most people, there were many feast days observed, which provided some relief from the routine, hard working life that they led. Thus, giving up food was a significant sacrifice for them.

Although fasting was not necessarily a public activity, it was often done in a much more open and obvious manner than it is in our time and was observed in a variety of ways. There were a number of periodical fasts such as the yearly day of atonement, the remembrance of the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, the remembrance of the burning of the temple, the remembrance of the slaying of Gedaliah, and the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem and perhaps a few others. These "public fasts" which were done on a regular basis, were to remind the people of significant events of the past and of their need to be more faithful to God's commandments.

Fasting was also observed in the assembly of the people as a group. "Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry out unto the Lord..." (Joel 1:14). "And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the Lord" (1 Sam. 7:6). "So the people of Ninevah believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5). Thus, we can see that fasting was often done in large assemblies that were called by those in authority for the specific purpose of fasting.

In addition to the public group fasts that were a result of the leaders proclaiming a fast, individuals also fasted in a very private manner for a variety of reasons. Moses "...was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments" (Ex. 34:28). Elijah "...arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God" (I Kings

19:8). “Then Ezra rose up from the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away” (Ezra 10:6).

Other examples of individuals fasting are found throughout the scriptures which offer much insight to the faith and steadfastness of these men of old times and of the sacrifices they willingly endured to draw closer to God.

Although fasting was often done to draw one closer to God, it was also carried out for a variety of reasons. Fasting was observed at a time of public calamity, such as when Israel was defeated in battle and King Saul and his son Jonathon were killed (II Sam. 1:12). It was also practiced at the time of personal affliction (Psalm 35:13; Dan. 6:18), and at a time of approaching danger as when Haman had succeeded in getting King Ahasuerus to order all the Jews to be slain and Queen Esther went to the king to plead for her people (Esther 4:16). Fasting often coincided with the confession of sin as the time Samuel offered a sacrifice to God asking for protection from the Philistines (I Sam. 7:6), and at a time of humiliation as Moses sought mercy from God because the children of Israel had provoked the Lord to anger (Deut. 9:18). Finally, fasting was observed at the time of bereavement (1 Sam. 31:13), and “...to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke” (Is. 58:6).

In each case, fasting was observed to address a specific problem in order to help individuals or groups of people draw closer to God. By sacrificing one of the basic necessities of life, the people of the Old Testament times use fasting as a very important and solemn occasion that was observed to strengthen the relationship between man and God.

The next article in “Light From the Word” will focus attention on fasting and prayer as it was observed in the New Testament.

Fasting Accompanied by Prayer - II

In the last article in the “Light From the Word”, attention was focused upon fasting as it was observed in the Old Testament days. This article will address fasting from the perspective of the New Testament.

As was the case in the days before Christ’s birth, so it is true today that fasting, to be of any significant value, must be accompanied by prayer.

Jesus’ example in fasting as described in the Gospel of St. Matthew, Chapter 4:1-12, shows us that fasting should be done in a very private manner and should be directed of the Spirit. “Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungered” (Matt. 4:1-2).

This was in preparation for the temptations Satan would bring upon Him as He began his ministry, and throughout the temptations Jesus used the Word of God as His defense. Satan was thus defeated and left Jesus for a time. After forty days of fasting, Jesus’ faith was strong and He was able to overcome all that Satan could bring before Him.

In addition to His example, Jesus provided valuable instruction about fasting, teaching that we must fast without show or pretense. “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face: that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly” (Matt. 6:16-18).

Jesus also emphasized that our attitude toward fasting must be of a humble nature. The Pharisee, who boasted that “I fast twice in the week...” (Luke 18:12) received no blessing because he exalted himself.

The Apostle Paul also fasted and prayed when he was called into God’s service. After he received his call on the road to Damascus, Paul was instructed to go to the city and await further instruction. There “He was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink” (Acts 9:9). Ananias was told to go to Paul “...for behold, he prayeth,” (Acts 9:11).

As Paul and Barnabas were about to depart on their first missionary journey, Paul, Barnabas and others were in Antioch and “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted, and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:2-3).

When significant steps were taken to spread the faith, the Apostles were careful to draw close to God by fasting and prayer, “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed” (Acts 14:23).

Since our bodies are the temple of God, we must be careful that we do not abuse God’s temple by fasting in an inappropriate manner. “What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?... therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s” (I Cor. 6:19-20). God does not ask us to starve ourselves. To fast to the point of starvation would be abuse and would bring no spiritual gain. “If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are (I Cor. 3:17).

Also, we must remember that when we fast in order to receive instruction or help from God to accomplish a certain task, we must be careful that we do not ask amiss. If the Bible instructs us to do something, we might consider fasting to help us do it but we should not fast to determine whether we do it. Obedience is better than sacrifice.

James teaches us that when we ask something of the Lord, we must be careful that we ask in faith and with a proper attitude. “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God,...But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways” (James 1:5-8). James also writes “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (James 4:3). We ought not to ask, fast nor pray for God to give us anything that would not be to our spiritual benefit.

Furthermore, fasting is not necessarily total abstinence from food or drink. We may choose a partial fast and refrain from certain kinds of food to insure that we do not offend our brother. “But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died” (Romans 14:15). “Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend” (I Cor. 8:13).

Finally, fasting can involve more than simply giving up food or drink for a period of time. Anything that we might sacrifice for the Lord can bring benefits similar to abstaining from food. It must, however, be something that is not sinful; sinful activities should be eliminated from our lives simply because they are wrong. While eliminating sin from our lives brings much relief and many blessings, we must realize that the concept of fasting accompanied by prayer involves giving up something that is important to us that would not bring us harm if we continued to do it. To be a sacrifice, it must involve giving up something that has value to us—and sin has no value.

Jesus made it very clear that denying one’s self of something we hold dear can bring many blessings. “And everyone that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life” (Matt. 19:29). Luke 18:29-30 reinforces this concept of sacrifice.

As we can see from the scriptural example, fasting that is observed in a quiet, humble, prayerful manner, can help us draw closer to God, overcome temptation, increase our faith, and accomplish God’s purpose in our lives.

Be Still and Know...

We are living in a world that is begging for attention. Many people put forth much effort to find happiness, peace and contentment. In their search, they turn to a world that promises to fulfill all of their desires. Instead of finding happiness, peace and contentment, they find noise, confusion, violence, disappointment and loneliness. As these conditions intensify, it becomes more difficult for a child of God to shut them out and to focus on a life separated from the world.

Along with the volume and forcefulness that is so prevalent, there is also much frenzied behavior. The world is caught up in so much activity and entertainment that seem to have little purpose other than to occupy their time and their minds. Although a certain amount of activity is undoubtedly beneficial, the children of God must be careful that we do not get caught in the trap of becoming so busy and so noisy that we do not hear the voice of God speaking to us.

The scripture provides direction for God's people to deal with this unwholesome situation. It also offers an explanation for the failure of the world to achieve its goal of finding contentment in spite of increased efforts to do so. The scripture tells us "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger" (Prov. 15:1). We are instructed to "...let our conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have:..." (Heb. 13:5) and that "...godliness with contentment is great gain" (I Tim. 6:6).

Many passages in the scripture reinforce these concepts. When Elijah felt so alone and was seeking God, he was instructed to "...Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice" (I Kings 19:11-12).

When Elijah listened to this "still small voice", he was able to receive instruction from the Lord and was somewhat comforted to learn that there were yet seven thousand in Israel that had not bowed to Baal nor had kissed him. A similar message was given by Zechariah when he was exhorting the people about their sinful condition and their indifference toward God. They would not find contentment from their efforts "...Not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6). Likewise, Solomon also understood the value of quietness and caution in speech. "He that hath knowledge spareth his words: and a man of understanding is of an excellent spirit. Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace is counted wise: and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding" (Prov. 17:27-28). Often Jesus sought a place of solitude for himself and for His disciples when they felt the need to draw closer to God. Immediately after His baptism "...Jesus was led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungered" (Mt. 4:1-2). Following this intense time of drawing closer to God, Jesus was severely tempted by Satan. The time that He had spent in quiet, fervent prayer may have left Him somewhat physically weakened but His faith was strong. He was able to face all the temptations that Satan could bring and to resist them by using the Word of God as His defense. Although the Scripture does not address this point specifically, we are left to ponder what would have been the result of those temptations if Jesus would have spent the previous forty days and nights in the midst of a loud and riotous atmosphere. Would He have been prepared to answer Satan with God's Word or would He have been defenseless and, therefore, vulnerable?

Not only did Christ provide the example, but He also taught His apostles the value of solitude. When they were in great distress following the death of John the Baptist, He said to them "...Come ye

yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest awhile: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat” (Mark 6:31).

The gentleness of Jesus Christ and the effectiveness of His speech serve as models for us today. Although there were a few cases where Jesus spoke loudly, it was only done in unusual situations and in a very controlled atmosphere. He rarely wasted words and taught us to do the same. In teaching His followers to pray He said “But when ye pray, use not vain repetition, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Mt. 6:7).

Time alone with God is valuable time. We need to shut out the interference and distractions of the world so we can concentrate on our prayers. “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (Mt. 6:6). The distractions of the world can be so disruptive that if they are not eliminated, our minds can be drawn away from God and our prayers seem so ineffective.

Happiness, peace and contentment are available to the children of God. We can achieve these goals by separating ourselves from the world and drawing closer to God. Separation from the world requires a conscious effort. It will not happen if we do not make it a high priority in our lives. Often our work and other activities can result in much contact and too much involvement with the world. This gives Satan ample opportunity to deceive us. By setting aside some time each day to be alone in the quietness of God’s presence and by consciously separating ourselves from the confusion of the world, we can “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10).

The Possibility of Falling from Grace

A very deceptive and dangerous doctrine that is supported by many professing Christians is the concept that is referred to as eternal security or once saved always saved.

These terms refer to a spiritual guarantee that once we have “accepted the Lord Jesus Christ” as our personal Saviour, then we are secure for all of eternity, regardless of lifestyle. For a converted person, one whose life has been completely changed, there is, of course, a wonderful feeling of security as we think about eternity. That feeling of security in Jesus Christ will remain with us as long as we walk with the Lord and do His will. In that sense, we can find “eternal security” in our salvation.

However, it is very important that as children of God we recognize that we can walk away from our salvation. If we allow ourselves to go places or engage in activities that expose us to danger, we are tempting God and giving Satan an opportunity to cause spiritual shipwreck. These unwholesome activities can weaken our resistance and may cause us to fall.

Numerous passages of scripture state clearly that it is possible for a child of God to return to sin. “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;” (I Tim. 4:1). “Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee” (I Tim. 4:16).

Paul was instructing Timothy to be watchful of the false doctrine he would encounter that could deceive him and cause him to be careless. Several words in these passages are especially important - “depart” and “continue”. Clearly we cannot depart from something we never had, nor can we “continue” something we have not begun. Therefore, we are sure that Paul was speaking to Timothy about converted people.

In the last days, there will be believers who will be convinced to turn away from Christ and return to sin. There will also be those who grow impatient for Christ’s return. They will be deceived and will try to convince others that the promises God made about Christ’s return to claim his bride, the Church, are false. “...there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (II Pet. 3:3-4). We must patiently continue to “hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown” (Rev. 3:11).

In the Book of Revelation, John wrote about those who at one time had placed the Lord first in their lives but had allowed themselves to grow careless and were very much in danger of losing their place in God’s favor. “Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works, or else I will come unto thee quickly, and remove thy candlestick out of his place...” (Rev. 2:4-5).

We take great comfort in the promise that “He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life,...” (Rev. 3:5). This would certainly indicate that the faithful, the overcomers, will retain their place in the Book of Life. The importance of this is emphasized when John wrote “...and another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books,...” (Rev. 20:12).

Jesus explained to His disciples of the dangers and deceit that His followers would face before the end times. There will be false teachers and much sin in the world. “And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold” (Matt.

24:11-12). The only way for love to wax cold is for it to exist. Again, clearly Christ was speaking of those who once loved the Lord but allowed sin to intervene and their love for Christ grew cold.

Jesus Christ did not leave His disciples without hope. He promised them “But he that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved” (Matt. 24:13). This beautiful promise would not have been needed unless there was a danger of falling away.

Not only do we need to be careful that we are not deceived by others, we must be careful that self-confidence does not cause us to grow careless. “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). We must also remain dependent upon the Lord to keep us safe and in His love. “How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings” (Ps. 36:7).

In addition to the danger of putting trust in ourselves and losing our salvation, we must also not put our trust in riches. “...an heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children:...following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness” (II Pet. 2:14-15).

Numerous other scripture passages could be cited that help us understand the false doctrine of once saved, always saved. Time and space do not permit a complete list but a few more are simply listed without comment. “And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). “But now, after ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage” (Ga. 4:9). “But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, the dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire” (II Pet. 2:22).

In spite of the seriousness and frequency of the warning in the Holy Scriptures that those who have become followers of Christ would return to sin and lose their salvation, there is no need for a child of God to despair. To each of the seven churches that are addressed in Revelation, a promise of a secure eternity was made to those that overcome and remain faithful. That promise is still in effect for us today.

Gossip

We hear a great deal in the world today that reminds us to be careful that we do not cause an accident that brings injury to ourselves or to others. Businesses go to great lengths to try to make the workplace a safe place to be. Governments at all levels pass volumes of legislation to try to make the world a safer place to live. As children of God, we need to be careful that we do not do something that would cause injury to another person. In addition to physical injury, there is another area of our life that needs attention that will also help reduce the pain we cause others. Gossip, the spreading of hurtful information about another person, can cause pain that is at least as serious as the physical pain caused by many injuries. “The words of a talebearer are as wounds and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly” (Prov. 18:8). This concept is so important that the exact words are repeated in Prov. 26:22. The scripture uses a variety of terms such as “evil speaking”, “talebearers” and “vaintalk” to warn us against gossip. All are utterly condemned by the scripture. All of them are regarded so seriously that those who engage in them are in danger of spiritual destruction. “If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain” (James 1:26).

Additionally James writes: ...the tongue is a little member and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body and setteth on fire the cause of nature; and it is set on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts,...is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison (James 3:5-8).

Our speech and our actions must be consistent. “Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries?...” (James 3:11-12).

If we hear of someone who is the subject of a rumor and we spread the news of this situation, we can be guilty of keeping the unfortunate story going. If we keep the gossip to ourselves, we can help to put an end to it. “Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth” (Prov. 26:20). We must be very careful that we do not add fuel to the fire.

Sometimes we are tempted to defend ourselves when we gossip by saying that the information that we spread around is true. That may well be the case but our speech need not be false to make us guilty of gossip or evil speaking. Anything that could be hurtful, whether true or untrue, can be gossip. The factor that determines whether or not a message is gossip is the impact that it has on the individual who is being talked about. When the Scribes and Pharisees took the adulterous woman to Christ, there is little doubt that what they said was true. They informed Christ of the sin of the woman and spread the news of the unfortunate woman. Christ did not defend her actions. He clearly referred to it as sin. But he also made the point very clear that the Scribes and Pharisees were wrong in what they said because their intent was wrong.

They were part of the problem rather than part of the solution. When we have some information about an individual or a situation, we need to ask ourselves why we are repeating the story. Are we repeating it just so someone else has the information or so they know that there is a situation that needs our prayerful attention?

We also need to ask ourselves what will be the likely result if we repeat an account of a situation. Will it edify or will it confuse and cause pain? Will it help the individual or will it hurt someone?

The closeness of the fellowship in our brotherhood affords us many opportunities to engage in fruitful spiritual conversation. We have many opportunities to uphold, encourage and exhort one another. All of these can be to our spiritual benefit.

We must, however, be so very careful that this extensive amount of time that we spend together does not give Satan an opportunity to cause division through gossip. Either within our local congregations or among the various congregations throughout our land, there are ample opportunities that Satan can use to bring pain or division. When an unfortunate situation occurs, we must use utmost caution in what we say, why we say it, how we say it or to whom we say it.

Certainly there are times when unfortunate situations must be discussed. In these times we should share just enough information so that the hearer has enough information to pray about the situation but does not have all of the unnecessary details. We must also be careful that we not add to the account by filling in details that may not be accurate.

Sometimes we are tempted to say something about someone in an attempt to make ourselves look better at their expense. We never make ourselves look good by making someone else look bad, "...but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (1 Cor. 10:12). Also, it is the approval of the Lord that is important, not the approval of man. "For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth" (11 Cor. 10:18).

Gossip can be very destructive and very hurtful. The wounds that it can cause can be very deep and long lasting. We can help avoid causing such pain if we weigh our words carefully and follow the Golden Rule. We are accountable for what we say. "But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment" (Matt. 12:30). If we would not want others to gossip about us, we must not gossip about them. "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12).

My Brother's Keeper

“Am I my brother's keeper?” (Gen. 4:9). This question was Cain's defense when God asked him about his brother Abel. It is a question that has been asked for generations; it is a question that we often hear even today. Sometimes the question is asked by sincere children of God who are trying to do God's will and want to know what they can do to help their fellow men, but sometimes it is asked by those who are trying to avoid responsibility.

What does it mean to be our brother's keeper? Although the term is only specifically used one time in the scripture, the concept is referred to many times.

A “brother” as used in the scripture, is described as “...whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven...” (Matt. 12:50). If we are a child of God, then our brother would be all others who are truly the children of God. This certainly is a closer relationship than a neighbor as described in the account of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35). Our neighbor can be anyone upon whom we can show mercy. Our brother, however, is anyone who does the will of God.

A keeper is one who is a guard or caretaker of someone. A keeper is one who has enough concern for someone that they will watch out for the welfare of that individual. A brother's keeper, then is one who has enough concern for a child of God to watch out for his or her welfare.

As children of God, we have the responsibility and the opportunity to watch out for the welfare of our brother. This requires us to be willing to do anything for our brother that would be necessary to help him to remain a child of God. Sometimes it means we will need to go and offer assistance or encouragement in time of need. At other times, it may mean that we will need to go and offer a word of caution or admonition if it appears that our brother is in spiritual danger.

At times such as this, it is very important that we approach the situation in the spirit of humility and with the sole intent of being helpful. We must be very careful that we do not confuse the role of being our brother's keeper with that of simply finding fault. There is no room in the household of faith for activities of this nature.

How can we be sure we are being our brother's keeper rather than finding fault? The scripture provides us with much instruction in this matter.

In the Gospel of St. Matthew, chapter 7, verses 3-5 give us a very clear explanation of one step in this process. Before we remove a mote that is in our brother's eye, we must make sure that we remove from our own eye all obstructions that would interfere with helping to remove the mote from our brother's eye. Later in the same gospel we can read: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican.” (Matthew 18:15-17).

These two passages established a procedure for us to follow that will help us fulfill our responsibilities as our brother's keeper. It assures us that we will see the problem clearly, that we will go in humility and that we will go in a manner that maintains confidentiality. At no time does the scripture ever give us permission to allow these situations to be the topic of gossip. The only reason we should ever speak of the situation is if it is done in a manner that will help solve the problem, not spread it.

The scripture utterly condemns gossip and makes it clear that if we gossip, we are part of the problem. “Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is a no talebearer, the strife ceaseth.” (Proverbs 26:20).

Spreading unkind or untrue statements are very damaging and usually cause a great deal of pain. “The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly” (Proverbs 18:8). A child of God should surely not want to either keep strife going with a brother nor to cause wounds.

Just as we would not want to be guilty of gossip about our brother, we should not engage in flattery or insincere compliments. We need to offer encouragement to one another and we must be sure it is sincere. “He that rebuketh a man, afterwards shall find more favor than he that flattereth with the tongue” (Proverbs 28:23).

If we go about our daily tasks and include gossip and flattery, we place ourselves in a very serious position—one of being a busybody. This behavior is also condemned by the scriptures, listed in the same sentence with other very serious sins. “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters” (I Peter 4:15).

We give evidence that we are our brother’s keeper by the love that we show toward one another. Space does not permit inclusion of all scripture references that demonstrate this but the point becomes very clear even with just a few references. When the Son of man sits on His throne to judge the people, those who are commended for doing right will be told “...Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40).

The Apostle Paul instructed us that “...ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13). The entire 13th chapter in I Cor. focuses on our opportunity and responsibility to show love one toward another and to be our brother’s keeper.

As we go about our daily tasks in an impersonal world, we have an opportunity to demonstrate concern and compassion for those around us. We can put our faith into action as we very quietly and humbly fulfill the scriptural responsibility to be our brother’s keeper.

Listening with the Heart

“My son, attend to my words; incline thine ear unto my sayings” (Prov. 4:20). In a world that is crying to be heard, the skill of listening is sorely needed. Much effort is put forth to try to teach communication skills but so often the need to listen is not emphasized enough.

To assure good communication, the first requirement, of course, is that the message being sent is crystal clear. “And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” (I Cor. 14:7-8). The message of salvation must be sent clearly and in a manner that it cannot be confused with the sounds of the world.

A clear message, however, is only the beginning. There must also be receptive, discerning hearers. We have a duty to learn how to listen to more than words. Effective listening requires us to try to understand the message that the speaker is trying to convey.

Spiritual deafness is the result of choosing to not listen to the voice of the Lord. Men have long refused to listen to the message that God has for His people. “Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house, which have eyes to see, and they see not; they have ears to hear, and hear not: for they are a rebellious house” (Ez. 12:2). Zechariah reported a similar concern when he wrote “But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear” (Zec. 9:11).

Spiritual deafness did not end with the coming of the Saviour. There were still those who chose not to listen to the message of salvation.

After Stephen gave his defense of the gospel to the council, those who heard what he said, chose to remain spiritually deaf. “Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord...” (Acts 7:57). Paul, while in Rome awaiting his trial, reminded those to whom he spoke that Esaias prophesied years before that there would be spiritual deafness when he said “...Go unto this people and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see and not perceive: For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing;...” (Acts 28:26-27).

The cure for spiritual deafness is faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. We need to be sure we do not intentionally stop our ears and deny ourselves the opportunity for salvation.

Refusing to hear the Word of God is only part of the problem. After we have heard the gospel message and to a degree understand it and apply it to our lives, we need to take the time to listen to those who are around us. We especially need to listen to those who are hurting.

Job’s three friends did well by going to him and spending time with him at his time of extreme difficulty. For seven days they sat and mourned with him. This was undoubtedly a great comfort to Job as he tried to deal with his grief.

Although Job’s friends went to him with the best of intentions, as soon as Job began to express his grief and to unload his burden, his friends began to accuse him of wrong doing. Although they may have heard the words that Job spoke, they did not listen with their hearts. The dialogue went on for some time throughout Chapters 3-15 in the book of Job. Job finally said “I have heard many such things: miserable comforters are ye all. Shall vain words have an end? or what emboldeneth thee that thou answerest? I also could speak as ye do: if your soul were in my soul’s stead, I could heap up words

against you and shake mine head at you. But I would strengthen you with my mouth, and the moving of my lips would assuage your grief” (Job 16:2-5).

If only his friends would have taken the time to hear his grief. They would have been in a much better position to help him. When someone is in great distress, it is not the time to heap accusations upon them. It is the time to listen to their grief, to offer comfort and compassion and to listen with the heart. If in the course of listening it becomes apparent that there is sin or wrong doing in the life of the one who is sharing their grief, it must be dealt with at the appropriate time but perhaps not at that moment. If we can gain their confidence by showing we care, we will be in a much better position to help them.

Jesus taught us about the importance of listening with a discerning ear. When his disciples asked him why he spoke to the people in parables He said “For this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing. But blessed are your eyes for they see: and your ears for they hear” (Mt. 13:15-16). They listened carefully to what the Lord Jesus Christ was saying and they listened to more than merely the words which were spoken. They listened to the meaning and to the importance of the message Christ was providing them.

Careless listening and the problem of hearing words but not the message is a frequent problem. “And lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not” (Ez. 33:32).

Paul cautioned against just hearing what we want to hear. “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine: but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (II Tim. 4:34).

When we listen to someone, we need to focus our attention on what is being said. Many times instead of really listening to the other person, we are trying to decide what we are going to say when they have finished speaking. As a result, we do not really know what they said and may respond in a totally inappropriate manner.

We can improve our listening skills if we listen actively. Look at the person who is speaking, if possible. Make sure they know we are listening to them. We may need to kindly ask a few questions to be sure we understand what they are saying. We may also need to encourage them to give more details and to reflect upon what they have said to be sure it accurately represents the situation. Above all we need to learn to listen with our heart, with compassion, with our minds focused upon what is being said so the one who is speaking knows we truly care about them.

Confession of Sin

From the beginning of time, it has been the nature of man to try to hide sin. When man does things that he knows he should not do, he wants to be sure others do not know what he has done. Unconfessed sin brings guilty feelings and causes us to feel separated from God. Separation from God makes us more vulnerable to Satan's attacks. If this vicious cycle is not broken, we will spend eternity separated from God.

Although we can hide sin from man, we cannot hide it from God. After Adam and Eve sinned, they initially tried to hide their sin by sewing fig leaves together to make themselves aprons. When they heard the Lord walking in the garden they "... hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God" When the Lord called unto Adam and asked where he was, Adam replied "I heard Thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Gen. 3:7-10).

Achan, also tried to hide his sin and was told to give "glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession unto him; and tell me now what thou has done; hide it not from me." He replied "I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel when I saw a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them; ..." (Joshua 7:19-21).

Solomon understood the seriousness of hidden sin. "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy (Pr. 28:13). Isaiah also warned of the results of hidden sin. "Woe to the rebellious children, saith the Lord, that take counsel, but not of me; and that cover with a covering, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin:" (Isaiah 30:1).

God has made it abundantly clear that sin will be exposed to the light. Man's efforts to hide sin will be of no avail. "But if ye will not do so, behold, ye have sinned against the Lord: and be sure your sin will find you out" (Nu. 32:23). "For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known" (Lu. 12:2). "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness ..." (I Co. 4:5).

It is important that we understand that sin cannot be hidden from God. It is also important that we understand that Satan would like us to believe that sin can be hidden from God and from man. Satan tried to convince Eve that not only was it acceptable to sin, but that it was a good thing. He told Eve "...ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:4-5).

Early messengers of the gospel of Jesus Christ preached repentance and confession of sin. "Then went out to him (John the Baptist) Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mt. 3:5-6). When the apostle Paul was preaching at Ephesus and the evil spirits tried to overcome the power of God, the faithfulness of the Saints was such that "...the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. And many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds" (Acts 19:17-18).

We may ask the questions - "Why should I confess my sins? What good will it do to make a confession of sin?"

James wrote of the benefits of confession of sin. "Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed" (Ja. 5:16). James was certainly referring to more than simply a physical healing.

Confession of sin is helpful to assure that the truth is in us and to obtain forgiveness. "If we say

that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:8-9).

Confession of sin, if undertaken in an appropriate manner, brings relief to the sinner. It is important to recognize that a humble confession of sin is more than a simple admission of having committed a certain act. It requires admission, with regrets, of having done the deed and an attitude of submission to God with a commitment to not repeat it. To bring a cleansing, purified, forgiven heart, confession must be done in a repentant state of mind.

From time to time we hear of acts of terrorism or other sins for which some group “claims responsibility”. Although these groups certainly have “confessed” their sins, there is no cleansing nor forgiveness. The confession is not done as individuals nor is it done with an attitude of sorrow nor humility. Thus, we can see that confession with an improper attitude is really boasting, not confession.

Humble confession of sin brings relief in a number of ways. The heavy burden of the sin is lifted. We no longer need to worry about having someone find out about our sin because we have removed that fear by making it known. If we have sinned in a manner that is harmful to another, we have the opportunity to gain peace of mind by going to that individual and confessing the sin and seeking forgiveness.

Confession of sin breaks the power of Satan. It brings to light those deeds that keep us in his bondage. Many times a soul will simply try to do better without acknowledging past sins. Rarely does this have long term benefits because, in the unconfessed state, sin is still our master. We must break the grip that Satan, through our sins, has on us.

Confession of sins also puts Satan to shame, revealing him to be “...the prince of this world...” (John 12:31). Our goal is to escape the cares and constraints of this life that we might spend eternity with our Lord. Since we “...cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24), we must completely separate ourselves from Satan.

Confession of sin brings a cleansing of the soul, helping us to remove the vessels of dishonor from our lives and making us fit for the Master’s use. “If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work” (II Tim. 2:21). Only those with a cleansed and purified heart, freed from the burden of sin, can have peace with our Heavenly Father.

Resisting Secular Influences

Since the beginning of Christianity, there have been philosophies and falsehoods that have threatened the Truth. Although the Word of God is inerrant, various thought processes have arisen to challenge true doctrine. As Christians, we know that the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God (I Cor. 3:19), and we must continually guard against the forces that threaten the Truth.

Satan is a deceiver. He roars as a lion seeking whom he may devour (I Peter 5:8). To resist such a force, the believer in Christ is to be “sober” and “vigilant”. He is to “resist steadfast in the faith” (I Peter 5:9).

The enemy’s tools have multiplied in the past generation due especially to increased communication capabilities. These faster and more effective means of communication make the believer more vulnerable to non-Christian thoughts. The proliferation of publishing and broadcasting can exert enormous influence over the unsuspecting believer. With the onset of the Internet, the potential for influence is magnified almost beyond comprehension.

One way Satan sets a framework for his negative influences is by using the trait of individualism which tends to exalt oneself over the Word of God or over the church’s interpretation of the Word. When this occurs, unity of the brotherhood is threatened. When absolute truth is denied, a breeding ground for relativism is born.

Relativism is a theory that holds there is no absolute truth. It asserts that meaning, truth and knowledge vary from person to person, culture to culture, and time to time. This, of course, is in diametric opposition to God’s Word, which is truth (I Thes. 2:13), and is changeless.

Relativism can be ruinous, both for individuals and for society. It is especially injurious, and can cause havoc when it exerts influence among a body of believers in Christ.

In subtle ways, relativism and its corollary philosophies can seep unsuspectingly into the minds of God’s people. If we are to resist relativism, we must be able to recognize its many faces.

Secular humanism, related to relativism, is a worldview oriented to the secular rather than to the spiritual (or the supernatural). Concepts and behavior are rooted in this world, instead of in God’s precepts. Ethics are seen from a human-centered outlook, rather than a God-centered one. For example, human cloning is often debated as a civil rights issue instead of a spiritual issue.

Individualism is also a trait that fits under the relativist umbrella. It is rooted in self-interest and self-centeredness. These instincts are naturally ingrained and can be a continuing battle for the true believer in Christ to overcome. Individualism sometimes shows its face when a soul arbitrarily exalts himself or herself to the point of dismissing sincere church guidance. Rather than submitting to a God-given authority, a soul tends to ignore it.

Another concept that promotes relativism is situation ethics, a philosophy that encourages every significant ethical decision to be made in the light of current circumstances. What to do or not do is determined by the present circumstances, rather than by the unchanging message of God and His Word. Situation ethics occurs when compelling “situations” cause a believer to leave the narrow way to adapt to a peculiar situation that has arisen. This exalts man’s reasoning above God’s standards.

Values clarification also fits under the umbrella of relativism. This outlook resists the absolutes of

the Bible and asserts that values are individually “clarified” - that what might be seen as truth to one person may not be so to another person, and vice versa. “Truth” is seen as multidimensional and therefore is not really truth at all.

These relativist-oriented forces have exerted a significant influence over American life and are beginning to have a major impact within our brotherhood. The believer in Christ must resist influences that are inconsistent with, and destructive of, the Word’s teachings. We are to discern the spirits to determine what is true and what is false. Solomon prayed for an understanding heart so he could determine between good and bad (I Kings 3:9). The Church offers us help in avoiding false conclusions and beliefs.

In resisting relativist influences, we have the avenue of prayer. If we are fervent in prayer, we will be able to discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not (Malachi 3:18). This is critical in these trying times. The Bible teaches us to be “wise as serpents, and as harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16). The believer needs to be informed concerning the anti-biblical influences that surround him.

There is a very significant requirement that precedes our ability to discern good or evil. The Apostle Paul taught the believer to “be not conformed to the world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). For what purpose? “That ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

If we are not conformed to the world, and our mind is transformed and renewed, we can see more clearly. We can discern between right and wrong and we can resist relativism and all its destructive influences. In doing so, our ability to overcome sin until the end will be greatly enhanced.

We, as a church body, are becoming more and more highly educated as the generations unfold. While knowledge can be very beneficial to society, the Word teaches that it “puffeth up” (I Cor. 8:1). Great care must be taken that all of us, whether students, parents, grandparents, etc., insure that we are both recognizing and avoiding the powerful forces of relativism that swirl around us. One of our founding church fathers once said, “A humble heart is an abode of God.” If we can, by God’s grace, remain humble in heart, God will surely direct us away from the onslaught of relativist falsehoods.

Technology and the Internet - I

“Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright: but they have sought many inventions’ (Eccl. 7:29). It is quite obvious that there have been many inventions that have brought significant changes in our lives, and as in the days of Noah, many of these changes have not been good. “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great ... and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5).

Technology has brought significant change to our lives, and the rate of change is increasing rapidly. We often wonder, and to an extent fear, what impact this will have on our faith. The next two editorials will briefly explore some of the benefits and concerns that technology has brought to our lives.

The Internet is a world wide connection of computers that can give the operator of a computer access to information from sources throughout the world. Any computer, any place in the world, can be connected to the Internet once it has been registered with a central agency and has been given a “unique address”. This collection of computers provides storage for information that can be transferred from one computer to another by using phone and communication lines. An individual who has a personal computer can access the Internet via a phone line using a device called a modem.

The World Wide Web (WWW) is a software technology that allows access to pictures, video, sound and text stored on the Internet. This software enables a computer owner to access information from virtually any place in the world.

Electronic mail (E-mail) is similar to the standard postal service mail we all use today. The primary difference between E-mail and standard mail is the means of delivery. E-mail is transported electronically over the Internet instead of over the highway by truck or airway by plane. E-mail can be delivered almost instantly and to numerous recipients at the same time.

“Chat Rooms” are a form of electronic communication that use typed messages which appear immediately on the computer of another individual or group of individuals. Much like short wave radios, chat rooms allow instant communication over the Internet. Messages may be accompanied by a video camera picture of those who use this means of communication.

The advanced technology and reduced cost has made it possible for many individuals and businesses to have access to almost unlimited information. There are many benefits that this new technology and the Internet have already brought, and the potential for future benefits is enormous. The Internet or the WWW can be used by schools, businesses and individuals in a variety of ways to improve our lives. Devices that enable many handicapped individuals to live a much more normal life, medical and surgical advances, and expanded educational opportunities are only a few of the advantages.

Technology also provides an opportunity for those of like mind and faith to draw closer together through improved communication. Brethren who are somewhat isolated because of work or other circumstances could be in close and frequent contact with other brethren through this medium. It could provide an opportunity to broadcast E-mail messages to friends and members, thereby keeping all of us better informed of opportunities to help each other. While this can be a blessing, we must be very careful because it could also lead to communication with those of another faith and increase the possibility of doctrinal confusion.

In addition to improved communication among brethren, the Internet and related technologies will also increase the opportunities for brothers to work at and from their own homes. This has the potential to

reverse the trend started during the Industrial Revolution which required men to leave home to work among worldly people in factories and offices. Many children have no opportunity to know what their father does at work nor do most families have an opportunity to work together. Working at home may allow us to once again work as a family unit as was common in the agricultural era.

Increased business travel in recent years has become a problem for some families. With some fathers being gone several nights per week, additional stress is placed on the mother as she tries to fill the role of both parents. The improved technologies could reduce the need to travel.

Undoubtedly the future will bring additional, significant changes in technology and this will bring with it many opportunities and concerns. Although improved technology can be very useful if Godly standards are adhered to, we must be careful that we heed the scriptural warning that men can become "...vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Ro. 1:21). With vanity comes self-exaltation. If advanced technology leads to the false belief that man is in control of his destiny, will the Lord again look down upon the earth and see the attitude of man is as it was at the time of the building of the Tower of Babel and say "... this they begin to do, and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do" (Gen. 11:6)? God is in control and determines how much knowledge man can gain. However, man may be tempted to try to go farther than he should, thus risking the wrath of God.

The Children of God would do well to be aware of potential problems brought on by technology. Some who become overly involved in the Internet have developed behavior similar to addiction. This behavior is often related to the dangers of pornography, profanity, games and communication with strangers that could lead to unwholesome relationships. The Scripture advises us to "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners" (I Cor. 15:33).

The next article will cover additional topics of concern about technology and the Internet.

Technology and the Internet II

This editorial is a continuation of a topic that was discussed in the last issue of the Silver Lining. The Internet and the WWW has raised great concern in recent years because it provides access to virtually unlimited, uncensored information to anyone who has access to this media. Children are especially vulnerable to this flood of unwholesome material.

The ease of access to the Internet allows one to obtain strange and evil information in the privacy of their own home. Identity can be hidden through made up names allowing individuals to deceive themselves into thinking that they can engage in this behavior without being caught. However, we know from the scripture that we will be held accountable for our behavior. “Rejoice O young man, in thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment” (Eccl. 11:9).

The false sense of security from the easy anonymity and the attitude that no one is really in charge of controlling the Internet is a serious problem. To think that we are not accountable for what we do is, of course, contrary to scripture. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that everyone may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (II Cor. 5:10).

The Internet also raises serious dangers concerning doctrinal deception. Experiences have shown the potential danger of yet another way in which the ecumenical spirit of our time can draw believers and friends alike into false doctrines, heresies and associations with others of a different faith or persuasion. The world proclaims the virtues of cultural diversity but in the scripture Jesus Christ said “He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad” (Mt. 12:30). Christ also warned us to “Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many” (Mt. 24:4-5).

The apostle Paul also warned of this deception when he wrote “I marvel, that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel; which is not another; but there be some that trouble you and would pervert the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:6-7).

Temptations are intensified when we feel that there is some element of privacy of our actions. Certainly there is an opportunity for the enemy of our soul to intensify temptation via the Internet. Alone in our home, office or college dormitory, unwholesome or deceptive information is available to us almost immediately. The tempering effect of needing to go somewhere else and be in a public place that brings with it an element of accountability is gone. The Lord reminds us to pray that we are not led into temptation (Mt. 6:9-13).

An additional concern about the high speed technology is the expectation for more services at an ever increasing speed. Technology is helping to make us very impatient. The human desire for instant gratification is emphasized even more by the speed with which we have come to expect things to be accomplished.

The Bible teaches us that “...they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength;” (Isaiah 40:31), and “...wait on the Lord, and he shall save thee” (Pr. 20:22). If we have so little patience with our daily pursuits, will we have the patience to wait upon the Lord? We would do well to find a quiet time each day to talk and listen to the Lord.

Also of concern with the technological advances is the added power it gives to those who choose

to use it to control or harm others. Prior to the technology revolution, the effect of one's actions was generally limited to a rather small geographic area. It is now possible for individuals to have a greater impact on and bring more devastation to the lives of more people than ever before. The risks of major catastrophes by individuals or small groups is substantially greater than it was several decades ago. Not only does this pose a risk to the safety of individuals and communities, it may be a source a temptation to God's children to misuse technology to gain an unethical advantage over others.

Another great danger of the Internet results from the fact that many young children are more adept at understanding and using computers and technology than their parents. Therefore parents need to make a special effort to counsel and provide accountability for their children. Parents need to review their scriptural responsibility in teaching their children of the ways of the Lord and to warn them of the dangers of deception in the world.

Deuteronomy 6:6-12 explains the necessity of the intensity needed to help our children understand the right way to live. Additionally we are instructed to "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6). Further instruction tells us "and, ye fathers provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4).

Improved technology can be used either for good or evil. If we are no careful, we will be exposed to more evil influences as this improved means of communication brings greater opportunity for involvement with worldly influences. If we become involved in the use of technology, we must use the utmost of caution and Godly discernment and make ourselves accountable to someone in our use of technology. The use of technology by our children must be very carefully monitored, because Satan will not lightly pass up such a powerful opportunity to spread his evil influence. We know the judgment of God on those who commit sin, and we also know that Satan has used many devices in the past to tempt the people of the world to engage in many sinful activities. We must be careful that we do not use advanced technology to "... do the same, (nor) have pleasure in them that do them" (Rom. 1:32).

The Power of Darkness

Satan has always feared the light. From the beginning of time he has worked in darkness and confusion, mixing the truth with lies. He successfully confused Eve by convincing her that by eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge that "...your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5), and that she would not die.

Even before he was cast out of heaven, Satan worked under the power of evil. "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon: and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world." (Rev. 12:7-9).

To a significant degree, Satan has succeeded in transferring his preference for darkness to mankind - and in the process has brought condemnation to those whose deeds are the work of darkness. "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (Jn. 3:19).

Often children fear darkness because they do not know what is there if they cannot see it. It is a sad situation to watch a child who is afraid of the darkness. It is a tragic situation when a man fears the light. This often occurs because they can see what is there, they know their deeds are evil, and they do not want the results of their works revealed to the world.

The concept of darkness is based on deceit. Men think that they can hide in darkness and that their evil deeds will go unnoticed. The scripture teaches us otherwise. "Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops" (Lk. 12:3).

Sin and the power of darkness will prevail at certain times. If we allow Satan to control our thinking and our behavior, there will be periods of time when it will appear that these forces of evil are in control. Christ recognized this at the time of His arrest prior to His crucifixion. When the chief priests, the captains of the temple and the elders sent soldiers to arrest Him, He said "Be ye come out as against a thief, with swords and staves? When I was daily with you in the temple, ye stretched forth no hands against me: but this is your hour and the power of darkness" (Lk. 22:52-53).

To accomplish God's great plan for the salvation of the souls of men, Jesus was willing to allow the power of darkness to prevail for a time. However, He knew that it was only for a time and after that time had passed, the power of God would clearly dominate Satan.

We might ask ourselves why God would allow darkness (and hence Satan) to prevail for even a short time. If we examine the Scriptures, we find that in the short time of Christ's trial and crucifixion several very important concepts relative to the plan of salvation were accomplished. Christ was able to turn the Power of Darkness into a series of victories for His heavenly Father.

First of all, He established very clearly that He was the Son of God. While speaking to Pilate, Jesus said, "Thou sayest that I am a King. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice" (Jn. 18:37).

Additionally, He established the futility of depending on the Power of Darkness. As He was being led to Calvary, He said to those who were following Him, "...weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children, For, behold, the days are coming in the which they.. .begin to say to the mountains, Fall

on us; and the hills, cover us” (Lk. 23:29-30). Even the mountains and the hills will not be able to stop the power of light from destroying the Power of Darkness when the Lord determines it is the time.

Also, the power of forgiveness was demonstrated in the very darkest of times. As Christ was in the depth of His agony, on two separate occasions, He showed the power of forgiveness. One of the thieves recognized that Jesus was innocent and was dying for the sins of the world and asked for Christ’s help. The power of darkness did not diminish Jesus’ desire or willingness to help others even when He was in extreme agony. He said to the repentant thief, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Lk. 23:43).

There were also others who were in need of forgiveness but at that time they did not recognize their need. Even without their having asked Him to do so, Christ prayed for, and forgave, those who were crucifying him. “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34).

The seriousness and power of darkness is referred to many times in the scripture. In His Sermon on the Mount, Christ said “But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness.” (Mt. 6:23). The ultimate victory of Satan would be if “. . .the children of the kingdom shall be cast into outer darkness: There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 8:12).

Fortunately, the children of God need not despair: Although Satan’s power in darkness is great, it is limited and we need not be consumed nor controlled by him. The Lord has promised us a way out of this despair. Jesus said “I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness” (Jn. 12:46).

While we are under the power of Satan we are in darkness but “. . .God sent not His son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.. For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, but he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God” (Jn. 3:17-21).

God’s children are such a privileged people. “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (I Peter 2:9). Our heavenly Father “. . .hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Col. 1:13).

The power of darkness is limited both by time and strength. The light of the Word of God will prevail and His children will be blessed for resisting Satan and for standing in the light.

Anonymous Admonition

“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin. (*James 4:17*)

One of the responsibilities that we have as children of God is to help our brothers and sisters to serve God faithfully. Sometimes this requires us to bring a concern to their attention. When we feel a need to admonish or share a concern to a brother or sister, it seems that too often it comes in the form of an anonymous note or an anonymous message sent through a third party. This third party could be an elder, a minister, or another brother or sister in faith. The practice of anonymous admonition is in direct conflict with Biblical teachings. The Bible tells us that we should (Col. 3:16, I Thes. 5:14, I Tim. 4:13, Rom. 12:8, II Thes. 3:14-15) admonish our brother and that we are able (Rom. 15:14) to admonish our brother. Furthermore, the Gospel of Matthew gives explicit instructions in the procedure to be taken when it appears admonishment would be helpful.

“Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye” (Matt. 7:1-5).

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” (Matt. 18:15-17).

Paul also writes that admonishment is done not to shame the brother, but to warn him. “I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you” (I Cor. 4:14).

The steps we should take to speak to a brother about our differences, as outlined in the Bible, are carefully taught to us as new believers and reviewed at every testimony with the converts.

There are many good reasons these Biblical steps should be practiced:

- * It is Biblical ... it is God’s Word.
- * Ignoring these Biblical instructions causes hurt and discouragement to a fellow believer.
- * Anonymous notes, and messages sent through a third party, deprive a brother of the opportunity to apologize to the offended. An apology and reconciliation are an important part of repentance and healing, and they are essential to spiritual health. It is especially critical as the time of communion approaches (I Cor. 11, Matt. 5:23-24). Furthermore, even with the best intentions, messages become scrambled, much like the childhood game of “telephone”. The full effect of the message may be lost when body language, expression, and tone of voice are not witnessed. For example, the problem could be only a simple misunderstanding, easily clarified at the time of the expression of the concern.
- * Involving a third party or an entire congregation may lead to whispering, gossip, and confusion (I Cor. 14:33; James 3:13-18; Prov. 20:3).
- * When admonishment is done correctly, church unity is upheld (I Pet. 3:8-11; I Cor. 1:10; I John 1:7).
- * Love and peace among brethren is a part of true religion (Mark 12:33; Mic. 6:8).

Since we have Biblical instruction to admonish our brother and a step-by-step outline of the procedure to follow, we certainly would not want to depart. Doing so could be an indication of one or more

of the following problems:

- * Lack of spiritual strength and courage (Deut. 31:6; Isa. 41:10; Matt. 28:20).
- * Pride (Prov. 28:25; I Pet. 5:5; James 4:10).
- * Hypocrisy (Matt. 23:23-24; Matt. 23:28).
- * Inconsistency (Rom. 2:21; Luke 6:46).
- * Anger (Prov. 15:18).

If we are approached by someone who wants us to convey a message of admonishment or concern for another brother, we should ask him if he has followed the scripture, and having examined himself first, spoken to the brother “between thee and him alone.” If he has not, ask him if he loves the brother enough to warn him about the perceived danger to his soul. Ask him why he wants someone else to talk to the brother. Encourage him to follow the Biblical directives and go to that brother, himself, face to face, in love and humility.

As a practical matter, if Biblical instructions are followed, much pettiness and distrust would be put aside and only the true areas of concern would be brought before a brother.

As children of God, we have the responsibility and the opportunity to watch out for the welfare of our brother. This requires us to be willing to do anything for our brother that would be necessary to help him to remain a child of God. Sometimes it means we will need to go and offer assistance or encouragement in time of need. At other times, it may mean that we will need to go and offer a word of caution or admonition if it appears that our brother is in spiritual danger.

At times such as these, it is very important that we approach the situation in the spirit of humility and with the sole intent of being helpful. We must be very careful that we do not confuse the role of being our brother’s keeper with that of simply finding fault. There is no room in the household of faith for activities of this nature.

Loving admonition is vitally important to the church and the believer. Anonymity, however, plays no part in the proper implementation of this act and because it is in direct conflict with God’s Word, it is sin.

Lost Opportunities

So many times as children of God we find ourselves regretting lost opportunities. How many times have we found ourselves in a situation in which we plan to do something for someone, such as visiting the sick or elderly, only to find that we have waited too long?

Perhaps the Lord called a loved one home and we regret not having taken the time to visit them, knowing we will never have that opportunity again. There are times when we know someone is facing a critical time in his life, only to find that we waited too long to give him an encouraging word or a bit of time that would have helped him through a dark hour. We are often sorry we did not make helping that person a priority in our life.

The Bible provides us with many valuable lessons about lost opportunities and instructs us on ways to avoid the pitfalls of these unfulfilled intentions.

In the parable of the ten virgins, the Saviour taught us the importance of being ready for the coming of the bridegroom and of the disappointment that awaits those who intended to be ready but were not. Their intentions were of no value. When they knocked on the door "...saying Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not" (Matt. 25:11-12).

In the same lesson Christ explained the fate that awaits an individual who has been given talents to be used in the service of the Lord but makes excuses for not using them in His service. Even though the servant felt justified in his own mind for not using his talent, the Lord did not accept excuses and said, "...cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:30).

In other situations, individuals were given the opportunity to follow Christ but they had other things they wanted to accomplish first. One who had been called to be one of Christ's disciples "...said unto him, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. But Jesus said unto him, Follow me; and let the dead bury their dead" (Matt. 8:21-22). Another only wanted to "...first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:61-62).

Others claimed that they were not aware of opportunities and therefore should not be held accountable. They didn't know that they had not ministered to those in need but the Lord reminded them that "...Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me" (Matt. 25:45).

Most of the examples cited thus far have referred to individuals who lost opportunities, but there were also times when entire villages lost the opportunity to do God's will. Prior to His crucifixion, Jesus lamented the plight of Jerusalem when He said "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not" (Matt. 23:37).

Perhaps one of the greatest lost opportunities of all time is the sad plight of Pontius Pilate. Here was a man who was in the right place at the right time to make a major impact on history. He had the authority to set Christ free. He had the understanding to know that Christ was innocent and he had been warned by his wife to not have anything to do with Christ's death. But, he feared the crowd and was not willing to take a chance at upsetting Caesar by setting Christ free. There is no doubt that even if Pilate would have risked losing his position by setting Christ free, Christ would have been crucified because it was necessary to fulfill God's plan. But Pilate had the opportunity to be the only man in history who could

have been remembered as the ruler who gave up his position to free Christ. He lost this opportunity because he feared man more than God. Instead of being remembered as the man who set Christ free, he is remembered as the man who washed his hands of the matter and tried to shift the responsibility to others. What a tragic lost opportunity to stand up for Christ.

How can we as God's children avoid losing the opportunity to do God's will? There are many places in scripture that help us avoid this situation. If we follow Christ's message in the Sermon on the Mount, we will start building a foundation that will help us take advantage of the opportunity to serve God. "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).

It is necessary from time to time for us to pause and take a spiritual inventory of our lives. Have we kept the promises we made when we made our covenant with God? Have we allowed the pressures of providing for our families to make us lose sight of the weightier matters of faith? Do we allow the desires for entertainment and worldly activities to rob us of precious time that could be spent in taking advantage of the opportunities that God presents to us?

As we reflect upon our life, do we seriously consider the Golden Rule? "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them..." (Matt. 7:12).

While it is certainly true that we cannot do all of the things we would like to do to help others, and although we cannot relieve all of the world's suffering, we can be of help. Every kind deed that is done is an opportunity gained and a service done for the Lord. "For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward" (Mk. 9:41).

The Hour Is Come

“Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify Thee” (John 17:1). For thousands of years the promise of God, made in the Garden of Eden to send one who would defeat Satan, was waiting to be fulfilled. From the perspective of mankind, it would seem as though God waited a long time to keep His promise.

God didn't wait a long time. He simply waited until the time and events were such that it was the right time to send His Son to earth to fulfill the promise of a Saviour. God's timetable differs significantly from man's timetable. We are instructed in His Word that we should “be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (II Peter 3:8).

Although there will be “...scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (II Peter 3:3-4), we must remember that “the Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (I Peter 3:9).

Time is measured as the interval between two events. The finite mind of man is unable to grasp eternity (timelessness) as God can, so we define our “intervals” with events that we can grasp. The interval between Christ's first coming and His second coming has been so long in the minds of man that there are many who question whether His second coming will occur. However the Bible tells us “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night,...” (II Peter 3:10).

For children, time often seems to pass rather slowly, especially as they look forward to special events. Christmas, a birthday or some other special activity that is exciting in the mind of a child seem as though they will never come. As we all know, eventually the event arrives, is soon over, and the children look forward to the next exciting event.

As individuals mature, time seems to go faster. They realize that these regularly occurring events will quickly come and go and often they find themselves thinking about events which may occur only occasionally in their lifetime. As in their childhood, they wonder if these widely spaced events will really come to pass.

In early adulthood, a decade seems quite long but it eventually ends and a new one begins. In old age, even these events come and go quickly and time slips away very rapidly and one begins to think about time in a different manner - perhaps in lifetimes. The time when grandparents or parents lived passed quickly and they were soon gone. The lifetime of each one of us also shall quickly pass away and the promises of God will be clearly seen.

Often the passage of time is looked at as an opportunity to make a clean start. A new year brings new opportunities; a new decade brings a new outlook; a new century brings a new era. We are now hearing a great deal about the coming of a new millennium. Some look forward to it with great anticipation, others with great fear. For a Child of God, there is no need of fear. Our reaction should be to recognize that each passing event brings us closer to the time we will meet God.

Many seem to expect that a “new” period of time will in some way suddenly make all things better, as though the changing of a page on the calendar can make things different. While we do not want to minimize the importance of time as a way to help us organize our lives and to help us realize that we so quickly are drawing closer to the end of our allotted span, we need to recognize that of all the different

ways of reckoning time, perhaps only two are of eternal significance. These two are the interval between our birth and our death and the interval between Christ's first coming and His second coming.

We all recognize that we will not live forever. In our youth we expect that we will live to be quite old. Youth seems to give us a feeling of being invincible, that there is no need to be concerned about the end of our life. But, the hour will come, and none of us know when we will be required to give an account of the activities in our lives. We cannot avoid it.

Perhaps we feel we are at an age that we expect to have many more years to live. We may be very healthy, young, and strong and have every reason to believe that the end of our life is many years away. Even so, there is another interval that we need to think about. Christ has already made His first appearance on earth, and we have God's promise that He will return. The Word of God gives us this assurance and it gives us much instruction about His second coming.

It would seem that most, if not all, of the prophecies which must come to pass before His return have been fulfilled; therefore He could come at any time. When He does return, His people will be called to give an account of their lives. Those who expected to have many more years to prepare for His Second Coming will be disappointed if they have not become a Child of God. Christ taught us to "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh" (Mt. 25:13). John wrote "Behold, I come quickly:..." (Rev. 3:11).

We have no promise of long life, or even of tomorrow. We must realize that time is fleeting and our life will soon end. Whether, in our minds, it will be soon or many years in the future, for all of us we will reach the point when "The Hour Is Come". We "shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Ro. 14:10-12).

The interval that God has given us will soon end. Let us all use that time to prepare for our meeting with our Lord.

Willingly Ignorant

The dictionary defines “ignorant” as lacking knowledge, education or experience. We are all ignorant in some topics for it is not possible for us to be knowledgeable about everything. As a result of our limited abilities, we must make choices about which subjects we will be ignorant and those about which we will be informed.

In choosing the topics about which we will be well informed, we need to weigh the importance of the topic and the consequences of ignorance. One topic that we are all ignorant about at some stage of our lives is the importance of salvation and a personal relationship with God.

Until we reached the age when we could understand our responsibilities toward God, we were not accountable for this ignorance. Prior to our ability to understand, the Scripture tells us that “the times of this ignorance God winked at” (Acts 17:30). The time comes for each of us, however, when there is no longer an excuse to remain ignorant and we read that God “...now commandeth all men every where to repent” (Acts 17:30).

The Scripture often refers to the spiritual ignorance of man. In each case there are consequences for this ignorance. The prophet Isaiah wrote “The way of peace they know not; and there is no judgment in their goings: they have made them crooked paths; whosoever goeth therein shall not know peace” (Is. 59:8). The Apostle Paul wrote “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God” (Ro. 10:3).

Ignorance of God’s ways is sometimes a result of being placed in a situation where the opportunity to know of God is very limited. Those who have less opportunity to know God’s ways have limited accountability. We are instructed that “... he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes” (Luke. 12:48).

The scripture issues strong admonition about those who are willingly ignorant. Christ spoke of willing ignorance when He said “For this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted” (Matt. 13:15).

The power of God is denied by those who are unwilling to rely upon Him - “For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old (II Peter 3:5). Being willingly ignorant of God’s plan of salvation in no way relieves us of the responsibility to do what is right. We are instructed that a “servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes” (Luke 12:47).

How can we avoid being willingly ignorant? We have many opportunities in our brotherhood to learn of God’s will. We can start and end each day with a conversation with God. It is important that we remember that a conversation is a two way process. We have the privilege of talking to Him through the avenue of prayer. We have the opportunity of having Him talk to us by reading His Word. This avenue of conversation needs to be exercised fervently and often. We are taught to “Pray without ceasing” (I Thes. 5:17) and “...continuing instant in prayer” (Ro. 12:12). An instant, unceasing two way communication with God will help to ensure that we are not ignorant of His will.

Attendance at all the church services possible (AM, PM and midweek) will help keep us in close contact with the Lord. Paul instructs us of the importance of “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together ...” (Heb. 10:25) as a means of encouraging one another to continue in the faith.

In addition to the regular worship services, in our brotherhood we have many additional opportunities to be in the House of God and under the sound of His voice. Gathering together to “Sing forth the honor of his name ...” (Ps. 66:2) also can bring us closer to the Lord.

When a soul has repented and been converted, they have an opportunity to share their experience with the congregation. As often as possible we should be in attendance at these testimonies to provide support to the convert and to be reminded of our conversion experience.

The members of any organization need to be informed of the concerns of the leadership of that organization. It is especially important in the household of faith that all of the brothers and sisters are aware of the concerns of the church leadership. By listening to the tapes of the general conference and by attending the reading of the memorandum, each member of the church can be well informed of these concerns and of how they can support the unity and soundness of the faith. In the early church after the Jerusalem conference a letter was sent to the believers at Antioch and “when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation” (Acts 15:31). We also can rejoice when given Godly direction.

A special time to strengthen our faith and to draw closer to God and one another is the communion service. Each of us is admonished to “... examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup ... For if we judge ourselves, we should not be judged” (I Cor. 11:28, 31). This is a very sacred opportunity for each brother and sister to strengthen his or her relationship with God and with the members of the church.

Other opportunities that we have to learn of God’s love for us and of His plan for our life include attendance at funerals whenever possible. This provides us with a reminder of the brevity of life and the certainty of death and that we will give an account of our life to God.

Weddings of brothers and sisters, special holiday services and other special occasions all serve to provide us with an opportunity to “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you” (James 4:8).

God has been so good to us. He has provided ample means for us to learn of His expectations for our life. Surely none of us would want to be ignorant of His love for us, and there is no excuse for us to be willingly ignorant of His Word.

Remember Them Which Have the Rule Over You

“Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation” (Heb. 13:7).

We are living in a time when respect for authority is seemingly decreasing at an alarming rate. Governmental authority is scoffed at, many employees defy their supervisors, school officials no longer are respected by many of the students and parents, respect for parents seems to be seriously eroding, in an alarming number of families husbands and wives do not respect each other, and most important of all, respect for the authorities of the church is at a seriously low level.

God has established an orderly plan for authority and those who deviate from His plan run the risk of causing confusion for themselves and for others. We are instructed that “...rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil...” (Romans 13:3).

Although it is a serious problem when citizens disobey government, when employees defy their supervisors, when students disobey teachers and when children are not obedient to parents, undoubtedly the most serious of all are those situations in which church authority is disobeyed. This authority is from God and therefore disobedience to church authority is disobedience to God. Gamaliel recognized this when he cautioned the Pharisees not to resist the work of the Apostles when he said “if this work be of men, it will come to nought, But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God” (Acts 5:38-39).

What are the responsibilities of those who are under Godly authority? What is their duty? When the Children of Israel fought the Amalekites, the Israelites prevailed when Moses held up his hand but when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed. To assure victory, “. . . Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun” (Exo. 17:12).

Many passages of scripture emphasize the importance of submission to Godly authority. “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation” (Rom. 13:1-2).

It is the duty of each of us to hold up the arms of those who have the spiritual oversight of us. Instead of undermining, which is so often the case, undergirding is our responsibility. Each individual who will endeavor to walk as close to God as possible and who will willingly submit to Godly authority helps to hold up the arms of God’s servants.

Those who take the liberty to go beyond the standards of the church and engage in activities which have long been the subject of warning by our church leaders often try to justify themselves by making the claim that they are not hurting anyone by what they are doing. What they fail to recognize is that there is the potential for damage to the faith that may not be immediately evident, but the long term impact is that it brings confusion and division into the church, and it seriously undermines the credibility of those who are in positions of authority. The negative impact on the unconverted can have eternal significance.

Likewise, friends of the faith closely observe the activities of our brothers and sisters. When they see those who have repented, who have been converted and who have been saved by the shed blood of Jesus Christ doing those things that they have been asked not to do, it can seriously undermine the work of the church. It sends a message that disobedience to the teachings of the church is not a problem and it gives

the impression that the standards of the church are not important. If these so called little things are not important, it can plant the idea in the minds of those who observe that perhaps none of the standards of the church are important. Since the doctrine and practices of our church are based upon the Word of God, those who disobey church authority are disobeying God.

Many of the main line denominations had sound doctrine and practices in their churches many years ago. Over time the doctrine and practices upon which the early church was built have eroded to the point where there is little resemblance to the standards as they are defined in the Word of God. These changes did not come suddenly. Over a long period of time one tenet of faith after another was ignored and finally dropped from the churches' standards until they reached the point where serious undermining of the plan of salvation occurred.

The trend in our brotherhood is going in that same direction. More and more brothers and sisters are engaged in worldly activities and “. . . that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes” (Deut. 12:8). If we follow the example of the world, we place ourselves at risk of destroying the very foundation upon which our faith is built.

We are cautioned in the scripture “Where there is no vision, the people perish:...” (Prov. 29:18). Our brotherhood has a vision. The Word of God provides that vision. It is the responsibility of our church leadership to uphold this vision and it is the responsibility of the members of the church to uphold the church leadership. If we ignore the vision and the leading of God through His servants, the vision will fade and the people will perish.

As is described in I Cor. 12, God has provided an orderly distribution of spiritual gifts throughout the Church. If all of the parts do not work together, the body (church) will fail. Those who were placed in positions of leadership in the Church have a duty to provide scripturally sound leadership. Those who become part of the church have a duty to “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account,...” (Heb. 13:17).

Faith Without Works Is Dead

We often hear sincere children of God discuss the topic of faith vs. works as they relate to salvation. We know that we can never do enough good works to earn our salvation. Yet we know that “faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone” (Ja. 2:17). What, then, is the duty of a child of God as it relates to faith and works?

The attitude of so many in nominal Christendom is to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour and be saved. This process of instant salvation has significant appeal in a world in which instant gratification is the normal expectation. We have fast food, fast transportation, fast communication, fast credit, fast entertainment, etc. Why not fast salvation?

The ability to receive almost instant gratification from the above list is dependent upon someone else having provided the means to allow us to have these material items so rapidly. If it were not for a great deal of organization, management and technological know how applied, there would be no means available for these things to be given to us so rapidly.

Salvation, on the other hand, is not something that can be given to us by someone else. There is one part of the nominal Christian version of salvation that is accurate. Salvation is dependent upon our having a knowledge of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is a relationship that must be nurtured in such a way that it can grow over a period of time.

Numerous places in the scripture we are instructed that we begin our relationship with Christ as babes and then we are to grow. We are instructed that “as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby” (II Peter 2:2). The Apostle Paul, in admonishing and exhorting the Corinthian Christians to grow, expressed dismay that they had not gotten past the “milk stage” of Christianity. He wrote to them “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat; for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able” (I Cor. 3:2). He further encouraged them to “...be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be children, but in understanding be men (I Cor. 14:20).

He also encouraged the Ephesians that “...we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:14-15).

Therefore, we can come to understand that salvation is not accomplished as an instant act nor from a short term commitment.

There is no doubt that salvation is available to us through faith. In Ephesians we are instructed very clearly that “...by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). In instructing His disciples, Jesus Christ reminded them that it was His blood “which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matt. 26:28) that makes salvation possible.

The Apostle Paul reminded the Romans that of ourselves, we are nothing. We have nothing to boast of because boasting “...is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay; but by the law of faith” (Ro. 3:27).

What role then does works have in our salvation? The writings of James makes it very clear that works are a part of the requirements for a Child of God. Are Paul and James lacking in harmony? Is there a division between them? Paul again addresses this issue when he wrote “Now I beseech you, brethren, by

the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you;” (I Cor. 1:10). He also reminded them to “...Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind...” (II Cor. 13:11).

Since Christ is not divided and God’s people must be of one mind, we can understand that the writings of Paul and the writings of James complement each other. They are not contradictory towards each other but supplementary.

Works then are a result of faith. After we have established a foundation of faith we are prepared to grow. Certainly our faith gets stronger as we mature and learn to know our Heavenly Father better. This maturity brings a desire to be of greater service to God.

James emphasizes a faith of action. He reminds us that we are to take advantage of the God given opportunities to do good. If we see one in need and do nothing to help them, then our faith is of no significance. If we simply acknowledge the need of the destitute and do nothing for them, we have neither warmed nor filled them. “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and hath not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit” (Ja. 2:14-16)?

If taken out of their proper context, the statements of the Apostles Paul and James could be made to appear to contradict one another.

However, in I Cor. 13, this issue is laid to rest. In this beautiful exhortation, the faith vs. works issue is brought together and resolved. Here we are clearly instructed that works by themselves would leave us as nothing and be of no profit to us. Read I Cor. 13 for further study.

Therefore we take the instruction of Paul “..by grace are ye saved through faith...” (Eph. 2:8) and the instructions of James “...faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone..” (Ja. 2:17) being brought together by charity. A long list of works is mentioned and we are given to understand that these works, being alone, are of no value to us. We can, however, make them a significant part of our faith by heeding the final verse in that chapter: “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (I Cor. 13:13).

It is I; Be Not Afraid

We are living in a time when knowledge, wealth, length of life and inventions designed to make our lives easier are at historic highs and all indications are that they will be continually increasing. Science is delving deeper into the mysteries of life, striving to conquer disease and to discover the secrets of longevity. Medical procedures that could not have even been dreamed of only a few years ago are becoming routine. The things that man strives for to bring comfort and security in this life are more readily available than at any time in history. With all of these advances that are designed to make our lives more secure, one would think that there would be an element of security for mankind.

In spite of all of these apparent advances, there is more instability, emotional distress and insecurity than ever. Sometimes even those who profess faith in God find themselves in the midst of fear. Even the disciples found themselves in such a situation as they were traveling by boat toward Capernaum. They had just witnessed the miracle of Jesus feeding about five thousand men with only five loaves of bread and two fishes. They had been in the presence of the very Son of God. They had seen His power and had heard His message.

Yet when a storm arose they became afraid. When they saw Jesus walking on the sea, they were even more fearful. But Jesus "...saith unto them, It is I; be not afraid" (John 6:20).

What is it that causes mankind to fear? There are a variety of situations such as physical danger, the unknown future, etc. that can cause fear. However, from the very beginning of man's time on earth, sin has no doubt been the greatest cause of fear. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God and took the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge that was in the midst of the Garden of Eden, Adam said "...I heard Thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid"(Gen. 3:10). This was the beginning of fear.

There are many examples in the Scripture of fear brought on by sin. Joseph's brethren, when finally confronted by their sin "...could not answer him; for they were troubled at his presence" (Gen. 45:3). When the Children of Israel had left Egypt and were wandering in the wilderness, God warned them of the fate that was in store for the disobedient when He said "And I will set my face against you, and ye shall be slain before your enemies: they that hate you shall reign over you; and ye shall flee when none pursueth you" (Lev. 26:17).

Sin brings fear even from things that should not cause fear. The Psalmist wrote "They were in great fear, where no fear was:" (Psalm 53:5) and Solomon wrote nearly the same thing; "The wicked flee when no man pursueth" (Prov. 28:1).

Man will go to great lengths to try to escape the fear brought on by disobedience to God; "And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord..." (Isa. 2:19). Jesus also told His followers of the desire that men would have to escape the fear of judgment; "Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us" (Luke 23:30).

It is not necessary for mankind to live with this fear that is a result of sin. From the beginning of time, God's plan was to bring peace and order to a world of chaos. At the very beginning of the Scripture we read "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep..." (Gen. 1:2). In the six days of creation, God brought perfect order to the universe. He created a perfect place for man to live. The perfection was destroyed by sin. After the fall of man, God promised a way for peace and perfection to be restored. God told the serpent in the Garden of Eden "And I will put enmity ... between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). A Sav-iour would come and restore peace and take away the sting of death. The apostle Paul wrote "O death, where is thy

sting? O grave, where is the victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Cor. 15:55-57).

Jesus Christ came to earth to save us from sin and to relieve us of fear. At the announcement of His birth the angels said to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Lk. 2:14).

Jesus taught us how to escape fear and destruction when He preached the message of repentance and conversion. He said “... except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Lk. 13:3) and “...Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

In His Sermon on the Mount (Matt. chapters 5-7), Jesus provided additional instruction to His followers that would help them live in peace with God and man.

Throughout His life Christ preached the message of peace and salvation. He taught us that if we sin we are the servant of sin, but we need not remain the servant of sin forever because “if the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (John 8:36).

After Christ told His disciples of His coming death and that they would all forsake Him, He went on to say “Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me” (John 14:1). Even in His greatest hour of agony, Christ brought peace when He said to the repentant thief “... To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

After His resurrection when He appeared to His disciples He said unto them “Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you” (John 20:21).

There is no need for man to live in fear. God has provided us a means to live in peace. If we live according to His will we have the promise of peace in this life and eternity with Him. At the end of the Scripture Jesus said “And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be” (Rev. 22:12). We must not wait to do His work because He said “...Surely, I come quickly:...” (Rev. 22:20).

Perilous Times

In reviewing the culture around us, most sincere believers in Christ Jesus would agree that perilous times exist (II Tim. 3:1). The high incidence of divorce, family breakdown, crime, child abuse and general promiscuousness have led to social chaos.

Many aspects of the arts, films, books and publications of all kinds contain impurity that exudes corruption. In general, ethical waywardness coupled with an indifference toward good behavior pervades our land. Dishonesty and moral decay are found in many areas of government including the highest office of the land.

Added to the peril that threatens to engulf us is a cynical attitude indicating that many have given up hope that an acceptable level of integrity and morality can be recovered. While such pessimism is wrong, it nonetheless exists and adds to the perilous nature of the times.

In evaluating the concept of perilous times, a sense of perspective must be kept. The peril we see today does not necessarily match the peril and social degradation of the past.

History records suffering, plunder and severe heartache over the years. One need only think of the early Christians being thrown to the lions; of the medieval Crusades where both adults and children left their villages in Europe to help retake the Holy Land only to suffer disease and death; of the Anabaptists who were drowned, beheaded or had their tongues torn out because they held to Scriptures and promoted adult baptism; of the American Civil War where a million men were killed or injured; or of the Holocaust where 6 million Jews perished.

Perilous times have always existed. Because an enemy, Satan, exists and continually persists in his devious doings, peril and suffering will continue.

In drawing an analogy between the perils of the past and those which exist today, one is initially drawn to the conclusion that spiritual peril was much greater in the early church, and through the ages, than it might be today. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that one of the greatest perils we face is our high standard of living. A general sense of ease exists across the land and the lure of materialism can cause leanness of soul. In former times it was the sword that caused untold perils among believers. To some extent, in today's era the sloth and indifference bred by plenty can be as detrimental to the soul as the roar of lions.

Our task as believers is to learn how to cope with perilous times. "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Romans 5:20). Notice that the Word says that grace did much more abound. This passage is heartening to any soul who feels burdened by the sin and iniquity (i.e., the peril) that surrounds us. Indeed, we must humble ourselves so the grace of God will be plentiful in our hearts (James 4:6).

"Peril" and/or "perilous" means danger, jeopardy and hazard. In a spiritual sense, we are all subject to peril. In his work for the Lord, the Apostle Paul faced untold peril as recorded in II Cor. 11:26-27: "in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness."

The peril we face pales when compared to the Apostle Paul's difficulties. While he faced physical and spiritual peril, ours is largely spiritual. However, we must realize that our comforts of life, and general

ease, are perils indeed.

The dangers we potentially face today are found in several subtle forms: questionable teachings in classrooms, wrong influences in broadcasting, entertainment, the temptations of impure literature, outlandish materialism, and becoming envious, lustful and jealous.

Further, in an era of relative ease, higher educational levels and less need to depend upon one another, the threat of attitudinal peril can easily beset a believer. One can more readily ignore church guidance (authority) and instead go his own way. Exaltation of self, as opposed to obeying God ordained authority, is an ever present peril that must be resisted.

In this generation there are additional traits that add to the concept of “perilous times”: spiritual sloth whereby a soul drifts along at the bare minimum, a feeble understanding of doctrine and heritage, and naive exposure to religious falsehoods. This last trait is featured by instant salvation, eternal security, and a lack of sanctification (which results in worldliness).

As believers we must be skillful in recognizing the perils we face and the lifestyles that can drag us into sin and thereby displease God.

According to Romans 12:2, if we are not conformed to the world, and our minds are renewed, we can more readily discern the perfect will of God. We can thence clearly see even the smallest peril that can affect us negatively in a spiritual way.

As true believers, we live to please and serve God. The truly converted soul is called to do his or her best (Matt. 5:48). The peril that exists makes this difficult, but the Word tells us that God’s power far exceeds that of our enemy. “Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (I John 4:4).

We are wise to seek lowliness of heart so God’s grace can keep us diligent in reading His Word, faithful in church attendance and protected from the perils we might face. Anticipation of the joys of Heaven together with participation in the glorious cause of Christ should motivate us to withstand peril, and overcome sin until life’s end.

Steadfastness

“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (I Cor. 15:58).

In an era that displays a great deal of instability, the general trend among mankind is significantly reduced commitment to the family, to the place of employment, to the community, or to the church. The children of God must carefully examine their attitudes and commitment to serving God.

There are a significant number of factors contributing to this problem. The self centered philosophy of our time encourages individuals to place self above family, community and God. The rapid change in technology requires many heads of families to change jobs far more frequently than was the case only a few decades ago. The global economy requires some corporations to be very flexible with their work force in order for them to remain competitive.

In the not too distant past a father could choose an occupation and expect to spend his entire working life in the same job. Although the standard of living was significantly lower than it is now, this long term employment in the same job generally provided significant stability for families.

Sons tended to follow their fathers in the same line of work. Multigeneration families reinforced stable values from one generation to another. This stability extended to the church where it was far more likely than today that families worshiped together in the same church all of their lives.

As the Industrial Age gave way to the Information Age, extremely rapid changes occurred. As these rapid changes occurred, workers, which unfortunately now includes many mothers as well as fathers, are often required to make frequent, sudden and drastic changes. Parents are often required to choose between economic sacrifice or social upheaval by moving their families to new communities. Although this phenomenon is not entirely new, the speed and frequency with which it occurs has increased almost beyond comprehension.

This has had a powerful impact on families. It is more important than ever that parents provide a spiritual atmosphere that brings stability to the family.

As children of God, we have access to an anchor that will provide the needed stability for our lives and for the lives of our children. The Word tells us that “I am the Lord, I change not;” (Mal. 3:6) and “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever” (Heb. 13:8). God’s mighty creation offers us evidence of His might and stability. We may be fortunate enough to fly high above God’s earthly creation and see land forms created thousands of years ago that are evidence of God’s power and stability. Mountains rising thousands of feet in the air stand firm against the tide of change.

God’s children have access to stability if they are willing to be steadfast and unmovable in their faith. The tenets of faith that were so important to the prophets of old, and to the early disciples of Christ, have not changed.

The Bible gives us many examples of steadfastness among God’s servants. Josiah, in performing his duties as King did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left” (II Kings 22:2). Job, in the face of terrible trials “. . .held his steps, his way have I kept, and not declined” (Job 23:11). The three Hebrew children, facing the wrath of King Nebuchadnezzar and the fiery furnace said “. . . we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image...” (Dan. 3:18). Peter and John said “. . .Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For

we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20). Paul in facing certain death said “But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy ... to testify the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24).

The perfect example of steadfastness, of course, is Jesus Christ. Having been in Heaven, totally free from trials and temptations, He was willing to come to earth to face the temptations that Satan would bring. He knew what was before Him: and the sacrifice that was necessary to make the way of salvation possible. Jesus “stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51) to pay a debt He did not have, because He knew we had a debt we could not pay.

As God’s children, we can be beneficiaries of Christ’s redemptive work if we will be steadfast in our faith and our service to Him. To this end we receive encouragement from many places in the scripture. “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1). Peter encourages us to resist Satan and be “stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world” (I Pet. 5:9).

We know that in the last days “perilous times shall come” (II Tim. 3:1) and that conditions of sin will get worse. We also know that God has placed a limit to how far He will allow people to go in sin. To avoid the fate that awaits the unfaithful, we are urged to “continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them;” (II Tim. 3:14).

In the Revelation of St. John, all of the seven churches were told that they had work to do to achieve the mark of perfection. In each case there was a promise made “To him that overcometh...” (Rev. 2:17).

We have a duty and a wonderful opportunity to search for the truth of God’s Word and to apply it to our lives. God’s promise to those who remain steadfast is as sure today as ever. We must all hold fast to the promises of God that we can reap the benefits awaiting those who are faithful.

Marriage in Faith I

July 1999

Decisions regarding marriage are the second most important choices that we make in our entire lifetime. The only decisions that we make that are more important are those that relate to our relationship with God: repentance, conversion and living a life of dedicated service to our Lord.

The success rate of marriages in our nation is very poor. The divorce rate is rising throughout the world and stands at about 50% in the United States. If the statistics regarding marriage can be believed, about 50% of marriages in the United States that do not end in divorce are not good marriages. The couples stay together because they believe divorce is wrong or they want to provide a stable home for their children or for a variety of other reasons. Therefore, if these statistics are accurate, about 75% of the marriages in our nation are not good marriages. Divorce and remarriage is not the answer. A higher percentage of second marriages fail than first marriages. Obviously, something is very wrong.

It is not difficult to find principles that will provide the basis for a strong marriage and to identify a number of problems that lead to marriage failure. The scripture provides us with a structure that will enable a child of God to have a happy marriage. If we follow the principles that are in the Word of God, there is no need for an unhappy marriage in the household of faith.

A child of God should approach the prospect of marriage with the same attitude of faith and submission as is needed for sincere repentance and a complete conversion. Since the Church is referred to as the Bride of Christ (Rev. 19:7 & 21:2), we know that the relationship between a husband and a wife should be based on the same principles of love and dedication that Christ has for the Church.

Those who have experienced a humble repentance and a true conversion know that it is only possible to complete these works of faith by having a totally submissive attitude toward the will of God. The same submissive attitude is needed when considering marriage.

Prior to even considering a proposal, a child of God needs to make a careful examination of his or her life. Am I standing in the grace of God? Am I cleansed and purified from sin? Am I at peace with God and man? Am I living an overcoming life? Am I living a life of service to our God?

Only then can a child of God properly consider the questions related to preparation for marriage. Am I willing to accept the responsibilities that accompany the privileges of marriage? Am I willing to make a commitment to a life long union? Am I willing to make the sacrifices of time, energy and self to allow a marriage to work? Am I willing to consider the needs of my partner ahead of my desires? For prospective husbands, am I willing to love my wife "...even as Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it;" (Eph. 5:25)? The future wife needs to ask herself, Am I willing to submit myself "... unto (my) own husband, as unto the Lord" (Eph. 5:22)?

Too often marriage is undertaken in the wrong spirit. Although there are many successful marriages in the world, the customs that are followed by those who are seeking a lifelong partner often are not based upon sound scriptural principles. Unfortunately these customs often lead to an unsound relationship that results in a marriage that does not survive when the realities of life set in. This problem will be addressed in a future article.

How can we be sure our marriage will be a strong and loving one? The answer, of course, is found in the Holy Bible. Although there are many passages in the scripture that will give us direction, several seem to be particularly pertinent.

When Abraham was old and came to understand that it was time for his son to have a wife, he placed his trust in the Lord to provide for Isaac. His first concern was that Isaac's wife would not be "of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell" (Gen. 24:3).

He wanted a wife for Isaac who would be of his people. It was important that Isaac's wife be a woman with faith in God and who would live according to God's commandments. He sent his oldest and most trusted servant, the one "who ruled over all that he had" (Gen. 24:2), to his country and kindred so that Isaac's wife would be a wife of faith rather than of the heathen, among whom he lived.

Abraham's servant placed his faith in God and asked for very specific direction that he could follow as he sought a wife for Isaac. Much prayer and submission to God were involved. Abraham's servant prayed, and he followed God's leading. Laban and Bethuel, also feeling God's direction said "The thing proceedeth from the Lord: we cannot speak unto thee bad or good" (Gen. 24:50). Rebecca, when told of the situation, said, "I will go" (Gen. 24:50). Upon returning to Abraham's land, the servants and Rebecca met Isaac who had gone "out to meditate in the field at eventide:" (Gen. 24:63) saw the camels coming.

The servant told Isaac what had happened. Isaac then took Rebecca "...into his mother Sarah's tent,...and she became his wife; and he loved her..." (Gen. 24:67).

All of this was done in faith. There was no discussion about compatibility, financial well being, social class, physical appearance or any of the other things that the world regards as being important. What was important was that the hand of the Lord was in the entire process. Genesis chapter 24 gives much instruction about the faith that is needed in bringing husbands and wives together in the Lord.

Faith in finding a mate is only one part of assuring that a marriage will be successful. Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, I Peter 3 and Titus 2 provide much valuable instruction for husbands and wives that will enable them to have a successful marriage.

The next article will expand upon these scripture passages.

Marriage in Faith II

August 1999

The previous article dealt with preparation for a marriage in faith and following God's direction in finding a mate. This article will expand upon some of the scriptural passages that provide sound principles upon which a marriage of faith can grow.

Parents have a responsibility to set a proper example to their children in all aspects of their lives, including their relationship with each other. We are taught "that the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience" (Titus 2:2). These are characteristics that husbands need to exhibit to be a proper head of the household.

Older women are given very specific direction to follow in helping younger women learn their role in a godly family. "The aged women likewise, that they be in behavior as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed" (Titus 2:3-5).

If we as parents provide this example to our children, they will see the Word of God in action. They will have the opportunity to learn the scriptural directives that provide the foundation for a godly marriage and be in a better position to heed the scripture in their own marriage.

Young women who observe older women fulfilling a godly role in the home will know how to "be in subjection to your own husbands" (I Pet. 3:1). They will know to obey the Word, have chaste conversation, and proper adorning. Young men will know to "dwell with them (their wives) according to knowledge, giving honor to the wife, as unto the weaker vessel,...that your prayers be not hindered" (I Pet. 2:7).

The Apostle Paul gives much sound advice to husbands and wives. In Colossians, Chapter 3, he was inspired to write about the attitude that a child of God should display. The following are related to having a godly attitude:

- * set our affections on things above
- * mortify our members which are upon the earth
- * put off anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication
- * lie not one to another
- * put on bowels of mercy, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, forbearance, forgiveness
- * put on charity, the bond of perfectness
- * let the peace of God rule in your hearts
- * let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly
- * do all in the name of the Lord

With our attitude tempered by the above concepts, it will be natural that "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as is fit in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and be not bitter against them" (Col. 3:18-19).

Additional instruction is given in the Epistle to the Ephesians. The atmosphere of our home, how we use our time and the thoughts that control our mind, all have an impact on our marriages.

We are taught to “...walk circumspectly...Redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15-16). We should give serious thought and prayer about the impact that our decisions have on those we love.

Husbands and wives must use wisely the time they are given to be together. Time spent together doing the work of the Lord will do far more to strengthen a marriage than time spent together in pursuit of worldly entertainment of the mind. If we fill our minds with holy thoughts, we will establish a pattern of life that will serve us well throughout our marriage. By “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;” (Eph. 5:19-20) we will give the Lord the proper place in our homes.

Husbands have a special charge to “be the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church.” (Eph. 5:23). Wives need the comfort and assurance that their husbands are fulfilling their godly role in the home. To accomplish this the scripture teaches “Husbands, (to) love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it;...so ought men to love their wives as their own bodies...” (Eph. 5:25 & 28).

Christ never made a decision nor used His authority to hurt the church in any way. He always worked to strengthen and support the church. Husbands are charged with the same responsibility in fulfilling their role as the head of the wife. If husbands are willing to fulfill their role in the home as Christ fulfilled His role in the Church, even to the point of giving their life for their family if necessary, wives will have no reason to fear to follow the scriptural directives to be submissive to their husbands.

Wives provide a support to their husbands. The commandment to wives that they “...submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord...” and “...as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (Eph. 5:22 & 24) can be fulfilled much more successfully in homes with a godly atmosphere.

It is very difficult for wives to submit to husbands who rule the home in a selfish manner. It is very difficult for husbands to be the proper head of the wife if the wife refuses to be a submissive mate. However, if both husband and wife follow scriptural directives it will be a blessing for a husband “...to love his wife as himself...” and for the wife “...to reverence her husband” (Eph. 5:33).

Both husband and wife must be willing to be totally committed to following the scripture in a way that will bring stability to their marriage and to their home. Pursuing selfish interests will bring a strain into a marriage that will bring sorrow. Following the Golden Rule while applying the Word of God to our lives will assure us of a fulfilling relationship with the one that the Lord has provided to be our lifelong partner.

The next article will examine some of the problems that are likely to result from basing our marriages on the customs of the world rather than the principles of God.

Marriage in Faith III

September 1999

The two previous articles described some of the scriptural basis for finding a lifelong partner and for developing a godly relationship between husbands and wives. This article attempts to examine some of the customs the world follows that often contribute to unstable marriages.

The steps one follows in seeking an help meet have a lifelong impact on the stability of our marriage. If we build on a weak foundation, we cannot expect to build a strong home.

Many of our youth are unaware that God has brought thousands of people happily together to marriage through faith without their ever having had a formal date. In the scripture we have the illustration of Abraham's servant depending wholly on God to show him the wife God had chosen for Isaac. The result was a marriage based on faith in which love developed. Isaac took Rebecca "into his mother Sarah's tent, ... and she became his wife; and he loved her, and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (Gen. 24:67). Faith was the guiding force. Physical attraction, infatuation, and compatibility had no part in establishing Isaac's marriage.

Dating, as a method to find a lifelong partner, is a custom that has spread to many parts of the world and is certainly the prevalent method used in the United States. Our culture permits unchaperoned dating which supposedly enables couples to get to know each other and determine if they are compatible. And yet, Americans cannot boast of their record of happy marriages. Well over 60% of teenage marriages result in tears and separation and many children's lives are marred by these failed marriages.

Nearly 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce.

The question may be asked, "Can a Christian date if it is prayerfully considered?" This question is a primary concern for parents when they have teenage children in their homes and is a serious concern of the Church when brothers and sisters are involved. Parents have a responsibility to exercise a realistic home discipline with proper supervision and wise restraining if friends of the truth date. The Church has the responsibility to teach young people to have faith in God's leading.

In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "lead us not into TEMPTATION, but deliver us from evil" (Mt. 6:13). Do we realize that dating invites and exposes young people to temptation? Do we believe that God would have us walk into a situation of danger deliberately, and then expect Him to "deliver us from evil"? Do we realize that if we deliberately expose ourselves to danger, and then expect God to deliver us out of it, that we are tempting God? One of the temptations the devil used against Christ occurred when he asked Jesus to cast Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, saying He would not be hurt, if He was the Son of God. The devil suggested that He was in no danger, that God would "...give his angels charge concerning thee; and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone" (Matt. 4:6). The Lord Jesus said "it is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God" (Matt. 4:7).

Peter was bold and confidently said: "Though I should die with Thee, yet will I not deny Thee" (Matt. 26:35). Yet he did deny Him. He warmed himself at the fire of sinners and exposed himself to their influence. Peter did not know his own heart, even though he was a foremost disciple and a Believer in Christ. But he also believed in self and trusted himself and he came to grief. He learned by bitter experience, that God does not always deliver from evil those that trust in themselves and their own strength. God permits them to learn the hard way. "And he gave them their request but sent leanness to their soul" (Ps. 106:15).

Can a Christian be a light in dating? We cannot be a light in a dark world when we do the same things the world is doing. Dating is certainly a widely accepted practice. However, dating feeds youthful lust, of which the Apostle Paul wrote young Timothy: “Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (II Tim. 2:22).

The Lord Jesus said: “Ye are the salt of the earth;...Ye are the light of the world...Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:13-16). If Christians date as the world does, is our light shining? Is it a thing of purity, of loveliness, of good report, of virtue, of praise or does it more often destroy purity and virtue, and further the unfruitful works of darkness done in secret?

We may believe that we are able to keep our place as a Christian. However, when we appear to do the same thing that the world does, we will be associated with the same evil works of darkness and shame that the world is practicing. Would not the world soon feel justified in this evil practice, saying: “Why shouldn’t we, the Christians are doing it?” We should “Abstain from all appearance of evil” (I Thess. 5:22). As Christians we have responsibilities not only to our Lord but also to our Brother, for whom Christ died. Romans 14:13 teaches “that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way”. Would you want some other young person to go wrong because of your example, or would you rather encourage parents and children to avoid the pitfalls of getting too close to sin?

By abstaining from the unfruitful works of darkness and by not being “conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2), the Christian represses its evil works. Since God joins together, the Psalmist’s advice is still good to follow: “Delight thyself also in the LORD:...trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass” (Ps. 237:4-5).

After considering the many scripture teachings, a spiritually awakened Christian will follow faith rather than dating. The Apostolic Christian Church teaches the advantages of marriage through faith. The scriptural path is clear. We have an opportunity to follow the scripture or to follow the world.

All Sunshine Makes a Desert

October 1999

Nearly everyone enjoys a balmy, sunny day that has no clouds. The blue sky, lush vegetation and comfortably warm temperatures provide an atmosphere of peace and serenity. However, we also realize that too many warm, sunny days all together will cause the earth to get very dry, hard and even develop cracks. The vegetation will begin to wilt and will eventually die if the rains do not come. We know that sunshine every day would make a desert and that we cannot live without the refreshing rain from heaven.

Nearly every child of God enjoys the times when our life is going well, when there are no major problems that we must face and our relationship with God and man seems to be very peaceful. We also know that when everything seems to be going our way too long we can get careless and begin to slowly drift away from God. Too many days or weeks of carefree living can lull us into a false sense of security and self sufficiency.

Just as we need the rains and storms of life to replenish the water supply that will sustain life, so do we occasionally need spiritual rain and storm to remind us of our dependence upon God for all that we have.

We do not look forward to spiritual battles. We sometimes anticipate them with fear. Even Job, who is described as “perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil” (Job 1:1) had a fear of pending troubles. “For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come to me” (Job 3:25).

Most Christians would prefer to live their life and serve God without persecution. Those who face persecution usually try to flee. This is understandable. Even the apostles, who spent time with Jesus, often would flee when given the opportunity to escape persecution.

When King Herod persecuted the Christians, he killed James and imprisoned Peter, intending to kill him also. Many were praying for Peter’s release. When he was miraculously released, he went to the home where they were praying. After gaining admission to the home, he “...declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place” (Acts 12:17). He did not stay there and face almost certain death.

Saul, soon after his conversion, faced persecution. When the Jews planned to kill him, “...The disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket” (Acts 9:25). At that time Saul chose to flee to a place where he could be of greater service to the Lord.

When it suits the Lord’s purpose to spare His people from harsh trials to complete the work He has for them, “...The Lord shall deliver me (his people) from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever” (I Tim. 4:18). Numerous other examples are recorded in the scriptures, both old and new, that record God’s merciful deliverance of his people from harm or evil. A few examples include Lot (Gen. 19:16), David (I Sam. 17:37), the Hebrew children (Dan. 3:27), Daniel (Dan. 6:22), and Paul and Silas (Acts 16:26).

There are times, however, when the Lord allows His people to suffer persecution and death. Stephen, after making a defense against the accusation of blasphemy, was not delivered from his accusers. “Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,...and

stoned Stephen, calling upon God and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit...he fell asleep” (Acts 8:57-60).

Peter and other disciples, when faced with persecution did not flee when it suited the Lord’s purpose for them to fulfill a task in the face of danger. When they were commanded by men to stop preaching, said “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). They continued to preach the truth. They were beaten for this and “...departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:11).

The Apostle Paul, as he neared the end of his ministry, refused to be intimidated by even the threat against his life said “...none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24).

Many other examples of self-sacrifice could be recounted, including Abraham (Gen. 13:9), Joseph (Gen. 50:21), Moses (Nu. 11:29), many early disciples and, of course, Jesus Christ. They faced heavy trials and their faith grew stronger.

Why would God allow His children to suffer? There are a number of reasons. Persecution caused Christians to move to many areas where there were no servants of the true God. Persecuted Christians “...were scattered abroad (and) went every where preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). Also, “...they which were scattered abroad, travelled as far as Phoenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word...” (Acts 11:19), and giving many people an opportunity to hear the Word of God.

Persecution also helps individuals grow in their faith. “if we suffer, we shall also reign with him:” (II Tim. 2:12). “...but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God” (I Peter 2:20). There are many examples throughout history, such as those accounted in the Bible and in Martyr’s Mirror, that provide us with evidence that faith can be increased with adversity.

Persecution can help strengthen the church by helping the individuals of that church be stronger in their faith. Following Saul’s early persecution against the Christians, there was an element of unrest but when Saul was converted and stopped the persecution, “...then had the churches rest and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied” (Acts 9:31). Other accounts of godly fear that brought the church closer together can be found throughout the scripture.

Persecution, suffering and pain are not conditions that we seek but when we face them on occasion, it can bring us closer to the Lord. We have been promised that “God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (I Cor. 10:13).

Our Precious Greeting – I

November 1999

The Word of God offers us special instructions that explain the proper greeting that children of God should have toward one another. We are instructed about the type of greeting to be avoided, the importance of greeting the friends of the truth and the special privilege we have to greet our brethren with godly love.

The vain greeting of the scribes and Pharisees was condemned by Jesus Christ. He pointed out their vanity and lack of humility when He rebuked their worldly ambition and their desire to be elevated above others. They denied themselves the privilege of a blessing by choosing to take the uppermost rooms at feasts and by loving the “greetings in the markets” (Matt. 23:7). Their greeting of vanity brought no spiritual benefit.

We are also instructed on the importance of a proper greeting to the friends of the faith. It is important that we let our friends know that we love and care for them. One way to show our concern for them is to follow the scriptural encouragement to “Greet the friends by name” (III John 14). Greeting them by name reassures them that we know who they are and are sincerely happy to greet them.

The most precious greeting, however, is reserved for brothers and sisters in Christ. Five times in the scriptures we are instructed to greet or salute one another with an “holy kiss” (Ro. 16:16; I Cor. 16:20; II Cor. 13:12; I Th. 5:26) or a “kiss of charity” (I Peter 5:14).

We are living in a world that is becoming more self-centered, more selfish and more casual. Relationships tend to be casual, shallow and without a significant amount of commitment. A Christian greeting, however, should be sincere, personal, loving, and provide evidence of commitment to the relationship we have with each other.

What is the value of our precious greeting? When we meet one another with “Greetings Brother” or “Greetings Sister” do we think about the meaning of these words or have we allowed our greeting to become a habit that has degenerated into a meaningless phrase?

The value of our greeting is determined by its sincerity and intent. A kiss can be an expression of love, an expression of lust if carried out in a manner which is frequently the case in the world, or an expression of deceit as was used by Judas in his betrayal of Christ.

The scripture commands us to greet one another with “an holy kiss” and “a kiss of charity”. To be holy or of charity, a kiss must be an expression of love, of joy, and of sincerity.

If we could have the privilege of meeting Jesus Himself, how would we greet Him? Would it not be a joy to be able to meet Him and to express our love for Him? We certainly would not meet Him with a casual “Hi”, a weak hand shake or a thoughtless, automatic word or so of greeting.

When we meet our brother or sister in Christ, we ought to have the same sincerity and love that we would have if we were greeting Jesus. We are, after all, greeting a son or daughter of God, one who has been adopted into the same relationship with God that Jesus has. When we say “Greetings Brother” or “Greetings Sister” we are acknowledging that the one we are greeting is a brother or sister of Jesus Christ.

Do we sometimes allow ourselves to become a bit careless and only say “greetings” and omit the “brother” or “sister” name? Do we allow our relationship with our brethren to slip a bit? The privilege of greeting a brother or sister of Jesus Christ should be highly valued and not become casual.

When we greet a brother or sister, do we acknowledge that we are happy to meet him and count it a privilege to be his brother or sister? Or do we sometimes hardly even look at him and casually pass on? We ought to at least make brief eye contact and make the greeting sincere enough that the one being greeted knows we are sincerely glad to meet him.

What is the value of the greeting with a kiss? When we greet with a kiss, it requires us to stop, at least briefly, and make a personal acknowledgment of the one we are greeting. The greeting with a kiss also tends to help us stay more united as a group of believers. It is very difficult to greet one with a kiss if we have a grudge against another or if we are not at peace with each other. Furthermore, the greeting with a kiss also promotes the feeling of “family” within the church. God’s children are all part of His family.

The greeting with a kiss can also be an act of humility. We often feel unworthy to greet one another and having that privilege requires us to acknowledge that we all are on the same level in the church in that no one individual is better than another. Thus, we all can have the same relationship with God when we are in the church: the factory owner and the factory worker, the farmer, the executive officer, the homemaker, the minister, the elder, the brother of humble means—all are the same, a brother or sister of Jesus Christ.

Our special greeting is not simply a custom to be followed or disregarded as one may choose. It is a precious privilege that we need to protect and promote within the brotherhood. Perhaps there are those who feel it is old fashioned or that in a time when men “...(burn) in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly...” (Romans 1:27) it is not a good light to the world. Satan’s goal is to gain an advantage over us by making this precious privilege seem unholy.

We must, however, resist the onslaught of Satan. Our greeting with a kiss is an holy greeting. It must never be allowed to be compared to the lust of the flesh nor to the sin of the world. We are greeting brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. This is a privilege we must not lose.

The next article will continue the topic of our Precious Greeting.

Our Precious Greeting II

December 1999

The previous article discussed the importance of greeting brothers and sisters with godly love. It is a holy greeting and it includes a kiss of charity. This article will focus on the history of the greeting and explore when the greeting is appropriate.

In the New Testament, the commandment to greet one another with an holy kiss or a kiss of charity occurs five times. There are numerous examples in both the Old and New Testament when the greeting with a kiss was practiced.

The Bible provides us with numerous examples of the greeting with a kiss of charity to show love and forgiveness at a time when human nature might have called for revenge. Imagine how dramatically the following accounts would have changed if there would have been revenge instead of a kiss of charity.

After Jacob had stolen Esau's blessing by deceiving his father, he and his brother were separated for many years. Jacob had run away to escape his brother's hatred and after many years had a desire to return to his father's house. This required him to meet Esau whom he feared because he thought Esau would take vengeance for what Jacob had done years earlier. As he returned home, "...he passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him: and they wept" (Gen. 33:3-4). Esau's willingness to forgive his brother was evident by his expression of love for Jacob.

Joseph, having been sorely mistreated by his brothers, was in a position of authority that would have made it possible for him to exact a severe penalty from his brothers for what they had done. Instead he "kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them: and after that his brethren talked with him" (Gen. 45:15). Years of deceit and wickedness were freely forgiven. Joseph, a man of authority in Egypt, was a man of compassion and forgiveness in his heart. Although sold into a heathen nation, he retained his godly spirit of love.

Likewise, the father of the prodigal son had ample reason to be upset with his son. However, when his son "...was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck and kissed him" (Lk. 15:20). The wasted years, the riotous living, and the irresponsible attitude of the younger son were forgiven by a father who understood the need of a son with a broken and contrite heart. The father's kiss of love was evidence of the father's forgiving spirit.

These are examples of the kiss being a symbol of love and forgiveness at a time when human nature might have called for revenge. Imagine how dramatically each of these accounts would have changed if there had been revenge instead of a kiss of charity.

Other examples of a kiss of charity occurred when some of God's people faced hardship. When Paul was parting from the brethren at Ephesus, "...They all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck, and kissed him. Sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more" (Acts 20:37-38).

The early Christians practiced the greeting with a kiss as an act of love and unity at a time when the number of Christians was small and when persecution was profound. The early Christians were encouraged, strengthened, and sustained by the loving support they received from one another. The same benefits of a Christian greeting are available to us today. Paul described it as a holy kiss to distinguish it from ceremonial or lustful acts which were so prevalent at that time.

Various histories of the early Christian church indicate that the greeting with the kiss was a token of affection that had its beginning in the early days of Christianity and lasted, to varying degrees, throughout the centuries even to our day and time.

Unfortunately, the practice of this greeting began to break down among many Christian groups by the end of the fourth century. The Anabaptist movement, which grew out of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, was largely responsible for a significant return of the greeting with the kiss, a practice which continued among various Christian groups until the present.

There are times when the question arises concerning when it is appropriate or inappropriate to greet with a holy kiss. Clearly it is appropriate when we are in our churches or in our homes. Other places such as our fellowship halls or other gatherings where the group is predominately those of our brotherhood would also be times when this special greeting would often be deemed appropriate.

We do, however, want to protect the sacredness of our precious greeting. If the greeting would be practiced in an atmosphere which would bring reproach upon the Church, it would not be edifying. If this greeting would be accomplished in a manner that would appear to be lustful as described in Romans (Chapter 1:20-32), it would not be to the honor and glory of God. While we do not wish to cast aspersions at others, we must remember the scriptural directive that we “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you” (Mt. 7:6). Those who have little knowledge nor appreciation of the scripture “...speak evil of the things they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption” (II Peter 2:12). We would not want to give Satan an opportunity to bring reproach from the world upon the children of God, and “turn the truth into a lie” (Ro. 1:25).

The greeting of our brethren, as brothers and sisters of Christ, is a precious greeting. It provides us the opportunity to show our love for the brethren, to demonstrate forgiveness, to promote charity within the church, and to greet one another in a manner that shows our concern and compassion for the children of God. We do not want to let the evil forces of Satan deprive us of the love and unity we can gain from the proper use of it, nor do we want to display it in a manner that would give the world an opportunity to dishonor our Lord and our Saviour.

Sowing Discord I

January 2000

“Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7). Every day we sow seed. Every day we plant a future harvest. Some of the seed we sow is good seed and will yield a bountiful harvest. Unless we are careful, some of the seed we sow will cause us to face unpleasant consequences in the future. The scriptures instruct us clearly that...“they that plough iniquity and sow wickedness, reap the same” (John 4:8). Also, “For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.” (Hos. 8:7) but “He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him” (Ps. 126:6).

There is much evil seed that is sown in the world. Sometimes statements are made with the intent to hurt others. Sometimes statements are made thoughtlessly, with no intent to hurt, but the comments may cause pain in spite of our intent. Sometimes comments are made by individuals who are trying to advance their own cause, perhaps to get a better job, or to make a better business transaction, and in the process someone else gets hurt. Whatever the reason, as children of God, we need to be careful that we are not guilty of this kind of behavior.

The scriptures contain many beautiful teachings that help us to understand the difference between the evil seed and the good seed. As children of God we should want to heed the advice that is so abundantly provided in the scriptures to insure that we are sowing good seed.

Solomon instructed us that “These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, A heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren” (Prov. 6:16-19).

Unfortunately, we have come to expect a great deal of sowing of discord in our society. Many times political campaigns seem to have the sowing of discord as the primary theme. We hear of deceit and discord being used to further one’s ambition so often in the world that it seems to be an acceptable practice and a normal way to achieve one’s goals. Perhaps in a sin-sick world this should not be too surprising. As the “...lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (I John 2:16) dominate the thinking of an unconverted person, “...iniquity shall abound...” (Mt. 24:12).

But what about discord within the family, the community, and the household of faith? Have we reached the point where a lack of harmony in a diverse society seems normal? Have we fallen into the trap of believing that discord within the family is inevitable? Have we come to the conclusion that each of us has our own convictions and therefore peace and unity within the brotherhood is not possible? Surely Satan will gain an advantage over us if we allow thoughts that lead to this kind of behavior to become a part of our lives.

Although there will be differences of opinion within families, especially as children begin to develop a spirit of independence, serious disagreements leading to discord and significant disruption of the family are neither inevitable nor acceptable. Certainly some children have a much stronger will and are more rebellious than others. Although there are some children who cause considerable disruption to unity within the family, their unacceptable behavior needs to be controlled by setting reasonable boundaries to prevent them from destroying the unity of the family.

As children of God or as friends of the truth, we need to frequently examine our lives in the light of God’s Word to enable us to identify and correct such behavior. It may be necessary to seek help within

the church to control and solve this problem. If our own lives are in proper order, we will have a better chance to help our children if they face this problem.

Also, within the community there will be some differences in opinion and some differences in priorities, but we need to work to be peacemakers. Peace with our neighbors is so important that Jesus said the second greatest commandment was to "...love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mk. 12:31). To emphasize the importance of this commandment, he taught us that our neighbor was anyone on whom we could show mercy (Lk. 10:28-37). Being a light to our neighbor is an opportunity to spread the gospel message of salvation.

Finally, peace within the household of faith is so important that unity among the brethren is stressed over and over. Jesus said there were other sheep that he needed to bring that "...there be one fold, and one shepherd" (Jn. 10:16). To accomplish this He was willing to lay down His life for our sakes.

The Apostles taught of the need for peace and unity among the brethren. "For we being many are one bread and one body:" (I Cor. 10:17). "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you: but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (I Cor. 1:10). "Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another;..." (I Peter 3:8). Many other references encouraging peace and unity could be quoted and it would be time well spent if we searched to find these pearls of wisdom.

How is discord sown? What behaviors do we need to avoid to be certain that we are not guilty of sowing discord? What behaviors do we need to encourage so that the sowing of discord can be eliminated?

Although it is not possible to examine all possible causes nor to list all cures in a relatively short article, it is possible to "...stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance:" (II Peter 3:1) that we can use the Word of God to keep ourselves from sowing discord.

The next editorial will focus on some of the scriptural warnings about the causes of discord.

Sowing Discord II

February 2000

The previous editorial focused on the need to avoid sowing discord. This article focuses on some of the causes of discord.

We can find in Solomon's writings warning about attitudes that cause discord. "An ungodly man diggeth up evil:...A froward man soweth strife: and a whisperer separateth chief friends" (Prov. 16:27-28).

There are individuals in the world, and possibly even within the church, who seem to derive pleasure in finding out about the failures and shortcomings of others (digging up evil) and spread them around for others to see. They use the weaknesses of others to make their lot even more difficult. This can cause discord in a family, a community, or a church. One who goes boldly, or anonymously (See Oct. '98 editorial) about, causing grief for others is surely guilty of causing discord. We would do far better if we would be desirous to help a struggling soul to find peace and contentment in the Lord, rather than to make his or her lot heavier.

A froward person is one who is stubbornly willful or contrary. A froward attitude is referred to numerous times in the scripture and is described as "...abomination to the Lord:..." (Pr. 3:32) and "...The froward mouth do I hate" (Pr. 8:13). Therefore, we can understand from scriptural teachings that if we have a froward, or contrary, attitude we will sow strife among those with whom we associate. If we find ourselves with a stubborn or contrary attitude, we need to seek the grace of God to change and become pliable and submissive to God's will.

Perhaps one of the most damaging activities that one can do to cause discord among friends is whispering, a form of gossiping. As indicated earlier, the scriptures tell us that this will even separate "chief" friends—those who are our best friends, the ones upon whom we depend most for support as we try to serve our God.

The scripture describes the agony caused by disappointment that comes when there is discord caused by those we love and trust. "For it was not an enemy that reproached me. Then I could have borne it: neither was it he that hated me that did magnify himself against me; then I would have hid myself from him: But it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company" (Ps. 55:12-14).

Discord caused by those who count themselves as our enemy cause us pain and disappointment, but we can bear up under those circumstances. We almost expect Satan to bring some disruption to our lives when we deal with unbelievers. But when the discord comes from one with whom we took sweet counsel and with whom we walked into the house of God, the pain is much greater.

Therefore, we can readily understand that anything that we would do to cause this heartache would be an abomination to the Lord. Also, we must realize that if whispering will go so far as to separate chief friends, what devastating impact will it have on a relationship that is a bit more fragile?

There are probably few activities that can cause discord within the brotherhood more quickly than undermining the leadership of the church or not supporting the fundamental doctrine of the faith. We are instructed to be very careful that we are not guilty of these sins.

“Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses” (I Tim. 5:19). The Apostle Paul understood the devastating impact that undermining leadership would have on the Church. This does not mean that church leadership is above receiving criticism. It does mean that such criticism must only be done when we are certain that our information is an accurate description of the problem and, it must only be done in a manner that will bring forth results that will strengthen the individual and the church. If we have a concern about the leadership of the church, we should prayerfully consider the matter before taking any action. We need to be certain that we are following the leading of the Holy Spirit and not our own emotions. Often when accusations are made, they are based on incomplete information which leads to an inaccurate conclusion. When one believes it to be necessary to approach church leadership in this manner, it must be done with humility and a deep concern for the welfare of the individual and the brotherhood.

Rather than undermining the leaders, we need to provide prayerful support. Every brother and sister has a responsibility in this work. If each of us will do what the scripture teaches, it will provide significant support for the undershepherds of the flock and ministers of the gospel.

In addition to undermining church leadership, we know that the time will come when some “...will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (II Tim. 4:3-4).

How serious is this offense? “He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?” (Heb. 10:28-29). Quite obviously, the offense is a very serious one.

To help ourselves eliminate the likelihood of sowing discord we should “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (II Tim. 2:15). Also, if we “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17), we will strengthen the brotherhood.

We are also instructed to remember to lift up the hands of those who are in positions of responsibility and “Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified...” (II Thess. 3:1).

Each of us has an obligation and an opportunity to strengthen the brotherhood and help preserve the faith that has been given to us. One way we can do this is to sow peace and harmony rather than discord.

Deception I

March, 2000

“Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field...” “and the serpent said unto the woman, ye shall not surely die:...” (Gen. 3:1 & 4). Almost since the beginning of time mankind has been subjected to deceit and lies. The author of deception, of course, is Satan and his goal is to make us believe a lie.

To be deceived is to be in the unfortunate position of believing a lie and to be following a wrong course. Deception is often difficult to identify and even harder to unveil, because the one who is deceived genuinely believes that what he or she believes is the truth.

The scriptures contain many warnings about deception which seem to fall into two categories. The first category is the type of deception that is designed to aid selfish ambition and the second type of deception occurs when those who are deceived are in danger of eternal damnation.

The first type of deception is illustrated when Joseph’s brothers lied to their father about what happened to Joseph. Because of their jealousy, the brothers used deception to achieve a selfish goal. Another example of this kind of deception involved Absalom, son of King David who wanted to be the king of the Children of Israel. Realizing there were others more likely to become king, Absalom put himself in a position where he influenced many of the Children of Israel by making them think if he were the king their concerns would be handled more justly than by King David, “...so Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel” (II Sam. 15:6).

Not only do the deceivers put themselves in danger of eternal damnation, but, the second and more serious type of deception, where individuals are influenced to believe a lie, can also cause them to be put in danger of eternal damnation.

In Matthew 24:4-5, 11-12, Jesus warned of this kind of deception. “Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many.” “And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold”. Thus, Jesus knew that there would be false teachers and false messages and that these would cause spiritual shipwreck for many.

Likewise, the Apostle Paul warned us that those who were involved in sin shall not inherit the kingdom of God. “Be not deceived, neither fornicators, nor idolaters ...nor covetous ...shall inherit the kingdom of God” (I Cor. 6:9-10). Further, there were those who taught that the grace of God was so great that it didn’t really matter if one lived in sin as long as they believed in the grace of God. But Paul wrote “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? (Ro. 6:1-2).

Although the grace of God is boundless, we cannot, as Paul said, continue in sin and misuse the grace of God to cover these sins. “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7). The scripture is very clear that sin has its price and that we must be spiritually alert that we be not deceived.

Even though we typically assume that deception is reserved for those who have never known the Lord, we are warned that even believers can and will be deceived. “Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition” (II Thess. 2:3).

The Apostle Paul was writing to the church of the Thessalonians about believers who had once known the truth but had a “falling away”. We cannot fall away from something we never had. These believers were encouraged to remain faithful and to avoid the teaching of anyone “who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God” (II Thess. 2:4).

Likewise, we are encouraged to remain faithful to the teachings of God. Those who refuse to love the truth of God shall find themselves among those who will feel the wrath of God. “And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they might all be damned who believe not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (II Thess. 2:11).

How can we know whom we should follow? The scripture tells us plainly: “Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous ...He that committeth sin is of the devil: for the devil sinneth from the beginning” (I John 3:7-8). “Ye shall know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16). Therefore, no matter how sincere someone may be about what he or she believes, if that individual’s life does not measure up to the Word of God, we then know that he or she is not of God. The scripture promises us that “...every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit” (Matt. 7:17).

History is filled with examples of people who were sincere in what they believed, but unfortunately what they believed was wrong. One example of this type of deception is the prophets of Baal. They were completely convinced that they were right. They were so sincere that they were willing to call upon Baal from morning until the evening sacrifice. “And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them” (I Kings 18:28). Despite their sincerity and willingness to go beyond reasonable dedication, they received no answer. They were deceived into believing that Baal was real and would answer them.

The scriptures warn us that deception is a tool of the devil by which both those who deceive and those who are deceived are in danger of eternal damnation. We must continually “prove all things: hold fast to that which is good,” for “there is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death” (I Thess. 5:21; Prov. 14:12).

The next article will focus on how we become deceived.

Deception II

April, 2000

“Give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall” (II Peter 1:10). Deception is a tool of Satan by which both those who deceive and those who are deceived are in danger of eternal damnation. How then do we know when we are being deceived?

Sometimes deception comes so slowly it may take years or even several generations to occur. Only by careful observation can this gradual change be detected; therefore, it is necessary to be certain we have a solid basis from which to operate, keeping the standard for comparison unchanged and enabling us to more easily recognize deception.

Because the Word of God is unchanging, we can use the Bible as our standard of comparison. If any generation changes even a small amount in a given area, it will always be possible to detect these changes if we truly examine them in the light of God’s Word.

Sometimes, however, we are deceived because we use people instead of Jesus Christ as our model. “For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise” (II Cor. 10:12). “For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth” (II Cor. 10:18). Therefore, it is clear that the only safe measure to ensure that we are not deceived is Jesus Christ.

Deception can also occur because we refuse to accept the Lord’s will for our lives. We often persist in asking for something we should not have until the Lord allows us to have it - but it is not without consequences. “They soon forgot his works; They waited not for his counsel: But lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert. And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul” (Ps. 106:13-15).

Furthermore, we also can be deceived by associating with the wrong kinds of people or going the wrong places. If we spend time with those who engage in sinful or questionable behavior, we can eventually have our consciences dulled and can no longer sense the spiritual danger of sin. If we do not maintain a sharp line of separation from sin, the line gets blurred and we no longer can tell if we are in danger. An example of this can be found in the entertainment industry. If we expose ourselves to unwholesome standards long enough, our senses will become dulled, and our behavior begins to change. Soon the sin that was obvious at the beginning no longer seems so sinful. We read in I Timothy 4:1-2, “...that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron.”

In Acts 28:27 we are similarly reminded of the danger of exposure to sin. “For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.”

Since deception is a state of sincere belief that we are right when in fact we are wrong, how can we tell if we are deceived? There are several questions that we can ask ourselves that may help.

1.) Do we find ourselves less offended by sin than we were at one time? Do we find ourselves accepting certain kinds of behavior that we would not have accepted when we were first converted? If so, we may have lowered our standards to be more in tune with the world. Since the world is getting more

evil, the gap between what the world accepts and what a child of God finds acceptable should be getting greater. If the gap is the same, have we been deceived into moving the same pace on the journey to sinful living that the world has?

2.) Do we find ourselves at odds with the doctrine and traditions of our brotherhood? The doctrine and traditions have stood the test of time. If we find ourselves in opposition to them, or trying to find excuses for not supporting them, a thorough self-examination could reveal that Satan has deceived us into believing that the standards of the church no longer matter.

3.) Do we find ourselves searching the scripture to defend questionable behavior rather than to draw closer to the Lord? The Word of God is not a law book to be altered to meet a particular desire of ours. It is rather a stable set of guidelines that will help us construct a solid foundation upon which to build a household of faith.

4.) Do we find ourselves making excuses for doing things that we have been taught that we shouldn't do?

5.) Instead of supporting church leadership, do we find ourselves criticizing them because they uphold the standards of old?

6.) Do we find ourselves saying "Since I do not have a conviction about an issue, if I follow it I will be a hypocrite"?

7.) Do we find ourselves listening to modern evangelists and theologians to support beliefs that differ from the doctrines and practices of the Apostolic Christian Church?

8.) Do we find excuses to not attend special services such as the reading of the memorandum, conference tapes and testimonies because we don't want to hear the messages?

9.) Is what we are doing a stumbling block to others or have the appearance of evil?

10.) Does it glorify God or quench the Holy Spirit in you?

11.) When Jesus comes again, would you like to be found doing it?

If we find we are living contrary to God's Word, we must spend time searching the scriptures to find the truth lest we be deceived.

Although Satan's use of deception is powerful, we can be encouraged in that we have a more powerful tool to guide our lives: Jesus Christ, the Author and Finisher of our faith. Through Him we shall be able to overcome if we keep our focus Heavenward. In Mark 13:33-37, Jesus says, "Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is... Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch."

Commitment I

“No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

No doubt each brother and sister, when giving his or her testimony and upon erecting a covenant with our Father in heaven promised to be faithful to God and to renounce Satan as long as he or she lives. No doubt, also, when we began our repentance we were instructed by our elder of the seriousness of the step we were taking and of the importance of remaining faithful to God. It is a very serious promise; one that should not be made lightly. It is a commitment that will have eternal consequences if broken.

Making a commitment means to pledge, to promise or to bind one's self to complete a certain task. Many promises are made, vows are established, contracts are signed, pledges are offered and covenants are erected, but sadly, in far too many cases, the commitment is not carried through to completion. For many people it is simply too easy to quit and walk away from a task that is only partially completed.

While the breaking of an earthly, material promise is disappointing, those broken commitments pale to insignificance when compared to the eternal devastation of breaking promises we have made to God.

How can a child of God be sure that a commitment to serve God can be fulfilled? The scripture provides us with numerous guidelines that will be of significant help.

Before putting our hand to the plough, the scripture instructs us to count the cost of serving our God. Jesus said if a man was going to build a tower or if a king was going to make war without sitting down first and counting the cost of the tower or considering whether he is able to meet his adversary with a larger army, he will surely come to shame (Lk. 14:28-32). Jesus also said “...whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple” and “...whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple” (Lk. 14:27 & 33).

Too often people believe that once they have turned to the Lord in repentance and have been converted, there will be no more trials. We have never been promised an easy road to Heaven. Jesus didn't promise His disciples an easy path. He told them “Go your ways: behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves” (Lk. 10:3). He didn't even promise them that they would have as much safety as a sheep would have - but rather that the danger should be as great as a lamb facing a wolf.

Many examples are given in the scriptures in which God's servants were called upon to make great sacrifices, even to give their lives, for the kingdom of God. Noah, Abraham, Joseph and many prophets are examples from the Old Testament who were required to make significant sacrifices for their faith. In “The Acts of the Apostles” we have numerous examples of early pillars of the faith who faced life threatening situations for their faith. Examples from the New Testament include Peter, Paul, Stephen and others. Throughout the history of Christianity there are many examples of the Christians who were severely persecuted for their faith.

Although in America today most of us do not face physical danger nor severe persecution, we cannot expect to serve God without sacrifice. If we do not count the cost of being a child of God, and prepare to make the necessary sacrifices, Satan may be successful in leading us astray and convincing us that the cost is too great.

After we have considered the cost of being a Christian, we must build our faith on a firm foundation. Again we have solid scriptural instruction on laying a foundation upon which to build a household of faith. Jesus said: And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say? Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them, I will show you to whom he is like: He is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it; for it was founded upon a rock. But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation built a house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great (Lk. 6:46-49).

As we would not allow a contractor to mix ground, clay or other impurities in concrete when a footer is being laid for a building, neither would we allow the walls of the foundation to be daubed "...with untempered mortar, that it shall fall" (Ez. 13:11). Likewise, we should not build our faith on an unsteady foundation. How does one go about laying a firm foundation of faith, making so "...the foundation of God standeth sure" (II Tim. 2:19)?

We start by being willing to obey "...every word of God" (Lk. 4:4). We cannot pick and choose those passages we want to follow and reject some that may require a greater sacrifice or more effort on our part. To establish a firm foundation upon which to build our ship of faith and to obey every word of God, we must be committed to reading His Word and to praying fervently. God can and will speak to us if we are willing to listen and He will listen to us if our prayers are sincere. How do we listen to God? How do we acquire faith?

God speaks to us through His Word as recorded in the Holy Bible and through instruction from faithful brethren who speak His Word in truth and in sincerity. The Bible tells us that "...faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Ro. 10:17). Commitment to serving God requires that we diligently search His Word to help us understand what is expected of a Child of God.

Sometimes Satan will interfere with our faith to the point that it makes our reading of the scripture somewhat ineffective and we may be tempted to stop reading. It is at times such as these that the believer can take great comfort in the promise that "blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors" (Ps. 8:34). There are times when watching for and waiting upon the Lord may be difficult but the promise holds true that if we continue to read His Word, we will be blessed.

Commitment requires us to be willing to serve God faithfully for the rest of our lives. We must count the cost before making the commitment, build upon a firm foundation, obey every word of God and faithfully read His Word.

The next article will focus on listening to God and allowing Him to change our lives so we can be faithful.

Commitment II

The previous article emphasized the importance of making a lifelong commitment to God, counting the cost of those commitments, laying a firm foundation and seriously reading His Word. This article will focus on the importance of talking to God, of removing barriers to commitment through repentance and conversion and of a willingness to follow Christ where ever He leads us.

It is vitally important that we read God's Word and listen to Him as He speaks to us. Equally important is the need to speak with God. The scripture has much advice in this matter. "Pray without ceasing" (I Th. 5:17) and "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation:..." (Mt. 26:41) are but two of the passages that remind us of this important part of our worship. Jesus provided us with an example of fervent prayer when He was facing His most severe trial. "And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Lk. 22:44) and he included "...nevertheless not my will but thine, be done" (Lk. 22:42) to assure that submission to God's will would be the basis of what He did.

To be truly committed to serving God it is important that we establish regular patterns of prayer. If we pray when we have time, Satan will see to it that we do not have time. We also must be careful that we not always wait to read and pray until the last part of the day. Although reading and praying are, of course, appropriate at the end of our day, we must be sure we reserve some time during the day for communication with God when our minds are fresh and we are able to focus on His Word. In a precious hymn we are reminded to "Take time to be holy" and to "Speak oft with thy Lord".

As we read the scriptures and pray, we will find that to become fitted to be a servant of God, we must experience a true repentance for our sins. This repentance must be deep enough and sincere enough that we bear a true sorrow for past sins and develop a longing to change future behavior. Jesus said "...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3 & 5).

Sincere repentance will enable us to seek God's help in becoming a different person than we were before we were convicted to repent. When Jesus' disciples asked Him who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven, He called a little child unto him and said "...Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3). To be converted means to be changed, to become a different person in our hearts and in our whole being. We cannot cease being unconverted and become converted without undergoing a significant change.

Not one of us is good enough in our unconverted state that we can become a believer in Jesus Christ and become one of His disciples without undergoing a transformation. We need a new heart, a new attitude, a new perspective.

As a result of repentance and being converted, we can, and must become overcomers. The importance of being an overcomer is emphasized in various scripture passages. To each of the seven churches in Asia that were addressed in the Revelation of John the Divine, a special promise was made "To him that overcometh..." (Rev. 2 & 3).

Having begun our service to God by building on a firm foundation is a good start. But it is only a start. It takes much grace from God and a total commitment on our part to remain faithful until life's end. Our final judgment is not determined by our spiritual state early in life nor at mid-life. It is how we stand at the end of our life that will determine our eternal destination. Solomon recognized this important fact when he wrote "...in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be" (Ecc. 11:3).

The Apostle Peter gives us a very clear explanation of the seriousness of not remaining faithful. “For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. (II Peter 2:20-21).

There are numerous examples in the scripture of those who at one time wanted to follow the Lord but were not committed to faithfulness and therefore, fell away. The young man who came running to Jesus wanting to know what he should do to have eternal life was willing to live a good life but he was not willing to be totally committed to serving God. When told to sell all that he had and give to the poor, he went away from Christ.

The young man was willing to keep the commandments but was not willing to remove an idol from his life. His most important priority was his wealth. If we are serious about serving the Lord “...with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind...” (Luke 10:27) we must be committed to removing all barriers that will separate us from God.

At another time Christ told His followers that they must eat His flesh and drink His blood in order to have life in them. Following a discussion about the need for commitment, “...many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him” (Jn. 6:66).

Jesus then asked his twelve apostles if they too would go away. Peter’s answer demonstrates the commitment that each of us should desire. “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God” (Jn. 6:68-69).

In the first and second article about commitment, attention has been focused on the need to be willing to serve God, to count the cost of commitment, to lay a firm foundation, to be obedient to His Word, to communicate with God and to remain faithful throughout our lives.

The next article will focus on heeding the warnings that will help us avoid falling away because of the temptation to follow the world.

Commitment III

The two previous articles focused attention on making a firm commitment, preparing for a life of service to God, learning to communicate with God and the importance of faithfulness.

This article will focus on heeding the warnings that will help us avoid the temptations that the world has to offer.

Commitment to faithfulness in serving the Lord in our day is especially important because of the prophesy that there will be many who will turn away from following Christ in the latter days of grace. The Apostle Paul warned young Timothy that "...the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (II Tim. 4:3-4).

The desire to have "itching ears" satisfied can produce short term benefits but often has disastrous results over the long term. Ahab, King of Israel, was such a person. Even though it ultimately cost him his life, he preferred false good news rather than the truth.

When preparing to go to war with Ramath-gilead, about four hundred prophets of Israel told King Ahab to go because the Lord would deliver it into Ahab's hand. Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, asked Ahab if there was another prophet of whom they might inquire. Ahab replied, "There is yet one man Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may enquire of the Lord: but I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil" (I Kings 22:8). Ahab preferred the false prophets because they sounded better. He hated the truth when it did not fulfill his wishes.

Also, the apostle Paul warned the Thessalonians "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first,..." (II Th. 2:3). Because we cannot fall away from something we have never had, we know this is referring to people who had at one time served God and turned away. It was not simply a refusal to turn to God, it was unfaithfulness by those who had once served God and left.

The warnings of the dangers of falling into apostasy are numerous and serious. "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God" (Heb. 3:12) and "Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness" (II Peter 3:17). Both of these passages are directed to those who believed in, and followed the Lord. Without diligent watchfulness, even sincere souls can be overcome.

The world has so many enticements that are a constant danger to the faithfulness and commitment of a child of God. Many of the fashions and entertainments of our time are based on the love of the world. The scripture tells us "...If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world" (I Jn. 2:15-16).

The world would much rather go after various forms of entertainment rather than seeking contentment in the simple life of a child of God. Huge numbers are attracted to a variety of activities that fill the mind and consume the resources and energy that could be better used in serving God. According to the 1998 "Apostolic Christian Churches and Ministers" book, on a normal Sunday combined attendance at all of the Apostolic Christian Churches of America is less than 25,000. It is not unusual for more than four times that many people to attend a single college football game. Surely as children of God

we would not want to be guilty of spending time and resources on worldly entertainment that is of no lasting value and contribute to the lust of the flesh. We would do far better to use our time engaged in activities that are described as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

Time and space do not permit a thorough listing of the activities that divert our attention away from God. We who are sincere in our desire to serve God would do well to familiarize ourselves with the meaning of the words that are listed in Galatians 5:19-21 and described as the works of the flesh. We are told that “They which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:21). Other places in the scripture such as Romans 1:28-32, I Peter 4:3-4 and Rev. 21:8 also offer a clear warning of activities to be avoided.

To have the peace of God in our hearts and minds, we are instructed, “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Phil. 4:8).

To “think on” an issue requires us to focus our attention on that particular issue. As we focus attention on things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of a good report our minds become filled with those things that are good. Filling our minds with good allows neither time nor energy to engage in those things that are evil. It is just as easy to form good habits as it is to form bad ones, but the benefits of good thought patterns and proper behavior are eternal.

Commitment to God requires faithfulness, a willingness to listen to the truth, a desire to avoid the pitfalls of the world and a willingness to fill our minds with the Word of God.

The final article of this series on “Commitment” will focus on submission and working together to fulfill our commitment to God.

Commitment IV

The previous three articles on commitment have briefly covered many concepts that help us establish and maintain a commitment to serve God. Among the concepts covered include making a firm commitment, counting the cost of the commitment, building a solid foundation upon which to build a commitment, communication with God as it relates to commitment, being faithful to God and heeding the warnings that are given to help us avoid the pitfalls that the world may bring to us.

This final article of the series on commitment will focus on the need for submission and to work together to maintain our commitment of a life of service to God.

To succeed in faithfully serving the Lord, it is necessary for God's people to have a submissive attitude and a kind, loving disposition. The first order of submission is to God. There is a beautiful promise that accompanies submission to God. "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). If we are willing to submit to God and resist the devil, he will actually flee from us! To flee means to go quickly. What a blessing we have to know that Satan must go from our presence.

Submission is not always easy and at times it may not be pleasant. Even Jesus Christ had to pray fervently that He could submit to the will of his Father in heaven. As He was facing His trial and crucifixion, Jesus "...fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Mt. 26:39). He prayed so fervently and he was in such agony that "...his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Lk. 22:44).

Jesus won His battle with Satan and was willing to submit to the will of His Father. Submission would cause Him to suffer extreme pain, shameful humiliation and, ultimately, his life. He was willing to go through all of these trials because He was committed to pay the price for our sins.

The Apostle Paul found that it is sometimes difficult but necessary to submit to the will of God. He thought he was serving God faithfully. He was willing to go to great lengths to preserve what he thought was right, but on the road to Damascus he learned that he was not serving God.

He fell to the earth after seeing a bright light from Heaven. He learned that he was actually persecuting the One he was to serve. "And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). The assignment he received required humility and submission that would enable him to endure extreme persecution as he fulfilled his commitment to God.

It is possible that we also will be required to face difficult times as we submit to God's will.

We must also be willing to submit to the church and to those in authority. "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account..." (Heb. 13:17).

The Church and those who are placed in positions of responsibility within the Church, have a tremendous responsibility to sound the warning. Each of us should carefully read Ezekiel 34 to help us understand the seriousness of the duties of those in authority. We should also read Ezekiel 33 to help us understand the seriousness of not heeding the warning. We each have a responsibility that we cannot avoid if we want to spend eternity with God.

As we work together to serve the Lord in unity, we must also be willing to submit to one another in a godly manner: “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (Ep. 5:21) and “...Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (I Peter 5:5).

We are our brother’s keeper. We each have a responsibility to help others obtain their salvation. We must spread the gospel. Some of Jesus’ last words to His disciples were “...Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk. 16:15). While we are not responsible for the eternal welfare of those who refuse to believe, we are responsible that we do not place a stumbling block in the path of anyone. Our example may have a powerful influence on others.

To be truly committed we must also be consistent. Christ severely chastised those who were hypocrites and wanted very much to be seen of men as being more righteous than they actually were. “...thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men” (Mt. 6:5).

It does us very little good to appear righteous on Sunday or when we are among brethren if we do not live for God the other days of the week. To appear godly on Sunday and to appear like the world the other six days is hypocritical and is of no more value than “...bodily exercise (which) profiteth little...” (I Tim. 4:8).

Commitment to serving the Lord requires a great deal of time and effort. It involves preparation of a foundation, a willingness to count the cost of serving God and a willingness to then do what is written in the Word of God. God is willing to help us to truly repent, to be completely converted and to be overcomers of the temptations that come before us. He sent His Son to pay the price of our sin. All He asks in return is our willingness to submit to Him and to commit our trust in His promises. He offers us the gift of the Holy Spirit that will dwell within the hearts and minds of the converted soul. May God give each of His children the grace to be committed to faithfulness until the end of our life on earth so we can join the faithful servants who have gone before us.

The Fear of God I

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Pr. 1:7).

Fear is a feeling of reverence, awe and respect on the one hand and an unpleasant emotion caused by a sense of danger at the other extreme. Fear can be directed toward God, man, or some other object. Fear may be healthy or harmful. If fear brings a cautious, serious approach to life and helps us escape sin, it is very helpful and can help us avoid many problems. If fear is irrational or becomes an excuse for not answering God’s call as it did for Adam (“...I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” Gen. 3:10) it is very harmful and can cause eternal destruction.

At times God wants us to fear in the sense of being afraid. When Ananias and Sapphira lied unto God and were almost immediately struck down “...great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things” (Acts 5:11). God brought fear upon them to show them the seriousness of sin and to bring a measure of control to future sin. They, and others who were there, needed to learn that the sentence of death for sin, as described in Genesis Chapter 3, was a serious sentence.

At other times God wants us to fear in the reverent sense because it will prompt sincere souls to walk even closer to the Lord. Cornelius, “a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house...” (Acts 10:2) was prompted by his fear (reverence) to heed a vision he had seen. In what must have appeared to Cornelius to be a rather bold and unlikely request, he sent for Peter, a Jew, to go to Cornelius, “...one of another nation...” (Acts 10:28). Although it was considered unlawful to do this, Peter, through the prompting of the Lord, went and spread the Gospel message to the Gentiles because “...in every nation he that feareth him (God), and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him” (Acts 10:35).

Our lives need to portray a balance of the two kinds of fear. The fear of God, in the sense of being afraid, should bring us to repentance. As a repentant soul matures in faith, the fear should change from being afraid to a fear reflecting a profound respect and reverence for God. After conversion we should neither be overly anxious (fearful) nor too bold. “And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously” (Deut. 17:13).

After we have been converted, we do not need to have the dreadful or timid fear, “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (II Tim. 1:7). Although the fear of God is available to everyone (“Let all the earth fear the Lord: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him” Ps. 33:8) and we know the whole duty of man is to “...Fear God, and keep his commandments...” (Ecc. 12:13), there are many people in the world who do not reverence nor even respect God. We also know that only those who are children of God can truly grasp the significance of Jesus’ encouragement to “Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk. 12:32).

The fear of God is important to each of us. The scripture says “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). Those who do not prepare to meet God by obtaining forgiveness through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ will find truth in the message of the angel who told of the destruction of Babylon. “...Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come...” (Rev. 14:7).

Undoubtedly, there is no greater fear than facing eternal damnation and separation from God. Those who realize too late of the truth of the admonition given in the scripture “...but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment” (Ecc. 11:9) will have fear beyond description. When

they hear the final judgment, "...Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:" (Mt. 25:41), they will fearfully try to defend themselves but to no avail: "and these shall go away into everlasting punishment..." (Mt. 25:46).

The fear of God is also important for those who love and serve God. The reverent fear that brings obedience to God's Word is more pleasing to God than many sacrifices would be. "...Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (I Sam. 15:22). When the children of Israel strayed far from the Lord, their sacrifices were of no avail: "...your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet unto me" (Jer. 6:20). It is not those who sacrifice but those who "...choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant..." (Is. 56:4) who will find acceptance by the Lord.

Jesus clearly explained the importance of being obedient when He said "Not everyone that saith to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Mt. 7:21).

The fear of God is also important to a child of God because we can perfect "...holiness in the fear of God" (II Cor. 7:1). Being holy requires far more than simply accepting Christ; it requires us to be untarnished by evil or sin and have a pureness of thought and intent. It is also a commandment: "...be ye holy: for I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 20:7). The holiness of the early Christians was perfected when "...the churches (had) rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost,..." (Acts 9:31).

The fear of God is a very powerful feeling for both those who serve God and those who do not serve Him. In the next article, this topic will be explored further.

The Fear of God II

In the first article on “The Fear of God”, the meaning and the importance of “fear” were presented. In this article attention will be focused on some of the specific benefits of fearing God: recognizing His greatness, learning to distinguish between right and wrong, learning to trust God, and gaining wisdom by serving Him.

If we fear God reverently, we will recognize His greatness. “Oh how great is thy goodness, which thou hast laid up for them that fear thee; which thou hast wrought for them that trust in thee before the sons of men” (Ps. 31:19). As we reflect upon the work of the Lord, we will surely agree with the prophet who wrote of “...The Great, the Mighty God, the Lord of hosts, is his name, Great in counsel, and mighty in work:...” (Jer. 32:18-19). Although there are many wondrous creations on the earth, there is no other power on earth so great or so deserving of reverence than the one true God.

In addition to recognizing the greatness of God, there are other benefits of fearing Him. Walking in the fear of God brings a greater understanding of right and wrong, brings confidence, wisdom, light in darkness, blessings from “...the Sun of righteousness...” (Mal. 4:2), and many others.

The counsel that we receive from God through His Word and through His servants enables us to understand right from wrong. His counsel, if heeded, will make it possible for us to free ourselves from Satan’s influence, to live in peace with God and man and to prepare for eternity. All of this is possible because of God’s greatness and His love for us.

As we learn the reverent fear of God, we learn to have confidence and trust in Him. “In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence: and his children shall have a place of refuge” (Prov. 14:26). “For thou art my hope, O Lord God: thou art my trust from my youth” (Ps. 71:5).

When we begin to serve the Lord, we may have doubts about placing our full confidence and trust in the living God. We may be tempted to reserve a bit of self and also continue to place too much emphasis on the world and the things it offers. We may also have doubts because we feel we are not good enough to be considered as one of his children. As we mature in our faith and we willingly become completely submissive to God, we can find the same level of comfort and trust that Paul expressed to Timothy “...for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (II Tim. 1:12). We learn that no one is really “good enough”, but by the grace and mercy of God, we can have confidence to know that God will hear our prayers and know “the thoughts and intents of (our) hearts” (Heb. 4:12).

The reverent fear of the Lord can bring wisdom: “...Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding” (Job 28:28). At times we struggle as we try to separate the knowledge of the world from the wisdom of God. However, the scripture reassures us that we can be “...wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (II Tim. 3:15) and that “...the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy” (Ja. 3:17). Worldly wisdom and worldly knowledge do not bring peace nor comfort to those who do not know the Lord. The harsh reality is that the knowledge of the world is constantly changing and is not really designed to bring peace. It is only of value in this life while the wisdom from God has eternal promises of joy and peace.

In numerous places throughout the scripture, those who fear the Lord are promised that light will replace darkness. “...he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). Because the world walks “...in the night, he (they) stumbleth because there is no light in him

(them)” (John 11:10) and “...they know not at what they stumble” (Prov. 4:19). We need not walk in darkness nor stumble because if we keep sound wisdom and discretion “Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble” (Prov. 3:23).

The blessings we can receive from reverently fearing God are almost beyond comprehension. Among the blessings brought by the fear of God are His acceptance of us, strength to overcome temptation, an appropriate attitude, and growth for the church.

The promise of God’s acceptance, “But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him” (Acts 10:35), brings special responsibilities and privileges. The responsibilities that come with being accepted by him include the need to labor in his vineyard. “Wherefore we labor, that whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him” (II Cor. 5:9). The responsibilities also include having faith in the atoning power of the shed blood of Jesus Christ, believing in His name and following His teachings. The privileges of fearing him include salvation: “...wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. In whom we have redemption through his blood...” (Eph. 1:6-7). Finally, it also includes the opportunity to live in peace, to separate ourselves from the world, and to defeat Satan’s evil plan.

Thus, we can readily understand that there are many benefits in developing a reverent fear of God. We can learn of His greatness, we can come to a much clearer understanding of right and wrong, we can gain confidence and trust in God and we can learn true wisdom that will help us walk in the light of God’s Word that we can be accepted by Him.

Part III of this series will focus on additional benefits that we can gain as a result of the fear of God.

The Fear of God III

Two previous articles on the Fear of God focused attention on the meaning of the two extremes of fearing God - reverence and terror - and the major benefits of fearing God. These benefits include recognizing His greatness, understanding right from wrong, and developing a greater trust and confidence in God and gaining wisdom by serving Him.

This article will concentrate on the benefits of the fear of God in helping us overcome temptation, to escape the grip of Satan, improving our attitude and some benefits it will bring to the church if we display the reverent fear of God.

In addition to the blessings we can receive from fearing God, the fear of God can also help us to overcome temptation. If we have a reverent fear of God, it is no longer necessary for a child of God to continue in sin. "...by the fear of the Lord men depart from evil" (Prov. 16:6). The world would have us believe that it is not possible to live an overcoming life. Nominal Christendom often teaches us that, since we have not become perfect individuals, "we sin daily" and there is no way we can rid ourselves of the power that sin has on mankind. The Bible teaches us otherwise. It is possible, and necessary, for a converted person to overcome sin.

Peter pleaded with the early Christians to "...abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul" (I Peter 2:11). Paul encouraged Christians to "...lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us," (Heb. 12:1) and also gave strong admonition that we not abuse the grace of God. "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? ...Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid" (Ro. 6:1-2; 15). Since we are baptized into Jesus' death and we know that He conquered death and arose from the grave, we by His grace can overcome sin.

We have a beautiful promise to those who fear God and overcome sin: "...that we, being dead to sin, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed" (I Peter 2:24). To each of the seven churches addressed in the second and third chapters of Revelation, a special promise was given to "...him that overcometh..." (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; and Rev. 3:5, 12 & 21). God would hardly have repeated a promise seven times if the condition of the promise was not attainable.

It is no longer necessary for us to remain in the grip of Satan, to continue to yield to his temptations, and to seek happiness from the pleasures of the world. We can have true joy and freedom in serving God faithfully. We also have the promise that we can be happy if we do not condemn ourselves by the things we allow in our lives (Ro. 14:22). By resisting the temptations that Satan brings to us we can rejoice knowing that the grace of God is sufficient to help us remove evil from our lives.

Prior to our conversion, when we had fright rather than reverence toward God, we all were in need of an attitude adjustment. We were not as submissive to God as we should have been even though we know that "Pride goeth before destruction..." (Prov. 16:18) and "A man's pride shall bring him low..." (Prov. 29:23). As we came under conviction and were able to "Submit (our) selves therefore to God..." (Ja. 4:7), we found it possible to be obedient and strive for humility and, therefore, find that "By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches, and honour, and life" (Pr. 22:4).

God knows our attitude. His Word is "...powerful and sharper than any twoedged sword, ...and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). If we fill our minds with thoughts of the fear of God and if the intents of our heart are pure, God will know. Jesus knew without being told who

believed in Him and whose hearts were right with God. He "...needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man" (Jn. 2:25).

If we truly fear God in a reverent manner, it will be apparent in our lives. We will truly be a separate people, showing humility, submission, obedience and holiness in our lives. It will not be necessary for us to seek the entertainment of the world that dulls the senses, destroys compassion, mocks the fear of God, blurs the distinction between right and wrong, and leads us to the very edge of sin.

The scripture also teaches us that the fear of God brings strength to the church. After a period of turmoil brought on by persecution, there came a time when "...the churches had rest ...and were edified; walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost,..." (Acts 9:31). Although periods of unrest and persecution were important in spreading the gospel, the Lord wants peace and harmony within the church. He counts as an abomination "...he that soweth discord among brethren" (Prov. 6:19).

David recognized that it is important for individuals to walk in unity and peace for there to be strength in the house of God. "For it was not an enemy that reproached me; then I could have borne it: neither was it he that hated me that did magnify himself against me; then I could have hid myself from him: But it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, and walked into the house of God in company" (Ps. 55:12-14). David knew that reverent fear of God would not have allowed such behavior to occur.

The first three articles of the "Fear of God" provided definitions of "fear", and explained some of the benefits a child of God can receive by developing and maintaining a truly reverent fear of God.

Among the benefits are learning of God's greatness, gaining a strong trust and confidence in God, obtaining wisdom, understanding the difference between right and wrong, gaining acceptance with God and adjusting our attitude toward God and His Word.

In the final article of this series, attention will be focused on learning how to gain the fear of God.

The Fear of God IV

In the three previous articles on the fear of God, the primary attention centered on the definitions of the fear of God and the primary benefits that can be derived by developing a truly reverent fear of God.

This final article of the series will concentrate primarily on how we can learn the fear of God.

How can we learn the fear of God? We know that God will help us to “Stablish thy word unto thy servant, who is devoted to thy fear” (Ps. 119:38). To learn the fear of the Lord, we must have the desire, the willingness to learn and the ability to ask for it. “Teach me thy way, O Lord;...” (Ps. 86:11). The Ethiopian eunuch, when asked if he understood what he read replied “How can I, except some man should guide me?” (Acts 8:31). He wanted to know the truth. He wanted to be taught. He had traveled from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, a very significant distance, to worship and to learn about the truth of God’s Word.

Just as the Ethiopian was willing to search, we must also search for the truth. Jesus, in the parables about the lost sheep and the lost piece of silver (Lk. 15:4-10), reminded us that we must search diligently for that which is precious to us. Our search should begin with the Word of God: “Seek ye out of the book of the Lord, and read:...” (Is. 34:16). Patient searching will help us learn more about God: “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Ro. 15:4).

In addition to being teachable and searching diligently, we must be willing to receive the fear of the Lord. The rich young man that ran to Christ for advice was anxious to learn and willing to search, but he was not willing to act on the instruction that would have provided him with the peace he sought. When told what he must do “...he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved:...” (Mk. 10:22). How unfortunate it is if we are unwilling to receive and act upon the instructions that will bring us into the fear of God.

Likewise, we must also be willing to grow in love and in our willingness to walk according to God’s commandments. “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (De. 6:5). If we would serve God completely, we must go beyond mercy, kindness, humbleness, meekness, longsuffering and forbearance. These are critical but we are reminded that “...above all these things put on charity (love), which is the bond of perfectness (Col. 3:14).

If we truly love the Lord, we will then want to do His will. The fear of God will bring to us the desire to walk after his commandments. “And this is love, that we walk after his commandments. This is the commandment, That, as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it” (II Jn. 6).

The scripture provides us with numerous examples of those who feared, served, and loved God and of the impact that this obedience had on others. At a time when the world was so wicked that God decided to destroy man from the face of the earth, He saw there was still one who was faithful. “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord...Noah was a just man...and walked with God” (Gen. 6:8-9). Noah feared the Lord and followed God’s instructions even though, in the eyes of the world, he must have looked very foolish. Noah’s fear of God, his faith and his obedience saved his family.

Further, Abraham was asked to be obedient in the most difficult of circumstances. Having had faith to believe that he could have a son in his old age, he was then asked to sacrifice his son. Just at the point of offering his son God stopped him and said “...for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me” (Gen. 22:12). What would have happened to Isaac if

Abraham would not have had the fear (reverence) of God so firmly established in his heart that he couldn't immediately recognize God's voice? The fear of God caused Abraham to do what was right.

Finally, Joseph, when in a position to inflict punishment upon his brothers for the evil that they had done, refused to repay evil for evil and said unto his brothers "This do, and live; for I fear God:" (Gen. 42:18). He realized that the events which occurred in his life were part of God's plan "...for God did send me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45:5).

Time and space do not permit a recounting of all who faithfully served God. Hebrews, Chapter 11, provides a brief list and discussion of many who feared God, endured much affliction and, in the process, helped to preserve faith in God. Likewise, in the New Testament, many faithful pillars feared and served the Lord that we can know of the benefits of serving God.

The scripture is very clear in describing the necessity and benefits of the fear of God as it relates to both the terror and the reverence of God. In the Revelation of St. John, the two extremes are clearly described. "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away...But the fearful, and unbelieving, and abominable, and ...all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone:..." (Rev. 21:3-8).

The fear of God can bring us to repentance. The fear of God can also draw us very close to Him as we learn to reverence and love Him for all He has done for us. Both extremes in the fear of God are designed to separate us from sin and bring us to a faith that will last through eternity.

Accountability I

January, 2001

“For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required: and to whom men have committed much, of him will they ask the more” (Lk. 12:42).

To be held accountable is to be required to give a satisfactory explanation for actions we have committed. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that we will be accountable for what we have done with the time and talents we have been given. Trying to escape accountability is not new. It has been a problem almost from the beginning of time. There is a long list of excuses that have been used over the years by individuals who have tried to escape responsibility for what they have done. Furthermore, the scripture also makes it clear that some people are more accountable than others.

We are stewards, not owners. All that we have (houses, lands, possessions of any kind, and even our lives) belongs to the Lord. He has allowed us the privilege of using some of His possessions. Just as when we use something that belongs to someone else and the time comes to return it or explain how we have used it, we must give an account of what we have done with God’s possessions. The unjust steward is not the only one who must “...give an account of thy stewardship;” (Lk. 16:2), “for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (Ro. 14:10).

The first excuse used in trying to escape accountability was to blame someone else. When Adam was confronted for eating of the forbidden fruit, he responded: “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat” (Gen. 3:12). Adam was not only blaming the woman but he also tried to place an element of blame on God as he reminded God that He had placed the woman in Adam’s life. When confronted about the accusation from Adam, Eve replied, “The serpent beguiled me and I did eat” (Gen. 3:13).

Both were guilty. Both knew they had done wrong, and both tried to blame someone else. The serpent was not given an opportunity for defense and had a curse placed upon him. Adam and Eve, of course, were both required to live with the consequences of their behavior. They were driven from the garden of Eden and required to earn their bread by the “...sweat of thy face...” (Gen. 3:19). Even more seriously, of course, was the separation from God and the death that they faced as a result of their sin.

Denying knowledge of the problem is also used as a method of avoiding the consequences of inappropriate behavior. When God asked Cain about his brother Abel, he lied and said “...I know not: am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9). Cain not only knew the situation, but he also knew that he was guilty of wrong doing. His claim of ignorance did not save him from the consequences of his behavior.

Likewise many people try to avoid accepting the consequences of their behavior by claiming that their unacceptable behavior was something they felt required to do. King Saul believed that it was necessary to offer a sacrifice to God before going to battle. He sincerely believed that sacrifices would bring the blessings of God to the Israelites.

King Saul was told to wait for Samuel who had promised to come to meet him and offer a sacrifice before Saul led his army to battle against the Philistines. When Samuel didn’t appear, Saul offered the burnt offering. Samuel soon arrived and asked Saul what he had done. Saul said “Because I saw...that thou camest not within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered together at Michmash;...I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt offering” (I Sam. 13:11-12). The king tried to blame Samuel for not coming at the appointed time to offer the sacrifice but that did not prevent him from facing the consequences of sin. Saul was told that he had done foolishly, he had not kept the Lord’s

commandment, and that his kingdom would not continue. Therefore, much of the remainder of Saul's reign was filled with sorrow and difficulty.

Finally, feelings of inadequacy are also used from time to time by those who are trying to avoid accountability. In the parable of the talents we are reminded that the time will come when "...the lord of those servants cometh and reckoneth with them" (Mt. 25:19). All of those servants were required to give an account of how they had used their lord's money. Those who used it wisely were told: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant:" (Mt. 25:21). The one who hid his lord's money was called wicked and slothful and was "...cast...into outer darkness:" (Mt. 25:30). The unprofitable servant believed his master was so harsh that he could not possibly do as his master expected. His assessment was wrong and his sentence for not doing his duty was harsh.

When we make errors or commit sin it is necessary that we confess our sins and that we go to those we have wronged, sincerely apologize and offer to make restitution. We know that "...every one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Ro. 14:12). We know that if we take care of a mistake as soon as possible, we can keep the situation from getting worse and we can restore peace with those whom we may have wronged. Generally, the people of the world do not understand this: "...they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you: who shall give account to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead" (I Peter 4:4-5).

In legal matters, the first bit of advice that attorneys often give their clients is to keep quiet and admit to nothing. They seem to think that if their client is found not guilty in a court of law that there will be no consequences. The Bible tells us otherwise: "But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment" (Mt. 12:36).

All of us will be held accountable for what we do with the time and resources the Lord gives to us. Although God's mercy and compassion are great, excuses for unacceptable behavior will be of no value. Blaming others, claiming ignorance of a situation, feeling pressure to do wrong, and feelings of inadequacy cannot make wrong behavior right.

In part II of this series, attention will be focused on a variety of reactions to being held accountable, to whom we are accountable and the degree of our accountability.

Accountability II

February, 2001

Accountability is the requirement to give a satisfactory explanation for the actions we have committed. Although there are a variety of excuses people use to try to escape accountability, we know we are accountable to God, the Church, each other, the government, our parents, and to our children. Just as we do not all have the same talents, we are not all accountable to the same degree nor do we all respond the same way to the accountability set before us.

One way of responding to the need to be accountable is to be completely submissive in all things. When Saul was struck down on the way to Damascus, after learning that God wanted him to change the belief he held, he became totally submissive. "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do" (Acts 9:6)? He obeyed the instructions he received there and followed the Lord faithfully for the remainder of his life. As he neared the end of his life, he could say, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (II Tim. 4:7). His submission to God was complete and his commitment was strong.

Unfortunately there are others who try to escape accountability by looking for the minimum level of service required for salvation. When the rich young ruler went to Jesus, he asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life (Mt. 19:16-22). When told what he needed to do, he was sorrowful because he regarded the price as being too high.

Others try to escape accountability by remaining ignorant of God's ways. Peter uses the term "willingly ignorant" and explains the dangers of not learning the ways of God (II Peter 3:4-12). Are we willingly ignorant of the will of God because we have chosen to absent ourselves from special services such as the reading of the memorandum, playing the conference tapes, and attending provings? Do we really believe that we will be found guiltless because we chose not to hear the truth?

Finally, there are those who try to avoid accountability by altering the Word of God to make it sound like sin is no longer sin. There are those who have rewritten the Bible so it is more "relevant" to today. Others give false interpretations to scripture passages, hoping that if they sound convincing that everything will be acceptable in the day of judgment. Sadly, they will be eternally disappointed if they alter the truth and believe a lie.

To whom are we accountable? There are those who would say that they are accountable only to God. The Holy Word of God teaches us that such is not the case. Certainly we are, first and foremost, accountable to God, but we are also accountable to others.

We are accountable to the church and to church authority. "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account" (Heb. 13:17). The authority of the church is further supported in Matt. 18:18. "...whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Finally, Ezekiel 33 and 34 also reinforce this measure of accountability to the church.

We are also accountable to each other "that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" (Ro. 14:13). In spite of Cain's plea to the contrary (Gen. 4:9), we are our brother's keeper and we will be held accountable if our example causes another to fall.

Accountability to our parents is also important. "Honor thy father and mother: and He that curseth father and mother, let him die the death" (Mt. 15:4). Children must learn that obedience to godly parents is a commandment from God.

We are also accountable to the government in those areas that belong to Caesar. Jesus said “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s:” (Matt. 22:21). The Apostle Paul instructed us to “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God:” (Ro. 13:1). When government does not conflict with scripture, we must obey the law.

Finally, we are accountable to our children. We must teach them the truth. We are instructed to “...teach them diligently...” (Deut. 6:7), to “Train up a child in the way he should go:...” (Pr. 22:6). and to “...provoke not your children to wrath:” (Eph. 6:4). Parents who neglect this very important duty may prevent the truth from passing from one generation to the next and deprive many generations of the opportunity to know the truth.

Our degree of accountability is related to our opportunity to know the truth. “But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more” (Lk. 12:48).

Since we are among those who have received much, our responsibilities are great. We must live a holy life so our salvation is assured and to provide the proper example for others. We are also accountable for helping to preserve the faith and to keep the doctrine of our faith on a solid foundation. If we do not preserve the faith, those who follow us may be deceived and thereby deprived of the opportunity for their salvation. The consequences for such unfaithfulness will be severe.

Surely those of us who have been taught from our youth the truth of God’s Word are very accountable. We have had parents to teach and show us the way of truth, thereby having easy access to the instructions in God’s Word. We have also been privileged to be instructed by faithful brethren and we have the support that comes from gathering together with God’s children as often as we wish.

With all of these benefits, we are among the most accountable of all people. We must keep God’s Word and follow His commandments. One day we will all stand before God for judgment. We can live by God’s Word and hear “Come, ye blessed of my Father” or we can ignore the truth and hear “Depart from me, ye cursed...” (Mt. 25:34 & 41). We can be blessed eternally if we serve God faithfully or we can be separated from Him forever because we allowed ourselves to believe that it is not important to follow the plan God has for our lives. The choice is ours. All of the excuses we may use and all of the attempts we make to limit our accountability will not alter the fact “...that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment” (Ecc. 11:9).

The Wages of Sin is Death

The scripture is very clear in teaching us that "...the wages of sin is death..." (Ro. 6:23). Because all have sinned, we must die physically, and if we continue in sin, we will die spiritually, for "...every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward;" (Heb. 2:2).

Wages are the payments a servant receives from a master for performing a task. Usually the wage and the task are agreed upon before the task is completed.

We are instructed in the scripture that a householder went out in the morning to hire laborers to work in his vineyard. "And when he had agreed with the laborers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard" (Mt. 20:2). Later in the day he hired other laborers and told them "...whatever is right I will give you" (Mt. 20:4). There was an agreed upon task and either an agreed upon wage or a promise to give what is right. Both the servant and the master knew there was something to be given by the servant (labor) and by the master (wages).

Because wages are earned, there is usually some relationship between the task performed and the wages received. For example, more difficult tasks with a greater time commitment usually result in higher compensation.

Since the beginning of time, from the message given to Adam and Eve, God's people have known in advance that there is a relationship between sin and (spiritual) death.

The wages of sin were agreed upon long ago. In the Garden of Eden, God explained to Adam that "of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17). The task was clearly defined - obey God's commandment to abstain from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil - and the wage was directly related to the task - a violation of the commandment would bring death. Adam and Eve knew exactly what was expected of them and they knew the results of disobedience.

The master of sin is well known and the wages to be received for sin are "earned". If we are the servant of Satan, we will "earn" spiritual death when we reach the age of accountability.

There are numerous examples where God gave a commandment and tied it directly to a "wage" if violated. King Saul "...died for his transgression which he committed against the Word of the Lord,... which he kept not, and also for asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit, to inquire of it" (I Chr. 10:13).

In the writings of Solomon we are instructed that "...he that pursueth evil pursueth it to his own death" (Pr. 11:19). Ezekiel wrote "...the soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ez. 18:4).

Further, Korah and his followers were swallowed by the earth (Numbers 16:28-33), Nadab and Abihu died for using strange fire in their censer (Le. 10:1-2); a man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath day lost his life (Nu. 15:36); Achan and his family were slain for keeping garments, gold and silver that were to be destroyed (Jo. 7:25); Jezebel (II Kings 9:32-33); Athaliah (II Ch. 23:15); Haman (Es. 7:10); Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:5-10); Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:23); and others died because of sinful deeds. From the point of view of mankind, some of the preceding transgressions seem more serious than others so we may think that the sentence should reflect this difference. However, all of these examples involved individuals who refused to obey a direct commandment of God.

Certainly we know that not all who sin are immediately slain. The scripture gives many examples of sinful men and women who were not required to immediately pay for their sin by losing their life. We could also find many examples in history for which those who seemed to perform very sinful deeds were not required to immediately die.

We are, however, instructed very clearly in the scriptures that ultimately we must stop sinning or we will die in our sins and lose the opportunity to spend eternity with God.

Christ explained to those who told him of the fate of the Galileans whose blood had been mingled with Pilot's sacrifices "...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3). Also those upon whom the tower of Siloam fell were sinners who paid with their life, but Christ reminded the people that "...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:5).

When Jesus explained to the disciples who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, He said, "Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3). Therefore, we understand that not only will unconverted people miss the opportunity to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, but much more serious is the statement that they will not even enter heaven. They will suffer eternal spiritual death.

So important are the concepts of repentance and conversion that Jesus made it very clear that those who refuse to recognize the sinfulness of their past by humbly repenting and continuing on the path of sin by refusing to be converted will perish and not enter heaven.

The need to repent and be converted was made very clear through John the Baptist's early preaching - "John did baptize in the wilderness and preach the baptism of repentance for remission of sins" (Mk. 1:4). This message was continued throughout the ministry of Jesus. His disciples from the Acts ("commandeth all men to repent" Acts 17:20) through Revelations (... "be zealous therefore and repent" Rev. 3:19) also taught the message of salvation.

James gives an excellent summary of the progression of sin and its ultimate penalty. "But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust; and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (Ja. 1:14-19).

Thus, we can easily understand that God has been very open and clear to His people. Although He has given us the opportunity to know the right way to live and the consequences of choosing to do otherwise, we know that the result of a life of sin is eternal death. We also know that God does not want that for His people. Therefore, He offers us the opportunity to receive the gift of eternal life, a beautiful topic that will be covered in the next article.

The Gift of God is Eternal Life

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Ro. 6:23).

Just as wages are earned payments received for those things we have done, gifts, however, are something that are freely given or bestowed upon someone by another with no pretense of being earned or deserved by the recipient. Although gifts are sometimes given in appreciation for what one has done, the giver of the gift does not owe it to the recipient, nor can the recipient demand that a gift be given. Gifts usually are given out of love.

God has chosen to give His people an opportunity to receive eternal life with Him. Although obedience to God is required to receive eternal life, the gift is so great that we simply cannot earn it.

The gift of eternal life is based upon God’s love for His people and their willingness to receive it. “For God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16). A related verse that expands upon this concept makes it clear that salvation is not something we can attain by our goodness nor by our power. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ep. 2:8).

We can understand from these verses that, while faith is required, the gift of eternal life is bestowed upon the faithful because God loves us and wants us to be freed from Satan’s deception.

Gifts have a price. The price, which may be money, time or sacrifice, is borne by the giver. What price did God pay that made it possible for Him to give us eternal life? The price was the life of His Son.

God’s love for His people is so intense that there was no price that was too great for Him to pay. We may ask ourselves, if God’s love for us was so great, why did He send His Son instead of coming Himself? It is undoubtedly easier for a parent to understand the answer to this question than for someone who does not have children.

If we had a very dangerous mission that had to be completed, and if we knew that the individual who completed the mission would suffer extreme torture and a slow agonizing death, which would be easier for a parent to do - go accomplish the mission and suffer the consequences ourselves or send our child and observe first hand the torture and agony that our child would suffer? There is no doubt that it took greater love by God to send His Son than it would have taken for Him to come and pay the price.

When Abraham was put to the ultimate test of faith at the time he was required to offer his son Isaac, it is not difficult to believe that it would have been far easier for him to give his life than to give the life of his son.

Several things occurred during this ordeal that made Abraham’s task even more difficult. God reminded Abraham that Isaac was “...thine only son whom thou lovest...” (Gen. 22:2).

On the journey to the land of Moriah, Isaac asked a question of his father that must have increased the weight of Abraham’s burden. Isaac said “...Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:7) Abraham had only his faith in God that a lamb would be provided to help him through that ordeal.

Abraham's faith was rewarded but not until he reached the ultimate point in his trial. But God was not spared of the agony of watching his Son pay the price. He was not given a reprieve at the last instant. His Son had to die. There is no doubt that the price that was paid was greater than if the Father Himself had gone to the cross.

Since the gift of eternal life was freely given by a loving Father who was willing to pay the most extreme price that any giver of gifts could pay, does that mean that we have no responsibility for our salvation? Certainly not. The receiver of a gift should have the desire to show appreciation for the gift and that the price paid by the giver of the gift was not wasted.

How can we show appreciation to God for so great a gift? Again we can find answers in the scripture.

When Paul and Silas were imprisoned for preaching the gospel, a great earthquake opened the prison doors and loosed their bands. The prison keeper was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. When told that the prisoners were all there, trembling before Paul and Silas he said "Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,..." (Acts 16:30-31).

What does belief require? We must have faith in the blood of Jesus Christ "...which is shed for many" (Lk. 22:20) and be willing to obey His commandments. Although time and space do not allow a full review of the plan of salvation, we can list a few fundamentals.

Christ said "...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3); "Except ye be converted, and become as little children ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3); and "...if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt. 6:15). Finally, confirming the lawyer's statement Jesus said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind: and thy neighbor as thyself" (Lk. 10:27).

Surely it is not asking too much to expect God's people to appreciate the gift of eternal life enough that we will be willing to submit to God's commandments and to the teachings of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He was willing to pay the price for our sins. Our Heavenly Father was willing to give us His Son, the most precious gift that could be given. We cannot earn our salvation but we can be thankful that God's gift is available to all who will accept it by following the teachings in the Bible.

Flee

Numerous times in the scripture we are admonished to flee. Sometimes the danger is physical, sometimes it is emotional and sometimes the danger is spiritual. Whatever the case, the warning is given to help us escape the danger.

To flee means to go swiftly or to move rapidly. When faced with physical danger we recognize the need to quickly move out of the way of the danger. Do we have the same reaction when faced with spiritual danger?

Too often sin is regarded as an inconvenience or an attractive nuisance rather than as an attempt by Satan to destroy us. If we truly believe the Bible, and if we believe there are only two destinations for the souls of mankind, then surely we must take seriously the threat that Satan poses to us. His goal is to cause us to spend eternity in hell, forever separated from God.

God, however, has the opposite goal for us. He wants us to spend eternity in Heaven with Him, forever protected from the temptations and deceitfulness that Satan brings before us. In His desire to help us win our battles with Satan, He has left us with clear instructions that, if followed, will help us to be successful in those battles.

As God's people, we are instructed to stay away from sin and to "...come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing;..." (II Cor. 6:17). In spite of our best efforts to remain separated from the evils of the world, we sometimes find ourselves in situations that are dangerous to our spiritual life. When that happens, the Lord wants us to recognize that situation and act quickly to protect ourselves from spiritual harm.

We have a faithful God who will not let us "...be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape,..." (I Cor. 10:13). How can we escape? "...flee from idolatry." (I Cor. 10:14); "Flee fornication..." (I Cor. 6:18); "Flee also youthful lusts:..." (II Tim. 2:22); and finally after being warned of the dangers of coveting, we are told, "But Thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness" (I Tim. 6:11).

Although the scripture only ties a few specific sins to the commandment to flee, it is apparent that a child of God is advised to flee from all sin. The Apostle Paul has numerous strong admonitions that encourage us to avoid sin. "...Abhor that which is evil;..." (Ro. 12:9) and "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (I Th. 5:22). If we are to abhor evil and not even have the appearance of evil, quite clearly we must flee all evil.

If we heed the advice we are given in the scripture and quickly remove ourselves from temptation, we have the assurance of escaping the temptation. As an added comfort, we are promised that if we "...Resist the devil ...he will flee from you" (Ja. 4:7).

Therefore, if we follow the instructions that we are given in the Word of God, we have a double portion of protection. If we flee from sin, we will be separated from evil, and if we resist the devil, he must flee from us.

What will happen to us if we do not flee from sin? If we allow ourselves to be deceived and ensnared by evil, we will pay for our foolishness in this life and in the time to come. Guilt that we have as a result of sin brings fear. In the Garden of Eden Adam said "...I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid,..." (Gen. 3:10).

Belshazzar, King of Babylon, committed a great sin by taking vessels from the temple and using them in his heathen feast. The hand writing on the wall caused such fear that "...the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another" (Da. 5:6).

If we live in sin, the Lord will set his face against us, causing such fear that "...ye shall flee when none pursueth you" (Lev. 26:17). Solomon reminded us that "The wicked flee when no man pursueth:..." (Pr. 28:1). Sin ultimately will make us powerless. When the children of Israel were rebellious and self-willed, trusting in swift horses, they were told that not only will they be unable to escape by trusting in themselves but that their enemies would be swift and cause them great fear. "One thousand shall flee at the rebuke of one; at the rebuke of five shall ye flee:..." (Is. 30:17).

Therefore, we can readily understand that if we do not flee from sin, the time will come when we will be so confused and so overcome with guilt that we will flee as a result of the guilt brought on by sin. Fleeing at that point, however, will be of no avail. We will not be able to outrun our fears.

If we choose not to flee from sin, we will try to flee from our fears brought on by sin. When we understand that we cannot outrun the consequences of sin, unrepentant sinners will make a final attempt to escape. Unfortunately, the time will come when sinners who ignore God's warning will be unable to flee. They will realize too late that they have ignored the opportunity to escape destruction and will "...say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us" (Lk. 23:30), but it will be to no avail. The situation will become so dire that "...shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them" (Rev. 9:6).

Therefore, in dealing with sin we must follow scriptural teachings to flee from sin. If we ignore that warning, we will try to flee from the fear brought on by sin. After we understand that we cannot escape this fear, we will ultimately try to flee from the wrath of God. This, too, shall fail. Only by fleeing from sin, and keeping ourselves pure, will we find comfort in God's Word: "... cleave to that which is good. Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer;" (Ro. 12:9&12).

Finally Brethren, Think on These Things

“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Phil. 4:8).

What fills your mind and your thoughts? Often as we go through our day we perform tasks that do not require a great deal of concentration. This provides time for a wide variety of thoughts, both good and bad, to fill our minds and compete for our attention.

We either have a spiritual mind or we have a carnal mind. Satan is constantly trying to fill our minds with thoughts of the world, of the pleasures of this life, of evil or of some thought that will just pass the time in a way that prevents us from focusing on God and from thoughts that draw us closer to Him.

Thinking about an issue can be as light as a fleeting thought of something trivial or as serious as deep meditation about an eternally critical topic. When our thoughts are of spiritual matters, the scriptural admonition is to “Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all” (I Ti. 4:15).

The issues we are encouraged by the apostle to think upon are profound and are of lasting importance.

Philosophers have long delighted themselves in asking the question “What is truth”? In many of their arguments, the implication is given that the question cannot be answered. Even Pilot struggled with the question during Christ’s trial. When Christ told Pilot that His mission was to bear witness of the truth Pilot said “...What is truth?...” (Jn. 18:38).

Unfortunately for Pilot, he did not hear Christ’s prayer shortly before His arrest as He was praying for the Church and the saints who would follow Him, asking God to “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (Jn. 17:17). Thus the Word of God is the basis of all truth.

Truth, as determined by science, changes as man continues his pursuit of knowledge. Information that was at one point in time “proven” to be true, is later found to not be true. Truth as determined by God’s Word, however, has not changed since the beginning of time.

Honesty is applying truth to our speech and behavior so we do not cheat, lie, steal nor deceive. So often it is possible to tell the “truth” without being completely honest. At times it is easy to tell only part of a story, thereby being “truthful” but not necessarily completely “honest”.

To be truthful and honest have been so important throughout history that they form the basis for two of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor” (Ex. 20:15-16).

To be just is to be righteous and upright, to do what is morally right. Throughout the scriptures the importance of being just is reinforced. “...the path of the just is as the shining light...” and “The tongue of the just is as choice silver:...” (Prov. 4:18 and 10:20). God is described numerous times as being “just”. “...Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints” (Rev. 15:3).

Moreover, purity is being free from anything that taints, being faultless or blameless. In the natural sense, it doesn't take much contamination to destroy purity. A very small amount of poison would make a large amount of food unsafe. Our lives are made impure by even a small amount of sin. Jesus' blood was pure, totally free from sin, and it would have taken only one sin to destroy that purity. To pay the price of the sins of the world required purity, a total freedom from fault.

Finally, to be lovely is to be morally or spiritually attractive. The concept of being lovely in the spiritual sense is so much more than the worldly view of lovely. Physical beauty counts for so much to the world and for so little to the Christian. It is so insignificant that the scripture even describes Christ as "...when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him" (Is. 53:2). However, in the spiritual sense, loveliness is so important that we are commanded to meditate upon it.

As the world likes to read bad news, our newspapers and newsmagazines are filled with it. The focus is on what is not good. The scripture, however, tells us to think upon the things that are of good report. How different would our lives be if in our homes and in our church we could eliminate gossip and evil speaking and talk of those things that are of good report!

How can we know if something is of good report? Does it have any virtue or moral quality that is meritorious? Does it promote general moral excellence? Does it glorify or extol our Lord? Does it help our brother or sister? What impact does it have on the friends of the truth? What is the end result of the report?

There are times, however, when we must think or speak about something that is unpleasant. In doing so we can either choose to think or speak in a manner that is helpful or a manner that is hurtful. If we think or speak properly, even those topics that are unpleasant can be done in a manner that is scripturally sound. This one very short passage of scripture (Phil. 4:8) provides us with excellent guidelines on how to occupy our minds. Not only does it advise us on the qualities that should occupy our minds, it emphasizes the importance of deep thinking.

The importance of meditating is emphasized in the Old and the New Testament. "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success" (Jos. 1:8). "Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all" (I Tim. 4:15).

Thus we can understand that to "think upon" those things that are pleasing to God requires more than fleeting thoughts. It requires full attention, total focus and a substantial amount of time, to meditate upon "whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report..." (Phil. 4:8).

Delayed Blessings

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness...;” (II Pet. 3:9). The scripture contains many promises that God has made to His people. To a child of God, these promises are comforting. However, to the unconverted many of God’s promises are distressing. Although some of the promises have come to pass and are understandable, others are somewhat mysterious and have not yet been fulfilled. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: all of God’s promises will be fulfilled in His good time.

We are living in a time when patience and a willingness to wait are not among our strengths. Many, if not nearly all, people in America have reached the point where they expect instant service. We have fast food restaurants, fast credit banks, automatic teller service to get money from our bank accounts, almost instant entertainment, instant information through the internet and a variety of other services instantly available.

We do not want to wait on anything. Even the short wait at a traffic light causes some to express impatience. But the Lord still operates on His time table, requiring us to approach Him in a manner that may be different from what we are accustomed to doing.

Many places in the scripture we are encouraged to slow down and to learn patience. Interestingly, we are instructed by the Apostle Paul as he lists the fruit of the Spirit, that there is no law against longsuffering.

When God pronounced a curse upon the serpent, He made a promise to Adam and Eve, and hence to each of us, that He would “...put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). As evidence of God’s patience, His promise of a Saviour was not fulfilled until approximately 4000 years later. To mankind, it seemed like a long time in coming. To God, the Saviour came at just the right time.

There are numerous promises given to those who wait patiently. “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Is. 40:31). The rewards of waiting are made clear in another of Isaiah’s writings “...Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (Is. 25:9).

David also teaches us a lesson on patience. “I waited patiently for the Lord, and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry” (Ps. 40:1), and “My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning:...” (Ps. 130:6).

Although David understood the value of waiting on the Lord, at times his patience also was tried. “How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?” (Ps. 13:1). “I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God” (Ps. 69:3).

Occasionally, Jesus required those who followed Him to learn the value of waiting for God’s time to act. Perhaps one of the more trying times of waiting was the time of Lazarus’ death when Christ could have easily gone to Judea earlier and cured him. Because Jesus chose to wait until Lazarus died before He went, both Mary and Martha were heartbroken, and said exactly the same words to Him after He arrived. “...Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died” (Jn. 11:21 & 32). The events that occurred during the period of waiting (Lazarus’ death and burial) were not only difficult for Mary and Martha, but they were also difficult for Jesus. It would have been easier for Him to have gone earlier and spared His friends of their grief.

It was not in the long term best interest for Jesus to have gone earlier because there was much to learn by waiting. Jesus told His disciples “And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe;...” (Jn. 11:15). If Jesus would have healed Lazarus before his death, the impact of the miracle would undoubtedly have been lessened. Raising him from the dead was a much more profound miracle, and therefore, the delayed blessings that Mary and Martha received have been a powerful lesson for generations to follow.

The delayed blessings received from waiting are not always immediately evident. Shortly before Christ’s trial and death, He took Peter, James, and John to a separate place where He could pray for strength to fulfill His mission. Three times He left these three disciples to wait while He went and prayed. All three times they fell asleep. Christ said unto them “...What, could you not watch with me one hour?” (Mt. 26:40). Undoubtedly, this experience was a very humbling one for those disciples and it helped them to realize that of their own strength they could do nothing, not even stay awake. They would need this lesson of relying on strength from God many times later as they spread the gospel.

In the early Christian church, the Apostles were promised that they would be baptized with the Holy Ghost and were instructed to go to Jerusalem to wait for the promise to be fulfilled. They were in one accord, waiting patiently for the promise to be kept. As they waited “...suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind ... and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost,... (Acts 2:2&4). What would have happened to the Apostles if they would have become too impatient to wait upon the Lord? They may have missed the opportunity to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Many more examples could be cited from the scriptures that would show us the benefits of being willing to wait for the Lord to send His blessings when He was ready.

We face many pressures in our daily walk of life that tend to make us grow impatient when we are required to wait. Although we may find that there are some material benefits to the rapid pace we face in society, to gain the spiritual benefits we need, the scripture encourages us to “Be still, and know that I am God:...” (Ps. 46:10). As Elijah was seeking assurance that God was still available to help His people, it was necessary for him to wait quietly until the strong wind passed, the earthquake ended and the fire burned and then he heard the Lord in “...a still small voice” (I Ki. 19:12). God’s blessings are never late, but sometimes we must be willing to wait for them.

Too Late

There are many times in our lives that we have an opportunity to accomplish a task and we wait too long to take advantage of the opportunity. Sometimes the results of waiting too long are insignificant, but in some situations the results are very serious.

Just as when someone puts off seeing a doctor for an illness and later learns his disease is too advanced for a cure, there is even more serious spiritual consequences for those who resist God until it is too late.

We know that God is "...a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth" (Ps. 86:15). But we also know that if we tempt the Lord beyond His patience, God will reject us, "So I swear in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest" (Heb. 3:11). If we persist long enough, God will "...(give) them their request; but send leanness into their soul" (Ps. 106:15).

There are numerous examples where individuals or groups pushed the patience of the Lord too far. In many of these examples, by the time they realized the seriousness of their error, it was too late. Romans 1:21-32 reminds us of the sad consequences of those who "...do not like to retain God in their knowledge..." (Ro. 1:28).

At the time of the flood, Noah warned the people for years that there would be a flood that would destroy all "...wherein is the breath of life,..." (Gen. 6:17). After many years of preparing the ark and giving those who lived around him plenty of time to learn about the impending disaster, the time came when the ark was completed. After Noah, his family, and the animals entered the ark, "...the Lord shut him in" (Gen. 7:16). Undoubtedly after it started to rain, there were those who would have been glad to enter the ark, but it was too late. God had closed the door.

The Egyptians had numerous examples of God's power and they had numerous opportunities to turn away from their sin but they ignored the warnings of the Lord and the nation was nearly destroyed.

Likewise, the Children of Israel, after seeing numerous miracles as they were leaving Egypt, so often tried the Lord's patience. Time after time they longed to return to Egypt, but God gave them more time and more examples of His love and power. When it was time to enter the Promised Land, they forgot what God had done for them. They ignored the message of Joshua and Caleb. All they could think of was how big and strong the enemy looked. They did not trust God in spite of the many times He had given them proof that He was with them. Finally, the Lord told them they must wander in the wilderness for forty years because of their unbelief.

Upon hearing this sentence, the Children of Israel realized that they had sinned and then decided they would fight their enemy and enter the promised land. Moses told them not to go, because it would not prosper. "But they presumed to go up unto the hill top:... Then the Amalekites came down, and the Canaanites which dwelt in that hill, and smote them,..." (Nu. 14:44-45). It was too late. The Lord refused to help them because of their unbelief and complaining.

We can also learn the value of yielding to God's wisdom before it is too late from the experience of Esau and King Saul. Esau realized he made a serious mistake in selling his birthright but "...when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears" (Heb. 12:17). King Saul finally recognized his sin in trusting in himself rather than obeying God. He said "...I pray thee, pardon my sin, and turn again with me, that I may worship the Lord.

And Samuel said unto Saul, I will not return with thee: for thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord hath rejected thee from being king over Israel” (I Sa. 15:25-26).

Esau and Saul both came to the point where they realized they had made serious mistakes, but they waited too long and they suffered the consequences of their behavior.

Although not everyone who waits too long is involved in what we might regard as serious sin, some simply put off doing what needs to be done to obtain their salvation.

For example, the five foolish virgins knew the bridegroom would soon come, so they “... took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom” (Mt. 25:1) at the proper place to wait for his arrival. The virgins even went so far as to trim their lamps, but they took no oil with them.

When the bridegroom came, they had to go get oil for their lamps. By the time the five foolish virgins returned “...the door was shut” (Mt. 25:10). They were too late. When they knocked and asked admission they were denied the privilege of going to the marriage.

Learning from the mistakes of others can be helpful in times of conflict. Knowing the Lord offers salvation and has even sent His Son to pay the price of our sins, the unconverted soul must decide to accept this gift. As Satan tries to convince him to wait a little longer before turning to the Lord, he faces a conflict that has eternal consequences. Jesus warned his disciples to not be deceived “...for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh” (Mt. 25:13). Once we have been called from time into eternity, it will be too late to choose salvation through Christ because where “...the tree falleth, there it shall be” (Ec. 11:3).

Perhaps one of the saddest verses in the hymns that we sing is the last verse of “Almost Persuaded” (Hymns of Zion p. 212). “Almost persuaded, harvest is past! Almost persuaded, doom comes at last! Almost cannot avail; almost is but to fail! Sad, sad that bitter wail, Almost, but lost!”

We need not suffer that fate. God is calling His people to come unto Him through repentance and conversion, giving time and grace to begin serving the Lord. God is longsuffering, but there will come a time when the unconverted will hear that they have waited too long, that the door of grace is closed and they are not saved. “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (Mt. 25:46).

Satan Departed For a Season

“And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him (Jesus) for a season” (Lk. 4:13). Many times throughout our lives Satan seems to have an enormous amount of power that he uses to discourage God’s people. There are even times when we can get so discouraged that we may begin to fear that Satan has more power than God.

There are numerous examples in the scriptures that tell us of God’s special protection and reassures us that, even when we are in distress, God is in control. We can see the hand of God working counter to Satan in the lives of Joseph, Elijah, Job and even Jesus.

Several times Joseph was sorely tried. He was sold by his brethren, falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife, imprisoned, and forgotten by the chief butler. In each case his load was somewhat lightened by the intervention of the Lord. Satan was only permitted to go so far and the Lord required him to leave for a time. Joseph was able to persevere in the midst of trial, and he felt the blessings of God.

Elijah was so discouraged he fled into the wilderness to hide. He could not find the Lord in the great wind, in the earthquake, nor in the fire. However, he found the Lord in a still small voice. When the Lord asked Elijah why he had fled he replied that he feared for his life because he believed he was the only prophet of God that was left “...and they seek my life, to take it away” (I Ki. 19:14).

God replied to Elijah that “...I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him” (I Ki. 19:18). With this reassurance from the Lord, Elijah found the courage to go on and he found Elisha, a young man whom God had chosen to carry on the work after Elijah was gone. Satan had almost succeeded in bringing Elijah to such discouragement that his work would have ceased. Finally, Elijah was able to recognize that Satan’s power was limited and the work of the Lord would continue.

Job is described as “...perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil” (Job 1:1). Satan was not pleased with this so he accused God of building a hedge about him. God gave Satan permission to cause Job much grief. Although we do not know how long Job’s grief lasted, it would appear to be a significant period of time.

Satan succeeded in taking away nearly every source of comfort Job had - his children, his wealth, the faith of his wife and the support of his three friends. Job became so discouraged he longed for death. God saw Job’s grief and heard his plea. Satan’s power was taken away and Job was again blessed so “...the latter end of Job (was more blessed)... than his beginning:” (Job 42:12).

Perhaps we should not be surprised when we are tried to the point of serious distress. We may even wonder if God still hears our prayers. Even Jesus felt tremendous pressure from Satan. After His baptism Jesus went into the wilderness to fast and pray. After forty days of fasting, he was hungry. Satan seized the opportunity to approach Him in His time of weakness. He came to Jesus with what seemed like a reasonable suggestion - turn stones into bread to satisfy His hunger.

The problem, however, was that Satan did not go to Jesus with a reasonable suggestion. He went with the intention of asking Jesus to obey him. Any time we obey Satan, regardless of how reasonable it seems, it is sin. Jesus recognized that it was an attempt to destroy God’s perfect plan to ultimately provide a way of salvation for all of mankind.

Jesus responded to Satan's temptations by using the Word of God. He did not allow Satan's "logic" nor his offers of temporary gain to cause Him to yield to Satan. Satan could not resist the Word of God, and he was required to flee for a time.

This was not Jesus' only temptation. As Jesus faced His final trial while hanging on the cross, He knew it was a trial He must face alone. In the darkest hour in all of history Jesus cried "...My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mk. 15:34). One last time Satan tried to make Jesus fail. Thanks be to God he was not successful. Jesus paid the price for our sins, and all of mankind now has the opportunity for salvation.

Since Satan is so bold as to approach the Son of God with temptations, we should expect that he will also approach us from time to time.

There are many promises and much encouragement contained in the Word of God to help us in these trying times. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1), the entire Twenty-third Psalm, and the comforting verses in II Cor. 4:8-11 "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body" are very comforting to those in distress.

When we are discouraged and feel we cannot go on because our reading of the scriptures seems pointless and our prayers seem so empty, we need to remember the promises of God. "For we are saved by hope:..." (Ro. 8:24) and "...that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope" (Ro. 15:4).

If we continue to do the right thing - reading the Word of God, praying, pleading for faith and trust - eventually we will find that God will prevail and Satan must leave for a season. When we have won the final victory and we have attained our heavenly goal, we will see Satan for what he is, a liar and a deceiver, one who only has temporary power who will eventually be destroyed with the wicked. Lucifer was proud, exalted himself, and wanted to "...be like the most High" (Is. 14:14). However, in the end he shall be brought low and be so powerless that those that see him shall say "...is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms..." (Is. 14:16). At that point Satan will depart, not only for a season, but forever.

Are You Ready for Christmas?

Often as we approach a religious holiday we are asked “Are you ready for Christmas (or whatever the holiday may be)?” The expected answer usually relates to our shopping, or baking, or some other secular aspect of the celebration.

How do we answer questions of that nature? Do we find ourselves focusing too much time and energy on the secular aspect of a holiday or do we prayerfully focus on the spiritual meaning of these special times?

How does a child of God prepare for a holiday? Do we get so caught up in the secular rush of the season that we sometimes forget what is important about that particular day? Have we spent so much time and energy on secular aspects of the holiday that when it arrives we are too exhausted to appreciate the spiritual significance of the day?

The purpose of this article is not to campaign against exchanging gifts or spending enjoyable time with family and friends. The purpose is to encourage each of us who is a child of God to reflect upon the meaning of these holidays and to encourage that they be holy days in our lives.

If someone who has absolutely no knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ would spend an extended period of time in our homes during a holiday season, what would they know about God after their visit? What would they know about the plan of salvation? Would they know who, or what you worship? Would they have any idea what God looks like or what is important to Him? If they would then search the scripture, would they find a close relationship between what they observed in our life and what they learned from the scripture?

For a child of God, preparing for a holiday may begin at the time of our conversion. During that period of time we should be learning of the significance of the various periods of Christ’s life and what these mean to our salvation. We should also be establishing priorities in our life that make serving God more important than anything else in our life. The time and energy we spend in preparing for a holiday should draw us closer to God rather than cause grief and heartache.

Spiritual preparation is certainly very different from secular preparation. Traditions of the world tell us how to prepare for secular celebrations. There are many scriptural passages that instruct us about the importance of, and the steps involved in, spiritual preparation for special occasions.

Since we do not know when the Saviour will return, it is important that we be ready at all times, lest we lose our opportunity to go with the Saviour, as did the foolish virgins. “And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut” (Mt. 25:10). Those who were ready went in, the others were denied admission. The five foolish virgins did make preparation - but it was after the door was shut. The Lord did not know them.

To make a thorough preparation, we must be careful that we do not allow idols to remain in our lives. Samuel reminded the children of Israel that they should “...put away the strange gods ...and prepare your hearts unto the Lord, and serve Him only:...” (I Sam. 7:3).

Do we have idols in our lives that are part of our holiday observation? If we allow material items or secular images to blur the purpose of the holiday or to divert our attention from the significance of the day, we may need to carefully examine our priorities and be sure we have not allowed the influence of Satan and the world to contaminate a holy occasion.

In addition to removing idols from our lives, we must be certain that the temple of the Lord, our body, (I Cor. 6:19) is cleansed. The prophets of old called for a cleansing of the temple. “And they gathered their brethren, and sanctified themselves, and came ...to cleanse the house of the Lord” (II Chr. 29:15). Jesus saw evil in the temple of God “...and drove them all out of the temple;” (Jn. 2:15). Although the prophets and Jesus wanted the House of God to be physically cleaned, their real concern was spiritual cleanliness. We must be careful that the customs of the world do not pollute our household of faith.

Sin separates us from God and we know “...all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; ...” (Ro. 3:23). Therefore, we need to consider the message the angel Gabriel delivered to Zacharias when he told him the work of John the Baptist would be to “...make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk. 1:17). As we prepare for a holiday, we must ready ourselves for serving the Lord.

We must “...purge (ourselves) from these (sins) ...(and) be a vessel to honor, sanctified, and meet for the master’s use, and prepared for every good work” (II Tim. 2:21). Thus, personal purification should be a major part of our plans as we get ready for special days that God has given to us. They are special opportunities for us to learn to know the Lord better.

Therefore, as we think about readying ourselves to observe a holiday, we should be sure we have abandoned all idols (sin), cleansed the temple of God (our bodies), returned to the Lord from whom we strayed when we became involved in sin, and purified ourselves, removing the contaminants that past sins have brought.

We may think that we have completed all the details necessary for a “perfect” holiday. We may have had the foresight to do our shopping early, to plan our menu well in advance, to clean every spot and corner of our house and to invite our guests in plenty of time to assure their attendance at our gathering. However, if we have not taken the time to prepare our hearts and our minds for God’s service and to instruct our children of the importance of making the occasion an honor to God, we have missed the real purpose of the holiday, and have lost an opportunity to worship in truth and sincerity. Are you ready for Christmas?

Double Mindedness

“No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other... Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Lk. 16:13).

During political campaigns, we so often hear a candidate for office try to please everyone by taking one position with one interest group and then taking the opposite or, at best, a very different position with a different interest group. It happens so frequently and so blatantly that we must be careful to not become calloused to such inconsistency.

Perhaps we should not be surprised to encounter such behavior in the world. Self exaltation from those who have selfish ambition has been with us for a long time. Absalom, the son of David, “...stole the hearts of the men of Israel” (II Sam. 15:6) as he advanced his own ambition. While he pretended to “...go and pay a vow... unto the Lord, in Hebron” (II Sam. 15:7), he went with soldiers to organize and carry out a conspiracy against David, his father, to take his kingdom from him. Thus, we can see that political double mindedness is not new.

Also, in business, doublemindedness is used to try to get a better bargain, and thereby improve ones material position. “It is naught, it is naught, saith the buyer: but when he is gone his way, then he boasteth” (Prov. 20:14). Unjust gain, often a result of a doubleminded individual, is utterly condemned by the Scripture. “Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them who have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth” (Ja. 5:4).

If we take unfair advantage of another or if we are “Masters (who do not) give unto your servants that which is just and equal...” (Col. 4:1), we will surely be held accountable by our Master.

Doublemindedness in politics, business, or any other aspect of our life is a symptom of a more significant problem - that of spiritual double mindedness. “A double minded man is unstable in all his ways” (Ja. 1:8).

Trying to serve two masters had its beginning in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve tried to serve God and also listen to the enticements of Satan. They were deceived into thinking that they could fulfill the lust of the eye and serve God at the same time. When they saw the tree was good for food “...and a tree to be desired to make one wise...” (Gen. 3:6), Adam and Eve both preferred to do what appealed to the flesh rather than to obey God. They were cast out of the Garden because of their sin.

The impact of their sin affected every generation that followed them. Cain, who pretended to serve God by bringing “...of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord” (Gen. 4:3), found that his offering was not accepted by the Lord because “...sin lieth at the door...” (Gen. 4:7). He tried to serve God in a manner that suited his purpose rather than God’s purpose. He did not have as the sole intent of his heart to serve God.

This practice of trying to serve two masters was often evident in the lives of the Children of Israel. “They feared the Lord, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations...”(II Kings 17:33).

So many times the Children of Israel lost their singleness of purpose and served other gods. When they fell into the sin of idolatry, God did not help them. They fell under the rule of their enemies and suffered until they returned to serving the one true God. Psalm 107 records the sad state of affairs as they

fell from God's protection time after time. However, the mercy of God is also evident as Psalm 107 also tells of the blessings the Children of Israel felt when they truly repented and again served the Lord. "Then they (cried) unto the Lord in their trouble, and he saveth them out of their distresses" (Ps. 107:19).

The way of escape from this distress is clearly stated. "Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men" (Ps. 107:15)! We need not fall into the same distress that has overtaken so many of God's people in times past. If we do not allow ourselves to be doubleminded, if we retain singleness of mind and keep Satan completely out of our lives, we can escape this problem.

There are numerous problems facing the Church today that are a result of double mindedness. Riches, worldly entertainment, pride, the desire to excel beyond reasonable levels, and filling our lives with many unwholesome thoughts or activities will most likely lead us into a position of compromise. If we compromise our faith for any reason, it becomes evident that God is not first in our lives. We want God's blessings and we want to spend eternity with Him, but are we willing to pay the price that is necessary to serve God with singleness of heart?

What is the cure for double- mindedness? "...Cleanse your hands, ye sinners;..." and "purify your hearts, ye doubleminded" (Ja. 4:8). To cleanse and to purify require effort and diligence.

Perhaps the first step in this process is desire. We must want to serve God and Him alone, regardless of what it may cost. "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee" (Ps. 73:25). To rid ourselves of the pollutions of double mindedness requires diligent self examination and a willingness to admit that we may need to purge impurities from our lives. Having identified these impurities we must then "Submit (ourselves) therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you..." (Ja. 4:7-8).

If we have allowed ourselves to become heavily involved in worldliness, it is likely that impurities have entered our lives. If so, they must all be removed so there is no separation between us and God. To be double minded means we are willing to serve Satan part of the time. If we serve him part of the time in this life, we will spend eternity with him.

Am I Your Enemy Because I Tell You the Truth?

One would think that the truth could hardly be controversial. If something is the truth it should be verifiable and, therefore, quite easy to settle upon.

Unfortunately, there are those who deny the truth, distort the truth, and even persecute those who stand for the truth. The world may make light of the truth, but Christ said "...the truth shall make you free" (Jn. 8:32). Pilot, in a state of confusion, asked "...What is truth?..." (Jn. 18:38) and as Jesus He prayed for His disciples, He answered that question "...Thy (God's) word is truth" (John 17:17).

Sometimes we are faced with situations about which we would rather not know the truth, perhaps thinking in the back of our minds that if we don't know we won't have to deal with it. There are times when an individual doesn't feel well physically. There may be fear that something is very wrong and as a way of denial, the individual tries to convince himself that there is nothing wrong.

Eventually, however, in those situations the individual must face reality. Perhaps they have put off seeing a doctor for so long that when circumstances finally force them to face reality, they find that the situation has become so serious there is little that can be done. Perhaps earlier it could have been dealt with successfully, but by denying the warning signals for too long, the situation became hopeless.

In the physical sense this is sad, but in spiritual situations it is disastrous.

When Ahab, King of Israel, wanted to go to battle against Syria, he sought the counsel of about 400 prophets who said he should go to battle. Although these prophets told Ahab what he wanted to hear, Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, who was going to battle with Ahab, was not sure these prophets were really saying God's will. Jehoshaphat asked if there was another prophet they could consult. Ahab said "...There is yet one man, Micaiah ... but I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil..." (I Kings 22:8). The King preferred to hear false good news prophesied, rather than the truth. It cost him his life.

Isaiah wrote of rebellious children who would not hear the law of the Lord "Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits:" (Is. 30:10). Again, they preferred short term comfort rather than the truth. In the long term, they suffered because they did not want to know the truth.

In the writings of Ezekiel, Chapters 33 and 34, the prophet warned of the results of not sending a clear signal and of refusing to listen to warnings. The shepherd and the watchman on the wall were warned of their responsibility to sound a clear alarm and to feed the sheep. Those who would not fulfill their duty were severely reproved. Those who refused to heed the warning when the truth was spoken were told that "...his blood shall be upon his own head" (Ez. 33:4).

In addition, as Jesus was explaining to the scribes and Pharisees His relationship to His heavenly Father, they became very angry and took refuge in the fact that they were Abraham's seed. Jesus reminded them that if they were Abraham's seed they would do the works of Abraham. "But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth,..." (Jn. 8:40). They denied that they planned to kill Him but a few minutes later they were so angry "Then took they up stones to cast at him:..." (Jn. 8:59). They could not stand the truth.

What about our brotherhood? Do we still stand for the truth? Do we avoid listening to Conference tapes and to the reading of the Memorandum? Do we stay away from provings so we don't have to be

reminded of our commitment to God? Occasionally we hear of those who stay away because they don't want to hear what is said. If we choose to not hear the truth, it does not reduce our responsibility to do what is right. Those who have the opportunity to hear and to know the truth will be accountable for their behavior even though they may have tried to not be reminded of the truth.

Many of Christ's followers have also felt anger from those who did not want to hear the truth. As Paul was lovingly exhorting the Galatians, whom he feared were trusting too much in the flesh, he asked, "Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?" (Ga. 4:16).

The Apostles often risked their lives by standing up for the truth of God's Word. Paul described the persecution he faced as a minister of the gospel: "...in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;" (II Cor. 11:23-25). He goes on to describe the perils of water, robbers, his own countrymen, by heathen, in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, among false brethren and so on. All of these were suffered because of his desire to be truthful in "...the care of all the churches" (II Cor. 11:28).

History tells us that all of Christ's original disciples who remained faithful except John gave their lives for the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Although John was not killed for his faith he was banished to "...the isle that is called Patmos,... for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:9).

Throughout the world even today there are those who must suffer for their faith. Persecution is very severe in many parts of the world. In our own land many government regulations have changed which makes it more difficult to stand for the truth. We are told that there is strength in diversity, that we need to tolerate (which is often interpreted as embrace) those of a different faith. The purity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is being threatened by those who would oppose the truth.

"Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another" (Ep. 4:25).

Are we enemies of some who do not want the truth? Jesus said "...If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (Jn. 8:31-32).

Denying the Obvious

Each of us make many decisions every day. Some of the decisions are minor, are made with little thought, and have only minor consequences on our lives and on the lives of others. Each of us also face situations in which we must make decisions that require much thought and prayer and have life changing consequences. Although many of our decisions fall somewhere between these two extremes, we need to be very careful about the decisions we make and consider the consequences of those decisions.

We face decisions in which the choice should be obvious, but for one reason or another we may not see the obvious nature of our situation. Satan frequently tries to blur the lines between right and wrong and causes us to struggle with these important issues.

Moses certainly recognized that he was in an unusual situation when he saw a "...bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed" (Ex. 3:2). In the conversation that followed, Moses knew he was speaking with God and he knew that God had a mission for him. In spite of many signs and promises of support, Moses resisted the obvious until "...the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses..." (Ex. 4:14). Moses resisted the obvious direction from God for quite some time and finally agreed to do as God requested.

The children of Israel, in their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, saw many mighty miracles, yet time after time they resisted the promises and leading of the Lord. The result was that all but two who were over 20 years of age when they left Egypt died during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. They missed the opportunity to go to the Promised Land because they longed to return to the comforts of Egypt and denied what should have been obvious messages from the Lord.

Similarly, Elijah saw many miracles from God, including the fire sent to burn the sacrifice that Elijah offered as he withstood Ahab and the prophets of Baal. He witnessed the end of a long drought when he heard "...a sound of abundance of rain" (I Kings 18:41). In spite of these miracles, Elijah felt so alone and afraid that he fled for his life. He overlooked the obvious until the Lord reassured him that "...I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal..." (I Kings 19:18). He then had the courage to go on and fulfill the work of the Lord.

The New Testament also records many examples of those who ignored the obvious. At the time of Jesus' arrest Peter cut off an ear of the servant of the high priest. Jesus "...touched his ear, and healed him" (Lk. 22:51) and most of those who were there barely seemed to notice that anything unusual had taken place. They denied the obvious power of Christ and sent Him to His death.

The soldiers who were securing Christ's tomb felt the earthquake, saw the angel of the Lord, "And for fear of him the keepers did shake and became as dead men" (Mt. 28:4). They knew something very powerful had happened and yet, after reporting it to the chief priests, were willing to take "...the money, and did as they were taught:..." (Mt. 28:15). They were "taught" to lie and to deny the obvious that Christ had risen from the dead. They knew little about Jesus' mission, and lost an opportunity to learn about Christ's power and His love.

After Peter and John, through the power of faith in Jesus, healed the lame man, the Jewish leaders knew they "...could say nothing against it" (Acts 4:14) and acknowledged "...that indeed a notable miracle hath been done... and we cannot deny it" (Acts 4:16). Even after making such a statement, they still tried to deny what had happened. They conferred among themselves and decided that they would try to keep the news of this healing miracle from spreading. They threatened the disciples and "...commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18).

The early Christians faced many trials as they tried to uphold the faith. Christians today must also expect to face difficulties as they serve God.

We are living at a time when the world seems to be encroaching upon our lives more than ever before. As technology advances and our work becomes more entwined with those who are not of our faith, we must be very careful that we do not deny the obvious truths of the Bible and follow after the ways of the world.

The scripture instructs us to repent, to be converted, to live separated, sanctified lives, to be overcomers and to place God first in our lives. It is obvious that if we want to be a child of God, we must live by every word of God. It is just as obvious that there are many individuals that we come into contact with in our daily walk of life who either ignore the Word of God or choose to ignore many of the commandments because they act as though they are no longer valid in the twenty-first century.

Satan is making inroads into our faith and causing confusion in our brotherhood by trying to convince us that many of the ancient landmarks of our faith are no longer important. He wants us to believe that we can walk with God and hold hands with the world. To attempt to do this is as much of a denial of the obvious as the examples that were cited at the beginning of this article.

The scripture tells us that “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt. 6:24). It is obvious from the words of Jesus Christ that we must choose who we will serve. To try to serve God and Satan at the same time will result in serving Satan.

Jesus does not want us to deny the obvious. He wants very much for us to serve God and exclude Satan. He offers us protection. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ...how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings and ye would not” (Mt. 23:37).

Not only did He want to protect us, His love for us was so great that He died for our sins and forgave us as He was dying. “...Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do...” (Lk. 23:34). He was willing to lay down His life for our sake. How can we deny such obvious love?

Except Ye...

Nominal Christendom espouses the philosophy that if you accept the Lord Jesus Christ you will be saved. It is true that we must be willing to accept the instructions of the Lord and to have faith to accept the redeeming power of the shed blood of Jesus Christ. We also need to be willing to accept the instructions of the Word of God and to be willing to accept responsibility for our behavior. There is, however, no scripture in the King James version of the Holy Bible that gives us hope of salvation by merely “accepting Christ”. There are many scriptural passages that instruct us that we must follow His teaching in order to prepare ourselves so He will accept us.

There are many passages of scripture that contain the exhortation “except ye”. “Except” when used in this manner means “unless”. Therefore, when scriptural instructions are accompanied by “except ye”, there is a requirement that must be fulfilled if we want to gain the acceptance of the Lord.

In the Old Testament account of the defeat of the children of Israel by the men of Ai, Joshua asked the Lord why they were not delivered from their enemies. The Lord told Joshua that there was sin in the camp and He would not “...be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you” (Jos. 7:12). Sin separates us from God. Only if we are willing to remove sin from our lives can we have confidence that the Lord will be with us and bless us. It was not until Achan and the forbidden goods were destroyed that the fierceness of the anger of the Lord was turned away from the children of Israel.

There are numerous instructions in the New Testament that are just as definite. In response to a comment about some who had lost their lives in terrible circumstances, Jesus said “...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3). Therefore, the scripture is very clear that repentance is a requirement for salvation. This is reinforced by the teachings of the disciples after Christ’s resurrection. “Repent ye, therefore...that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;” (Acts 3:19).

Jesus also made it clear that we must become converted and turn away from sin. When the disciples asked Jesus who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven he said “...Except ye be converted...ye shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven” (Mt. 18:3).

This concept is reinforced in numerous passages throughout the scriptures. Peter was told that after he was converted, he was to strengthen his brethren (Lk. 22:32). In one of Peter’s sermons he instructed his listeners that they should “Repent... and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...” (Acts 3:19).

Repentance and conversion are necessary steps to become a child of God. There are additional requirements. Christ told Nicodemus that “...Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5). Nicodemus could not understand this. Christ explained that it was the love and power of God that made it possible. From the human point of view this certainly seemed impossible, but from God’s point of view it is not difficult for those who will love and serve Him.

We can be born again and have our sins buried in the death of Jesus Christ because “...God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (Jn. 3:16-17).

After the death and burial of the old sinful nature, there must be fruit. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained that it was not enough to appear to be righteous and to outwardly follow the

commandments. In a statement that must have been shocking to those who were listening, Jesus said to the multitude, "...except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:20). Most people thought the scribes and Pharisees were righteous, but clearly they were condemned because they laid heavy burdens on "...men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers" (Mt. 23:4). To be of value, righteous appearance and words must be accompanied by righteous behavior. It is not enough to merely look and speak like a child of God. There must also be fruit.

We are also commanded to remember that Jesus willingly gave His life to pay the price for our sins. "...Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you" (Jn. 6:53). We must be so much "at one" with Christ that we must take part in His suffering and death by being in communion with Him and our brethren.

Faithfulness is also required. After we have received the blessings of repentance, conversion and baptism, we must continue to remain in His service: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me" (Jn. 15:4). We must be committed to be faithful to God as long as we live. We cannot be as the dog that "...is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire" (II Peter 2:22).

We must be willing to give all for the Lord. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (Jn. 12:24). Jesus gave His life for us. We must be willing to dedicate our lives to Him.

Our service to God must be complete and without reservation. If we do not serve the Lord consistently, we send a very confusing message. Paul instructed the Corinthians that "...except they give a distinction in the sounds,...who shall prepare himself to the battle?...likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken?..." (I Cor. 14:7-9).

Not every issue that is important to be a child of God has been included here. God has provided us with an opportunity to learn what is necessary for salvation. We must be willing to search the scripture and to submit to His plan so He can accept us into His kingdom.

Let Brotherly Love Continue

“Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers; for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb. 13:1-2). What is brotherly love, and how can we be sure that we are practicing it?

To love is to display intense fondness or deep devotion toward someone. Brotherly love is the manifestation of this fondness or devotion to our brother. In this usage of the word, brother goes far beyond those of our household. It refers to God’s children, who by virtue of our having been adopted by God, are therefore our brother.

The scriptures provide us with many examples of brotherly love. Jonathan, King Saul’s son, loved David “...as his own soul” (I Sam. 18:3). This feeling that Jonathan had toward David developed even though Jonathan had been warned by his father that David would be King of Israel rather than Jonathan. Jonathan did not allow earthly ambitions to interfere with, nor destroy the love he had for David. So great was Jonathan’s affection toward David that he was willing to put his life in danger for the king by defending David to King Saul (I Sam., 20:27-34). David did not feel himself worthy of such love but Jonathan knew the Lord was with David and he “...made a covenant with the house of David...” (I Sam. 20:16).

Solomon expressed the value of brotherly love when he stated that it would cover all sins (Prov. 10:12). Covering of sins in this sense does not refer to hiding but rather to destroying the power of the sin. The opportunity that we have to exhibit love toward one another is from God. We may be a tool that God wishes to use to help someone else, and in the process, cover or gain victory over sin.

Many other examples of brotherly love are recorded in the Old Testament. Joseph’s love for his brothers, Moses’ love for his people, Ruth’s love for Naomi and Elisha’s love for Elijah are only a few examples of the love that God’s servants had for each other.

None of these examples, of course, compare to the love that Jesus Christ demonstrated for all of mankind. The life of Christ is the perfect example of brotherly love. From the Sermon on the Mount to His prayer that God would forgive His executioners, Jesus lived and taught brotherly love.

Everything that Jesus did, from the time He left Heaven until He returned to Heaven following His resurrection, was a demonstration of brotherly love in action. Even the time when He challenged and chastised those who considered Him as their enemy, He demonstrated brotherly love. The Sermon on the Mount (Mt. Chapt. 5-7) contains numerous examples where Jesus encouraged His followers to implement brotherly love. His chastisement of those who opposed Him was out of love. He wanted them to submit to God’s will.

The Golden Rule and many other of Jesus’ teachings run counter to human nature (love your enemy, do good to them that despitefully use you, etc.). We find in Jesus’ teachings that it is necessary to live contrary to human nature if we truly are going to demonstrate brotherly love.

No act in the history of mankind exemplified brotherly love more fully than the willingness of Jesus to give His life on Calvary and to shed His blood for the redemption of our sins. He willingly allowed Himself to be ridiculed, beaten and finally nailed to the cross. Why was He so willing to pay the debt of sin that He did not owe? Because He knew we had a debt we could not pay. He fulfilled the mission for which He was sent to earth and put brotherly love into practice.

Jesus' example of brotherly love is undoubtedly beyond the ability of human beings to match. However, there are many other examples and teachings in the New Testament that encourage us to implement the commandment to display brotherly love.

The entire chapter of I Cor. 13 emphasizes that love is more important than many of the issues that man might think to be important. The Apostle Paul reminds us that love is more important than speaking in tongues, than the gift of prophesy, than knowledge, than giving, and that even faith without love leaves us as nothing. Many things will fail but love will not.

The Apostle Paul many times, in the face of severe persecution and extreme danger, felt the love and support of fellow believers. He wrote of the willingness of Priscilla and Aquila "Who have for my life laid down their own necks:..." (Ro. 16:4). He also wrote of the encouragement he received from Onesiphorous who "...oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain: ...but...sought me out very diligently, and found me:" (2 Tim. 1:16-17). Paul not only received brotherly love, but gave it as well. He was willing to "...spend and be spent for (the Corinthians); though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved" (2 Cor. 12:15). For Paul, as it should be for us, brotherly love was unconditional. He did not require it of others before he was willing to give it. For him, it was such a natural state of affairs that he wrote to the Thessalonians that they "...need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another" (I Th. 4:9).

The Scripture makes it clear that we cannot love God if we do not love our brother. "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: ...and this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also" (I Jn. 4:20-21). Brotherly love must be more than words. It must be put into action. "But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him" (I Jn. 3:17)?

Brotherly love is a privilege. It is also a commandment. If we love our brother, we also love Christ. Jesus said "...Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Mt. 25:40).

The Beauty of Holiness

To be holy is to be spiritually pure and to be deeply reverent. To be holy requires one to be untainted by evil and to be dedicated to serving God. There are many passages of scripture that encourage us to strive for holiness. Some of the passages offer encouragement by telling us of God's holiness. "And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is. 6:3). Other passages entreat us to strive to be holy as God is. "Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy" (I Peter 1:16).

Surely as His children we recognize the privilege and duty of holiness toward God. "Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name: bring an offering, and come before him: worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (I Ch. 16:29). Although this is a very short verse, it contains many very important messages.

First, it is our duty to strive toward holiness to God. Because of His goodness and His greatness, the glory of holiness is due Him. It is a commandment, not a suggestion. The name of the Lord is worthy of glory. As His children we have the opportunity to give the Lord what is due unto Him. King David recognized that giving glory and honor to the Lord was a special privilege. "Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy hill; for the Lord our God is holy" (Ps. 99:9).

Holiness toward God is a condition of beauty almost beyond the comprehension of the human mind. In numerous places of the scripture, the servants of God tried to pen into words a description of God's holiness and they seemed to recognize that His holiness is so great that their descriptions were inadequate. Job, in his darkest hour, recognized man's inability to fully comprehend God's greatness. "...therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I know not" (Job 42:3).

After the children of Israel escaped the destruction and oppression of the Egyptians, Moses sang the praises of God's holiness as a thank offering. "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness..." (Ex. 15:11). Moses had seen the futility of serving idols and recognized that among all the gods of the universe, there was no god that demonstrated the holiness of the God of Israel. Of all the gods of Egypt and of all of the gods of the heathen whose lands they passed through, none displayed holiness toward those who worshipped them.

After the death of Eli, the children of Israel were defeated by the Philistines because they had forsaken the Lord. The Philistines captured the ark of God and took it into the house of Dagon. They suffered terrible plagues because of their sin toward God. They wanted to send the ark back to the children of Israel because they recognized the God of Israel was a holy God. "...the men of Bethshemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God..." (I Sa. 6:24)? Although they gave their god Dagon credit for delivering the children of Israel into their hands, they later came to recognize that Dagon could not stand before the holy God of Israel.

Isaiah wrote "...Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is. 6:3). He then recognized his inadequacy when he said "...Woe is me! for I am undone;..." (Is. 6:5). Isaiah felt that he was of unclean lips, unable to fully express the holiness of God.

Another important concept in recognizing the Lord's holiness is that it gives us the opportunity to bring the Lord an offering. Before Christ's sacrifice on Calvary's cross, the offerings brought to God were generally animals sacrificed as a temporary atonement for sin, which fulfilled the requirements of the old law. The offerings of man were incomplete. The blood of animals was not pure, and therefore not really

worthy of the holiness of God. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ has brought to mankind the opportunity to "...cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (II Cor. 7:1).

As a result of the suffering of our Savior on the cross, we have the opportunity to give our entire life to God. We sing in a hymn "Let your whole life be an offering" (Zion's Harp #159). Jesus emphasized how important it is to be completely submissive to God and to dedicate our lives to Him. He said "...No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk. 9:62). A partial submission to God's will and looking back to the things of the world would be to pollute the holiness of God and make "...the latter end ...worse with them than the beginning" (2 Peter 2:20).

In what other ways can we recognize the beauty of God's holiness? We need to recognize that the beauty of God's holiness is not a description of physical appearance. Outward beauty does not assure us of holiness. It is more likely that it will prevent holiness. Solomon taught us that "Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain:..." (Prov. 31:30) and Isaiah wrote that "...when we shall see him (Jesus), there is no beauty that we should desire him" (Is. 53:2).

From these instructions we can recognize that we must look beyond appearance for holiness. God was willing to send His Son to die for our sins. Jesus was willing to sacrifice all for the benefit of mankind. This willingness to show His love for us demonstrates holiness that is far more valuable than the beauty that pleases the eye.

The holiness of God and the beauty that it radiates goes beyond what the natural eye can see. Sin clouds our vision of holiness. However, a clean and purified heart allows us to see in His holiness, the God who "...was, and is, and is to come" (Rev. 4:8).

The Christian's Cross

Jesus said to His disciples "...If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mt. 16:24). He also said "And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me" (Mt. 10:38). These two admonitions make it apparent that a willingness to bear the cross for our Savior's sake is very important.

What is a cross? How can we "take up" a cross? Is every trial of a Christian a cross? At various times in history, especially at times in the Roman Empire, the cross was an instrument of death. It was an extremely cruel and painful means of death. The victim spent many hours, or even days, on the cross before being claimed by death. The term "cross" is also used to describe special challenges or burdens that individuals, especially Christians, bear at times throughout their lives.

As we look at the various references to the cross in the holy scriptures, we come to understand that taking up the cross and following Christ may not be an easy task. There is no promise in the Word of God that once we have made a commitment to take up our cross, that our life will be easier than before. In fact, we are cautioned that there may be very difficult times in store for the individual who tries to take up Christ's cross.

Jesus appointed seventy disciples that He sent to places He planned to visit later. He told them "...behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves" (Lk. 10:3). He also reminded us that before we build a tower, it would be foolish if one "...sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it" (Lk. 14:28). We can certainly understand by these messages from Christ that taking up the cross of Christ may be difficult. We know that even a full grown sheep among wolves is in great danger. But it wasn't a sheep that Christ referred to. It was a lamb. A lamb would never survive among wolves without special protection.

As we go out into the world to try to take up the cross of Christ, we will be destroyed very quickly if we do not have special protection. The only protection that we can rely upon is the protection of Jesus Christ. He will protect us if we stay close to Him.

Although God protects His servants, we have no guarantee of freedom from difficulties. God's protection only assures us that we will not receive a heavier cross than we can carry. It does not assure us that we will not face harm or even death. Are we willing to pay the cost?

We know that after we have "...received the knowledge of the truth,...and willfully sin ... there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins" (Heb. 10:26). Therefore, before we take up the cross, it is vital that we count the cost to be sure we are willing and able by the grace of God to pay the cost.

Sometimes we hear Christians talk about their "cross" as though every hardship in life is part of the cross of Christ. Nearly every human being has hardships and trials at some point in his life. This includes people who neither know nor pretend to serve God. We must distinguish between the burdens we have as human beings who are living in a sinful world and the cross we carry that is a direct result of our faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

We cannot count every trial, every burden nor every hardship that we have as "our cross". What is it that we suffer or sacrifice for the Lord? What pain do we endure, what do we give up, what offerings do we make for Christ that really causes us to do without something that we really need? Giving of our excess is hardly a cross. Do many of us really have a heavy cross?

The Apostle Paul cautioned the believers in Galatia to not confuse the “...desire to make a fair show in the flesh...” (Gal. 6:12) with the cross of Christ, “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (Gal. 6:14).

Christians and unbelievers get sick. Christians and unbelievers suffer accident and injury, face financial difficulties, lose their jobs or experience other problems related to our material or physical life. Christians and unbelievers may face depression, experience family problems, feel very lonely, or any of a number of other difficulties in life. Many of our problems are not a result of our desire to serve the one true God. Many are simply a result of life. In some situations, it may not be possible to tell if a problem is a result of our faith or if it is simply part of life.

The cross of Christ would then seem to be those hardships or trials we face that are a direct result of our faith. It is those hardships or trials that we would not have to bear if we were not a Christian.

If we suffer persecution or ridicule as a direct result of our faith, that undoubtedly is a part of our cross of Christ because we probably would not have had to endure those things if we would not have been a believer. Being willing to give up some of the entertainment and pleasures of this life may be part of our cross of Christ because in an unconverted state we probably would have participated in those activities. Our willingness to separate ourselves from the vanities and pleasures of the world may be part of our cross of Christ. As unconverted people we could blend in with the world and not feel a need to be separated from these things. Using our time and talents to serve God when we could spend more time pursuing the riches or pleasures of this life may also be a part of our cross.

Compared to many believers, our cross is so light we hardly know if we are really carrying one. We may even wonder if we have the opportunity to carry a cross. We sing in a hymn:

Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free?
No there's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me.
("Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?" Tabernacle Hymns p. 304)

Bearing the cross of Christ is a privilege as well as a duty. The cross of Christ has a cost. The cost is the difference between the hardships we bear as Christians and those that we bear that are simply a result of life in an imperfect world. How faithfully we carry our cross is one measure of our dedication to God.

Blasphemy

“But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation” (Mk. 3:29). The thought of committing a sin that hath never forgiveness strikes fear in the hearts and minds of those who love the Lord. Occasionally there are sincere souls who fear that they may have committed this unpardonable sin.

We need to understand that Jesus Christ made it very clear that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was the worst kind of blasphemy possible. “Wherefore I say unto you, all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men” (Mt. 12:31). Jesus also made it clear that speaking against the Son of Man was serious, but forgivable. “And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him, but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come” (Mt. 12:32).

Blasphemy under any circumstances is very serious. But what is blasphemy? Can we be guilty of blasphemy and not know it? Can a sincere Child of God accidentally commit blasphemy? Many of us have pondered these questions at times.

Blasphemy is defined as contemptuous speech, railing, slandering or defaming that which is sacred. Each of these terms implies a very strong statement against the one being blasphemed. Thus, in blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, one would deliberately resist and repudiate the sacred work of the Holy Spirit unto repentance and salvation.

Jesus warned the scribes, and all who would hear or read His words, of the very serious danger of attributing the sacred work of the Holy Spirit to the devil. His condemnation of their accusation was especially strong because they said the work of Jesus, which was in perfect harmony with the Holy Spirit, was of “...Beelzebub, and by the prince of devils...” (Mk. 3:22) and that “He (Jesus) hath an unclean spirit” (Mk. 3:30), rather than the Holy Spirit.

We are also instructed of the seriousness of the fallen state of a believer who does despite to the Holy Spirit. “Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace” (Heb. 10:29). Despite is a deliberate ongoing rejection of the Holy Spirit, which if continued to the end of one’s life would have the same impact on a soul as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – putting one in danger of eternal damnation.

The Apostle Paul confessed that he “...was before a blasphemer, and persecutor, and injurious:” (I Tim. 1:13). Was Paul therefore guilty of a sin that could not be forgiven? Paul’s blasphemy, which appears to have been against Jesus rather than the Holy Spirit, was very serious “...but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief” (I Tim. 1:13).

We can understand, therefore, that there is more than one way to commit blasphemy. All are serious. None of them would occur accidentally or unknowingly. One, that which is against the Holy Spirit, is unforgivable. Doing despite to the Holy Spirit and thus committing ongoing, deliberate rejection of the Holy Spirit, in effect, becomes blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Knowingly attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to the spirit of the devil is also blasphemy. These two situations leave the guilty person in danger of eternal damnation.

Blasphemy is somewhat difficult to define precisely. However, we find comfort in the scripture that sincere souls are unlikely to be guilty of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit because those who do despite to the Holy Spirit seldom feel remorse or have any concern about this great sin.

We can also take comfort in knowing that if Satan brings doubt to our minds and causes concerns that we are guilty of sin, we are not alone in this situation. We are taught that Satan will bring accusations to the brethren about their spiritual well being. “Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night” (Rev. 12:10).

Paul wrote that “...if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins,” (Heb. 10:26). Additionally, Paul wrote of those who have “...their conscience seared with a hot iron” (I Tim. 4:2). Both of these scriptures imply that the sin of the individual was willful and ongoing. Therefore, to choose to live in sin without repentance and recovery is to place ourselves on a path that could lead to rejection of faith and the danger of committing blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

From this, and the promise in the Holy Scripture “...though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Is. 1:18), we can understand that sincere souls who diligently seek to do God’s will are not likely to be guilty of a sin that cannot be forgiven. Also, we know that God “...will have all men to be saved...” (I Tim. 2:4) and that “...As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked...” (Ez. 33:11). We must, however, recognize that individuals who continue to resist the Holy Spirit, and individuals who either deliberately or through carelessness allow themselves to be drawn back into sin and remain therein are given no hope of salvation.

We know that “...now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face...” (I Cor. 13:12). We also know that God will give sufficient understanding so that sincere souls can serve Him faithfully and need not have undue fear of committing blasphemy. God will make the final judgement on who will be forgiven and who will not be forgiven. However, He has made it clear that “...to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word” (Is. 66:2). In James 4:6 we read that God “...gives grace to the humble”. Christ promised us that “My grace is sufficient for thee:...” (II Cor. 12:9) and John writes, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (I John 1:7).

Render Unto Caesar

Since the earliest days of Christianity, the followers of Jesus have had concerns about the responsibility of Christians toward governmental authority. How much of a role should government have in our lives and how much of a role should our lives have in government?

Those who lived at the time when Jesus was on earth struggled with this issue. Because the Roman government was oppressive, the children of Israel wanted desperately to be free from Roman rule. It was not popular to support the Roman officials. However, Christ did not involve himself in the political issues of the day even though there were many social injustices such as slavery. In an attempt to cause trouble for Jesus, the Pharisees asked Him if it was lawful to give tribute to Caesar. Jesus simply said "...Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Mt. 22:21).

In America we have a similar concern but from a much different perspective. We do not live under an oppressive government nor are we forbidden to worship the one true God as we believe we are directed by the Holy Bible. We appreciate this privilege and we want to retain it. It is not always easy to know exactly how we should respond to governmental authority. The Bible is very clear on some of the issues of concern, but perhaps not so clear on others.

Clearly a Christian is expected to be honest. This includes paying his share of taxes and being obedient to the law when it is not in conflict with the Bible. Jesus told the Pharisees they should pay tribute where appropriate. He also instructed His disciples to do the same. When Jesus and Peter entered Capernaum, Peter was asked if his Master paid tribute. Jesus instructed Peter to go to the sea, catch a fish and there he would "...find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for me and thee" (Mt. 17:27). Since this took place before the Pharisees raised the issue with Jesus, He clearly was not doing it to impress the Pharisees.

Concerning non-resistance, the scripture is equally clear. Jesus said "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Mt. 5:43-44).

Jesus also said "...I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Mt. 5:39). If ever there was a time that would seem to us to justify resistance, it would have been at the time of Jesus' arrest. Yet He said to Peter, "...Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Mt. 26:52).

We are instructed about non-resistance in numerous other places in the scripture. John the Baptist told the soldiers, "...Do violence to no man..." (Lk. 3:14). Paul wrote "Recompense to no man evil for evil ... as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men ... Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink:..." (Ro. 12:17-20).

The position of the Apostolic Christian Church, from its very beginning, is to refrain from bearing arms with the intent to kill another human being, thereby forever terminating his chance to find salvation.

There are examples in the Old and New Testament in which men of God reacted peaceably in the face of violence. Daniel and his friends did not obey the ungodly orders of kings. Daniel allowed himself to be cast into the den of lions and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace.

A number of the Apostles were beaten and imprisoned for their faith and yet they did not react violently to this force.

Over the years, many of our brethren entered the military service as non combatants. They served in the medical field, often facing dangerous situations unarmed as they administered help to those in need.

The government has a significant impact on our lives. It exists to maintain order and to protect its citizens. We need to obey the government as much as we can. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God" (Ro. 13:1). However, if government rules contrary to God and we cannot obey God and the government, then we must "...obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Is there any part of government in which we can safely participate? We can effectively participate in government by being a humble law abiding citizen. There are several ways in which we can participate in local government. Perhaps the best way is to find organizations that exist to help those in need and find a spiritually safe way to contribute.

At the state and national level it gets a bit more difficult. Although we may feel we can safely vote in elections and express our concerns to those who represent us, it is not too likely that we can safely run for office. The pressure to do what is "politically correct" rather than what is morally right can be very difficult to deal with.

There are state and federal programs that we may be able to safely take part in if we are careful. Examples may be agricultural, educational, medical or similar programs. If we do participate in these programs, it is very important that we follow the intent of the law. It is often very easy to find those who would advise us to stretch the law as far as possible. We must not fall into this trap. The Psalmist instructed us that "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful" (Ps. 1:1).

Perhaps the most important way we can participate in government is to remember to pray for those who hold positions of responsibility. They have many weighty decisions to make and they face pressures from many sides. They cannot always do what we would like them to do. We should not expect that everything will go our way. By praying for them we lift them up to a merciful God.

Not only should we pray for those who are in positions of authority, but also pray that we can submit to them as is appropriate. "Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience' sake" (Ro. 13:5). We must be very careful how involved we get in matters of government. If we follow the example of Jesus, we will not be led astray.

Seizing the Opportunity

We sing in one of our hymns “Ready to go, ready to stay, Ready my place to fill; Ready for service, lowly or great, Ready to do His will” (“Ready”, Hymns of Zion, p. 124). The hymn is beautiful, encouraging, and sobering. Are we really ready to do His will regardless of the task?

Jesus encouraged His followers to be ready. “Watch therefore; for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come” (Mt. 24:42). Preparation and readiness for the coming of the Lord is so important that we cannot overemphasize it.

We normally associate the need to be ready with Christ’s second coming and with the need to be prepared to give an account of our lives at any time because “...in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh” (Mt. 24:44). Certainly being prepared for Christ’s second coming and for the day we will give an account of our lives are the most important preparations anyone can make. Being prepared involves so much more than simply overcoming temptations and having a sin free life. We understand that the only way to salvation, is through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Although we can never do enough good deeds to earn our way into heaven, part of getting ready for the second coming of Christ involves being ready to respond to opportunities to serve God in this life.

There are many examples in the scripture that tell about individuals who had a special opportunity to serve. They had opportunities which, if ignored, may have cost them a great deal. Some were willing to seize the opportunity while, sadly, others allowed the opportunity to pass by without responding.

Lot, his wife, and their two daughters were warned that Sodom and Gomorrah were going to be destroyed. They were given the opportunity to save themselves if they were willing to obey God and move quickly. Lot and his two daughters were obedient but “...his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt” (Gen. 19:26). Her heart was with those things she should have left behind, and, by not seizing the opportunity that God gave her, she lost her life.

Abraham was told to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Although it must have been a long, difficult journey to the place God appointed for the sacrifice, Abraham obeyed. It was only at the last possible moment that God told Abraham that he should not harm his son. Abraham was clearly ready to listen to the voice of God and to obey it even if he didn’t fully understand God’s plan. If Abraham would not have been ready to obey God’s voice without a long period of time to think about it, the results would have been tragic. The Lord only spoke two words to get Abraham’s attention: “...Abraham, Abraham:...” (Gen. 22:11) and Abraham answered “...Here am I” (Gen. 22:11). His faithfulness and readiness to respond were rewarded immediately.

We do not always get a quick answer. Joseph had to endure years of difficulty as he was being prepared to fulfill the role God had for him. Finally, he was in a position where he had the power and the opportunity to make his brothers pay for what they had done to him. He was also in a position that would allow him to destroy them. By the grace of God, he was able to seize the opportunity presented by God to unite his family rather than destroy it.

Two disciples on the road to Emmaus were given the opportunity to visit with their risen Savior. As they walked and talked with Jesus, they didn’t recognize Him. They did, however, recognize an opportunity to do a kind deed by inviting Him to abide with them. It was only after Jesus “...took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them” (Lk. 24:30) that they knew it was Jesus.

Many other examples could be cited in which God presented His people with an opportunity to serve Him and their response proved to be a blessing for many who came after them. The Apostle Paul wrote many letters while in prison for his faith. John was exiled to an island where he was inspired to write the book of the Revelation. They could have complained about their treatment but they willingly did God's will. Many generations have benefited from their willingness to make the best of what looked like an unreasonable situation.

How does this apply to our lives? What opportunities do we have? There are almost limitless opportunities to serve God. In nearly every congregation there are brethren or friends who would appreciate a helping hand or a friendly smile. A visit or a brief note to a dear soul who cannot get out might give them a bright spot in their day.

Many times there are opportunities in our communities to help those in need. Shut ins would appreciate a meal or a few groceries brought to their home. A child who has no stability in his home may be in desperate need of an adult to give a steady hand. Nursing homes have residents who almost never have visitors. We can not always tell the impact that a visit or reading a scripture passage to them may have.

We are fortunate to have a well organized World Relief program in our brotherhood. Some are able to travel hundreds of miles to help those in need. Others can do small projects at home.

Understandably, there are times in our lives when we may not be able to reach out very far to help others. Families with several young children may neither have the time, energy, nor resources to do much for others at that time. Taking care of their children and nurturing them in the ways of the Lord is an important work. Other opportunities will come to faithful families when the children are older.

The most important task we will ever have is to prepare ourselves, by God's grace, to give an account of our lives. This involves, first and foremost, the need to be at peace with God and man. We must repent, be converted, submit to God's will and remain faithful. We also must seize the opportunity to fill our lives with "...the fruit of the Spirit ...love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance:..." (Gal. 5:22-23). By allowing God to fill our lives with these important virtues we can be useful in His vineyard.

Weights I

On the surface it would appear that being a child of God in the United States in the early part of the 21st century should be much easier than it is in other parts of the world. Also, it appears that it should be much easier now than it was at other times throughout history.

Few of us in America have ever experienced either harsh or lengthy persecution. Few of us have ever faced the possibility of death, serious injury, severe hardship or even significant inconvenience for taking a firm stand for our faith in God. We rarely hear of Christians in America who have lost their jobs, their homes or other possessions as a result of serving God as they feel instructed to do so in His Word.

We can freely assemble around His Word as often as we wish; we can openly fellowship with those of like-mind and faith; and we can publicly express our views about the one true God with no fear of serious reprisal. We can dress modestly, we are rarely required to go places where a child of God ought not to be, and the atmosphere of our homes can reflect our faithfulness to God. We are not required to take an oath of allegiance to a government official nor to an idol.

In spite of all of these blessings, Satan seems to be as effective in America as he is elsewhere in thwarting the Word of God and causing souls to stray from the straight and narrow way.

Although there are undoubtedly many factors which contribute to Satan's success, it would appear that one of the important tools that he uses to accomplish his evil purpose is to bring "weights" to our lives. If Satan can overload us with obstacles that hinder our service to God, he can reduce our effectiveness as children of God.

The Apostle Paul warned us to "...lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1). Paul recognized that in addition to easily recognizable sins, there are other tools that Satan uses to hinder a child of God from being faithful and from winning the race to receive our heavenly prize. Paul recognized that as Satan adds "weights" to our lives, he hinders our progress.

Perhaps we could define a weight as anything which hinders our service to God or slows us down in our effort to draw closer to God. Since Paul wrote of weights and sins, we can understand that weights are not necessarily evil. It is possible that an activity which is good could become a weight. Weights are issues over which we do have some control and we could therefore, remove most if not all of them from our lives.

What are the weights that we need to avoid? How can we keep them out of our lives or at least keep them from putting our salvation in jeopardy?

There are many activities which, in isolation, may not cause us to lose our salvation. However, these activities may divert our attention, waste our energy, blur our vision, put a barrier between us and God, or draw us farther from God, thereby making us more vulnerable to Satan's tactics.

When Jesus visited the home of Mary and Martha, Mary left the greater share of the work of serving to Martha. When Martha asked Jesus to tell Mary to help her with the work, Jesus said "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful; and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (Lk. 10:41-42).

Certainly Jesus did not say it was wrong for us to serve our guests. He did say that we should not be so particular about details that we allow these things to keep us from worshipping God as we should. Too much energy used on unimportant detail turned hospitality into a weight.

We must also be careful that we do not allow situations outside of our home to weigh us down. The social, political, and economic systems under which we live bring us into contact with many people. Most of us live and work in situations that expose us to significant diversity in culture, family structure, values, and religious beliefs. These areas of diversity are promoted by our government as being wonderful attributes for our communities and nation. Perhaps this is true in a political atmosphere in which globalism is promoted as the solution to world conflict.

However, from a spiritual point of view, diversity is potentially a great danger. Many of the people from diverse cultures and religions are nice people and make wonderful neighbors and co-workers. But do they draw us closer to God or do they draw us away from Him? We must be careful that we do not make the same mistake that the children of Israel made as they allowed diversity to significantly impact their lives.

Solomon was deceived by having a close association with heathen people. He married “strange women” - those of ungodly people - and “...it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart ...and Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord” (I Kings 11:4-6). Even a man as wise as Solomon could not associate with evil without having his faith weakened.

There are many other examples that could be cited in which the children of Israel allowed themselves to become allied with ungodly people and it cost them dearly. David recognized this danger and wrote “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful” (Ps. 1:1). The Psalmist cautioned us that this situation gets progressively more serious. First we walk with them, then we stand with them, and finally we sit with them.

If our acquaintances do not draw us closer to God, we must be careful. Perhaps it is not possible to avoid working with, or living by, unbelievers. We can, however, avoid becoming involved in their activities which may lead us to spiritual shipwreck. Their kindness and friendly personalities may cause us to unwisely expose ourselves to false doctrines.

This topic will be continued in the next month’s “Light From the Word”.

Weights II

The previous article addressed several issues about “weights” including a definition, a caution about Satan’s tactics in using weights, and several examples for which we need to be cautious. This article continues to address issues which can be weights to those of us who are sincerely trying to serve the one true God.

An issue that provides Satan with an opportunity to cause confusion in minds of God’s people is the extreme wickedness of the world. Satan could deceive us into thinking that we really aren’t doing anything that is so terrible. If we compare ourselves with the world, we might think that some of our temptations are rather minor and as a result, not a problem if we yield. We are cautioned in the scripture that those who compare “...themselves among themselves, are not wise” (II Cor. 10:12). It would not be difficult to sooth our conscience by finding a poor soul mired deep in sin. The only safe comparison that we have is the life of Jesus Christ. If we compare our lives with His life, we quickly realize that we have no room for the things of the world.

Most of us have been taught to be diligent in our work. Many of us have had an opportunity to receive a good education that has enabled us to learn a valuable skill or profession which in turn helps us to earn a productive job. These advantages often lead to success in the workplace. We may have the opportunity to get a series of job promotions with substantial increases in our income. This may result in our having more money than we really need.

Most of us also are blessed with many labor saving devices. We can do the chores at home with much less time and effort than was possible in the past. Therefore, we might find ourselves in the position of having time that is not filled with work related responsibilities.

Is this extra time and money a blessing or a curse? Is it a “weight” or an asset? It all depends on how we use it.

The Bible gives us numerous examples of the impact that these weights have on the souls of men. Lot “...lifted up his eyes and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere...” (Gen. 13:10) and he yielded to the temptation to choose the better land when Abraham asked him which land he wanted. As time passed he moved closer to the sin-filled cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and eventually moved into Sodom. Lot and his family became so engulfed by the weight of the wealth of the cities that he did not want to leave, even in the face of obvious danger. “...while he lingered, the men (angels) laid hold upon his hand ...and set him without the city” (Gen. 19:16). Unfortunately, even after all of these warnings, Lot’s “...wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt” (Gen. 19:26). She was destroyed by weights that tied her to sin.

A rich young man came to Jesus and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Upon hearing Jesus explain the commandments, he felt that he had kept them all. However, when Christ went on to explain that “...If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, ...and come and follow me... he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions” (Mt. 19:21-22). He wanted to do what was right but the weight resulting from his love for his wealth was too heavy for him to deal with. He allowed his material possessions to keep him from following Christ.

Many people have more leisure time than previous generations have had. If we use this time to pursue the pleasures of the world, we may find ourselves in an unfortunate situation similar to the one the prodigal son found himself. The deceitfulness of riotous living left him longing for the husks that the swine ate.

We must be careful that we do not allow the “weights” of time and money to hinder our service to God. If labor saving devices enable us to find time to serve God more effectively (more time in prayer, visiting the sick, helping the distressed, etc.), the spare time we have can be a great blessing to us. On the other hand, if we use the extra time to pursue worldly entertainment, and fill our lives with “...the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life...” (I Jn. 2:16), the spare time will be a curse.

If we can use the material blessings as we are encouraged to do in Gal. 6:10- “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith”, we can find great blessings from our material goods. However, if we use our wealth in the pursuits of the worldly pleasures “... and seeth (our) brother have need and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?” (I Jn. 3:17)

Improperly used time and wealth are undoubtedly two of the more serious weights that a child of God may have to deal with. Other weights include the temptation to follow the traditions of the world rather than the practices of the church and an unhealthy desire to be entertained.

Family vacations can be a wonderful time for parents to spend wholesome time with their children. However, if the time is used to engage ourselves in activities that we would not feel comfortable doing at home, vacations can be a problem. It can also become a problem if fathers use the time to get away for a while and leave the family at home.

There are many other weights that Satan could bring upon us. How can we be certain that we are not allowing them to hamper our service to God? If we seek out answers from the Word of God, we can gain much protection. The scripture lists activities that are referred to as the Works of the Flesh and activities that are referred to as the Fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:19-26). If we carefully examine our activities and use the discernment of the Word, we can know if our activities are likely to enhance the Works of the Flesh or the Fruit of the Spirit. Any activity that enhances the Works of the Flesh should be avoided. However, activities that enhance the Fruit of the Spirit will assuredly reduce the weights that hinder our relationship with God and draw us closer to our Heavenly goal.

All Things Work Together for Good

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Ro. 8:28). “In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (I Thes. 5:18). These are such beautiful and comforting verses of scripture when everything is going well. They are verses that all of us want to believe and apply fully to our lives. However, at a time of tragedy they can be difficult verses to embrace.

Nearly all of us at one time or another have had situations come into our lives where we have felt a heavy burden or serious heartache. When the situation passes and time brings an element of healing we can see that the experience did enable us to increase our faith by the grace of God.

But what do we do when we or a loved one face a situation where we know that there is virtually no chance for a speedy recovery? There are situations in which there seems to be no way out. How do we take comfort or how do we encourage others when there is not much hope of a brighter day? The death of a loved one who did not appear to make preparation for eternity, an accident that leaves a permanent and nearly total disability, or parents who face incredibly painful situations in raising their children are situations that do not appear to give much hope for relief.

When we are not the ones who face the affliction, it might be rather easy for us to use the opening verses to encourage others. While we certainly need to use scriptures to encourage each other, we must be careful that we do not demonstrate a lack of compassion toward those who are suffering.

There are examples in the scripture that describe situations where men of God found themselves in situations in which they felt they had no hope. King David, who was described as a man after God’s heart, at times felt completely deserted. He uttered words that are virtually identical to Christ’s words on the cross: “My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me...” (Ps. 22:1)? There was a time that he felt so low he said “...But I am a worm, and no man...” (Ps. 22:6).

Elijah was so discouraged that he “sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die: and said “...It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers” (I Ki. 19:4). Moses, Job, Joshua and others in the Old Testament also experienced times of distress and doubt.

Even John the Baptist experienced doubt. While in prison, knowing that his work was nearly complete, he questioned if Jesus was the Christ. He sent two disciples to ask Jesus “...Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?” (Mt. 11:3). In time of deep distress, John needed to be reassured that Jesus was the Christ and that the power of God was manifest in Him. At the time of His crucifixion, even Jesus felt deserted when He cried out “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mk. 15:34).

If some of the most faithful servants of God struggled from time to time, we undoubtedly will also face situations which bring doubt. How do we encourage someone who is facing extreme difficulty?

The scriptures provide us with a wide variety of options when we try to comfort those in need. When someone is in deep distress, it is very helpful to share encouraging scriptures with them. God allowed Moses to see his back parts, but not His face, when Moses needed extra strength (Ex. 33:23). In blessing the children of Israel Moses reminded them that God “...shall thrust out the enemy from before thee;...” (Deut. 33:27). David, though often distressed, wrote “...in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion;...” (Ps. 27:5) and “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1).

Jesus, after telling Peter that he would deny his master three times, comforted him when He said, “Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me” (Jn. 14:1). At that time Jesus knew His disciples needed comfort. He also knew there were occasions when it was necessary to “...upbraid(ed) them with their unbelief and hardness of heart;...” (Mk. 16:14). Jesus knew when to upbraid and when to encourage. We also need to work on learning to discern when someone needs chastisement and when they need encouragement, and then follow the appropriate scriptures.

If a sincere soul is trying to do God’s will and they are carrying a grievous burden, they hardly need to be made to feel even worse by inappropriately using scripture that will add to their burden. Paul recognized that there will be times when we are almost overcome by distress when he wrote “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed;” (II Cor. 4:8-9).

It is not a sin to feel heavily burdened at times. It is not that we do not trust God. It is more likely that a soul is simply going through a time of struggle that will ultimately make him stronger and he needs to be encouraged.

We do not always understand why we face certain trials. We are sometimes allowed to go through difficult situations when, from our perspective, it may not make sense. We do not always see accurately but the time will come when we will. “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (I Cor. 13:12).

If we can encourage and uphold others as they go through dark valleys of distress, if we can help them retain a measure of faith when all seems helpless, if we can provide a measure of hope when there seems to be none, then by the grace of God, the time will come that they can see that all things do work together for good and that we can give thanks in everything.

Seeking the Lost

There were ninety and nine that safely lay
In the shelter of the fold,
But one was out on the hills away,
Far off from the gates of gold
Away on the mountains wild and bare,
Away from the tender Shepherd's care.
"The Ninety and Nine",
Tabernacle Hymns, p. 231

How many saved souls are enough? How many lost souls are too many? No doubt if someone would tell us on a Sunday afternoon that by the next Sunday morning there would be ninety-nine converts in our congregation during that week we could hardly believe it. If it actually came to pass, we would be almost overcome with joy.

But how long would it take after we heard of that large number before we would think of one more dear soul - perhaps from our own family - who was still away from the tender Shepherd's care? How long would it be before we acknowledge that there are more souls who desperately need a Savior? Until all are saved it is not enough. If there is one soul lost, it is too many.

What is our duty and how do we go about seeking the lost? It would seem as though there are two issues here - the duty of the saved to seek the lost and a willingness of the lost to be found.

Jesus set the example for all of us to follow in seeking the lost. He very clearly explained His mission to His disciples. "For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost" (Mt. 18:11). He also explained to the Pharisees that it was necessary to go to those who are in need. The Pharisees criticized Jesus because He ate with publicans and sinners, something which they felt was beneath their dignity. Jesus said "...They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick...for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Mt. 9:12-13). Although we do need to seek those who are lost, we must be careful that we do not go to places which may cause us to sin. Jesus warned us that we should not "...cast ye your pearls before swine,..." (Mt. 7:6).

How much effort is one soul worth? Again, we have an answer from Jesus, "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth,..." (Lk. 15:7). He also said "For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away" (Lk.9:25)?

Therefore, we can readily understand that Jesus' mission was to seek the lost, and He placed the value of one soul above all other things. There is nothing of the material world that is worth gaining at the risk of losing our soul.

As Jesus sent His disciples out to preach the Word, He emphasized the importance of spreading the gospel. He said "...The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few:..." (Lk. 10:2j). After His resurrection, Jesus gave His disciples the Great Commission: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:" (Mt. 28:19).

Does this mean that all of us who are saved should go to the foreign mission field? The scripture makes it very clear that we have different gifts and different callings. "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues" (I Cor. 12:28). This does not mean that some have less value

than others. We just have different functions. “For the body is not one member, but many...God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him...those members of the body,... which seem to be more feeble, are necessary:...and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness” (I Cor. 12:14-23).

How can brethren safely, effectively serve God and seek the lost? In the 1993 Memorandum the following points were explained as they relate to the missionary policy of the Apostolic Christian Church:

- We encourage the sharing of God’s Word by all members of our church with anyone who has an interest in reading it.
- We encourage all members to invite their friends, neighbors and associates to our churches.
- We encourage members who find it feasible, to move to existing Apostolic Christian communities, especially those that are small.
- We encourage, especially where there is a nucleus of brethren and/or friends, the starting of new churches in areas within the United States.
- We encourage those of our members who feel a calling to assist in the establishment of Apostolic Christian Churches in foreign countries to work cooperatively with the Elder Body and the Mission Committee. For those who have this calling, it is necessary that they teach, through their words and lives, the same doctrine as our church, and work separately from other groups or faiths.

We can see therefore, that the responsibility and the opportunity to seek the lost are great. We who have been fortunate enough to hear the message of salvation must be willing to share it.

What is the responsibility of those who are lost? They must be willing and they must be available. In the aforementioned hymn the lost sheep made its whereabouts known. “Out in the desert He heard its cry, Sick and helpless, and ready to die;” (Verse 3). The lost must not run away and hide. It was only after the prodigal son was willing to humble himself and start home that “...his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Lk. 15:20).

Unfortunately, not all lost souls are willing to be helped. The rich young man was available, but not willing. When Jesus told him how he could be saved “...he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions” (Mt. 19:22). The price was too great and, at least at that time, the young man passed up the opportunity for salvation. Jesus did not run after him and try to negotiate a different offer. He was always available to those in need, but He did not alter the plan of salvation to make it suit the young man’s desires.

We have a great responsibility to share the gospel. The lost have a responsibility to receive it. God has called us to serve Him in many ways. The rich fellowship into which we were born affords us incomprehensible opportunities that cannot be taken for granted. Jesus said “...unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required...” (Lk. 12:48).

God's Promises to the Afflicted

The Children of God are not promised a life free of affliction. We are told that there may be hard trials as we serve God: "...behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves" (Lk. 10:3). David, described as a man after God's own heart, knew what it was like to suffer extreme distress. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me,..." (Ps. 22:1)? The remainder of the Psalm details the grief, the helplessness, and the fear that David felt as he struggled to deal with his affliction.

Ten of the eleven faithful disciples suffered a martyr's death and John was banished to the isle of Patmos to live in exile. Jesus, in His most extreme hour of affliction, cried out with virtually the same words that David uttered. "...Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mk. 15:34). Therefore, we should not be surprised if we suffer affliction for our service to God. Peter confirms this in his writing: "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy" (I Peter 4:12-13).

What, then, does a child of God have to look forward to? Is there no hope of escape? Is there neither comfort nor relief for those who suffer for their faith? Although there may be trials, the Lord has many promises for His people which give us hope and courage.

There are situations that we may face in which immediate relief is not promised, but we are promised the grace and strength to persevere. Paul suffered a thorn in the flesh and he fervently asked the Lord for relief. Rather than receiving relief, he was told "...My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness..." (II Cor. 12:9). We will not always see the path to relief as quickly as we may wish, but we will, by God's grace, be able to uphold our faith through severe trials.

Does this mean we can never expect nor even hope for relief? We are promised deliverance and we are promised a brighter day - but it will be according to God's time table, not ours. "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all" (Ps. 34:18-19). David also wrote "For his anger endureth but a moment;... but joy cometh in the morning" (Ps. 30:5).

Therefore, we know that God will help us through our afflictions. We can make ourselves more available for His help if we are of a proper attitude. We know that "...God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble" (Ja. 4:6). If we humbly approach God's throne of mercy and show true contrition for our sins, God will hear our prayers.

We also are promised comfort in our distresses by being in God's presence. If, for whatever reason, God chooses to not remove our affliction, we have the comfort of knowing He will be with us as we pass through our trial. "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee" (Is. 43:2). God's presence in times of affliction is assured.

Afflictions in this life may seem long and harsh. There are times when we really do not see the solution or an end to the trial. Loved ones who are sick do not always recover even if they are not old. Financial set backs may never be completely removed. Consequences of sin may remain with us long after we have repented and been forgiven. Satan is at times permitted to bring distress that we may never understand. Job probably never understood what was happening to him, but he trusted in God and "...the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning:..." (Job 42:12).

We do have the promise of help in this life even if the problem isn't resolved as we may wish it to be. Sometimes, after having dealt with an affliction for some time, and wondering what the end will be, we can look back and see there really was benefit in our affliction. We are promised that we will actually reach the point where we can say with conviction that "...we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Ro. 8:28) and that we truly can "In every thing give thanks..." (I Th. 5:18).

In addition to receiving help in this life, we also have the assurance that those who can endure affliction to the end have a promise of God that will reward us eternally if we truly believe in God. Shortly before Jesus' trial, when He told His disciples that they would desert Him, He also assured them that in the end, they would prevail. "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you" (Jn. 14:1-2).

In the book of Revelation, those who endured great tribulation are given a special promise: "...These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14). God also promises to be a comforter at the time of final deliverance for those who endured to the end. "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

There are many trials and afflictions in this life. However, there is much encouragement to endure. "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair, Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body" (II Cor. 4:8-10).

Redeeming Our Time

“The time flies on; and death draws nigh;...” (“Redeeming Our Time” Zion’s Harp p. 188). Each of us knows that we have limited time on earth. Solomon wrote that there is “A time to be born, and a time to die;...” (Ec. 3:2). Time can be defined as the interval between two events. The time in question, of course is our life. What we do with that time will determine where we spend eternity.

What does it mean to redeem our time? How can we redeem this valuable commodity? “Redeem” has a variety of meanings. Perhaps the meanings that are applicable here are to convert into something valuable and to set free or to ransom.

The scripture reminds us that our time is short and we need to use it wisely. The Psalmist wrote “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom” (Ps. 90:12). Solomon wrote “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;” (Ec. 12:1). Paul wrote “But this I say, brethren, the time is short:...” (I Cor. 7:20).

As children we may have thought that eighty years was a long time. However, those who attain a high age can readily identify with the Psalmist who understood the brevity of life. “The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, ... for it is soon cut off, and we fly away” (Ps. 90:10).

Since our allotted time is short, we want to use it wisely. The scripture gives us guidance on how we can accomplish this.

Paul wrote “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” (Eph. 5:15-16). Circumspectly means to give careful attention to all the circumstances that relate to an action or judgment.

Although we may not be able to see all the circumstances that relate to what we think or do, God gives us enough insight to help us make good decisions. A fool would give little attention to the results of his behavior. He would do what appeals to the flesh and then suffer the consequences of his decision. Since “The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God...” (Ps. 14:1), we should not be surprised that he would not use his time wisely.

A wise man, however, will give careful consideration to what he is planning to do so he can weigh the likely results. The wise man may not be able to consider every detail nor understand all of the potential results of a decision, “For now we see through a glass darkly;...” (I Cor. 13:12), but he will, by the grace of God, see many potential pitfalls that must be avoided.

God has given us a variety of tools to use that will help us make wise decisions including prayer, reading His Word, and speaking to faithful brethren.

Through prayer we have a special opportunity to seek help in learning to use our time wisely. There are many examples of prayers in the scripture, in which wise men of old entreated the Lord for wisdom and guidance. Because Solomon recognized that he needed help to rule the people wisely, he entreated God to “Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart ..., that I may discern between good and bad:...” (I Ki. 3:9).

Job sought wisdom in his time of distress. He asked “But where shall wisdom be found?... Man knoweth not the price thereof; neither is it found in the land of the living” (Job 28:12-13). He acknowledged that “God understandeth the way thereof, and he knoweth the place thereof. For he looketh to the ends of the whole earth, and seeth under the whole heaven; (Job 28:23-24).

As Paul was giving Timothy instructions, he told him “Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding...” (II Tim. 2:7). Paul knew that true understanding comes from the Lord. What we say, by the grace of God, may be worth considering, but understanding comes from the Lord.

The Lord also helps us gain understanding by providing faithful people in our lives. Many of us were blessed with parents who studied the Word of God and applied it to their lives. The scripture explains the impact that parents should have on their children. “And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (Deut. 6:7).

The thoroughness of this command makes it clear that the time fathers spend in instructing their children is very valuable. “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Pr. 22:6).

We do not find scriptural references that advise us to simply fill our time. We do, however, find numerous admonitions against slothfulness. The servant who hid his lord’s money was called “... wicked and slothful ...” and was admonished for not having “...put my money to the exchangers,...” (Mt. 25:26-27). The Apostle Paul rebuked those who did not put their time to good use. “For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies” (II Thess. 3:11).

We also know that our time must be used to free ourselves from Satan. Jesus paid the ransom that was required to free us from sin. We must make good use of our time and take advantage of this opportunity.

Timothy was encouraged by the Apostle Paul to “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (II Tim. 2:15). Paul also applied the need for diligence to himself. “Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13-14).

The time we have is limited. The energy and resources are also limited. Let us not waste the most valuable resource God has given us. Let us redeem our time for we “...know not when the master of the house cometh,...” (Mk. 13:35).

Aligning Our Will With God's Will

“...O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Mt. 26:39). Three times, as Jesus faced his trial and crucifixion, He prayed this prayer. Jesus wanted to do God's will, but He also wanted to escape the awful ordeal that He faced. By being totally submissive to God's will, Jesus won the victory over Satan and accomplished the mission for which He was sent to the earth. He paid the price for our sins and opened the way to salvation through faith in His shed blood for all who will come to the knowledge of the truth.

Jesus was in a battle of the will of the flesh versus God's will. As God's children we also often face a battle of our will versus God's will. How can we win this battle? How can we be sure we know God's will? How can we be sure we have our will in perfect agreement with God's will?

Human nature would have it that God would change His will to become more like our will. If we insist long enough, God may give us our will even when it is contrary to His will. When the children of Israel were dissatisfied in the wilderness, they complained and tempted God. “And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul” (Ps. 106:15).

Hezekiah was sick and was told to get his house in order because he was going to die. He pleaded with God to give him more time. God added fifteen years to his life. During that period of time he had a son Manassah who became king and did evil in the sight of the Lord. Would Hezekiah have been better off to have accepted God's will?

To learn God's will we must be teachable. “Teach me to do thy will; for thou art my God: thy Spirit is good;...” (Ps. 143:10). When Samuel was very young he was called to serve God. He didn't recognize God's voice because “...Samuel did not yet know the Lord, neither was the word of the Lord yet revealed unto him” (I Sam. 3:7). After the third call, Eli instructed Samuel to listen to the Lord and to answer “...Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth...” (I Sam. 3:9). Samuel was ready to learn.

Samuel's readiness to learn didn't all develop the night the Lord called. He spent years as Eli's servant learning about serving God. When the time came for Samuel to learn more about God's will, he was ready. The task that he was given was very difficult, but he was willing to carry it out.

Saul thought he was doing God's will. On the road to Damascus he had to learn a very difficult lesson. He was going in the wrong direction. After he was struck down and became temporarily blind, he was willing to listen. “...Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?...” (Acts 9:6). He wasn't given a full explanation of what was before him. He was to go to Damascus and receive further instruction. Although he began to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ almost immediately, he did need to take time to learn about God's will.

In his letter to the Galatians (Chap. 1:15-19), Paul explained that he learned to do God's will, not by flesh and blood but through God's revelation of His Son to him. He went to Arabia, then returned to Damascus, then after three years he went to see Peter. Throughout his Christian life he learned that he had to rely upon God in order to do His will.

To serve God and do His will, we must be willing to have a submissive attitude. We must be sure we are of a mind to say “Speak Lord, for thy servant heareth” rather than “Listen Lord, for thy servant speaketh”.

There are some things we can do to help us align our will to God's. First of all, we must have the desire to do His will. This requires submission and to be "...in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart;" (Eph. 6:5-6).

We can also learn to know if our will is in line with God's will by comparing our will with the Word of God. Does our will enhance the likelihood that the fruit of the Spirit will be evident in our lives or does it enhance the likelihood that one or more of the works of the flesh will be evident in our life?

If we feel we are being led of a spirit, can we be sure it is God's will? First of all, we must be certain that it is God's Spirit that is leading us. Our emotions may cause us to think a certain course of action is God's will. Our emotions are not always reliable. There are many spirits in the world. Only God's Spirit will lead us to His will. Therefore, any time we may question which spirit is leading us we must discern the spirits. Christ chastised the people who could "...discern the face of the sky and of the earth; but how is it that ye do not discern this time?" (Lk. 12:56).

Since God's Spirit will never contradict God's Word, we have a guide that is steady and sure. If we feel led of a spirit, we can discern if it is God's Spirit by comparing it with His Word. This is neither easy nor is it fast. Sometimes we need to spend a great deal of time and effort in God's Word to guide us safely. Jesus instructed the Jews to "Search the scriptures;..." (Jn. 5:39). Paul instructs Timothy to "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15). Searching and studying both imply that time and effort are required. Our "instant" society often does not encourage a thorough analysis of an issue.

If we go up against our nature and develop an attitude of humility and submission, by God's grace, we are more likely to be, in line with God's will. Who is it that we are trying to please? What are the likely results of our decisions? Are we likely to cast a stumbling block in our brother's way? We know that "...every knee shall bow to me (the Lord), and every tongue shall confess to God" (Ro. 14:11). We know from the Word of God that there are things of the world that will condemn us. If we keep these things out of our life, we will be happy. "...Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth" (Ro. 14:22).

Therefore, if we walk by faith, we can discern whether our will is aligned with God's will or if we are trying to align God's will to ours, for we are taught "...whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Ro. 14:23).

The House of God

“I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord” (Ps. 122:1). Entering the House of God should be a special time for all of us. As we enter a building that has been dedicated to the worship of God, we would do well to remind ourselves just how special it is to be able to do so. The Lord reminded Solomon of the sacredness of a house that has been dedicated to the worship of the one true God. “And the Lord said unto him, I have heard thy prayer and thy supplication,...I have hallowed this house,...to put my name there for ever;...” (I Ki. 9:3). Jesus also reminded us of the importance of keeping God’s house holy when He said “...Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves” (Mk. 11:17).

What does the House of God provide for us? Do we count it a special privilege to be permitted to enter the House of God? Undoubtedly there are many blessings we receive from attendance at God’s House, and while we may not be able to address them all, it would appear that among the more significant are the following: it is a holy place sanctified for worship, a place of comfort, a place of instruction, a place of refuge, a place where we can receive special blessings, and a place where we can feel the examples of the life of Christ.

Many of us who have been privileged to attend the dedication services of one or more of our churches can remember the special feeling that we had as we felt God’s Spirit sanctifying, or setting apart, that building for the specific purpose of worshipping God. We knew it was not to be used for entertainment, for business, nor for any other worldly activity. It was dedicated as a holy place that was not to be polluted by the world. As a result of this special sanctification by God, we know that when we enter His house our behavior must be that of a humble, “...meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price”(I Peter 3:4).

The House of God is also a place where one can seek comfort and solace. Hannah, Samuel’s mother, was greatly distressed that she had no children. So “...year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord...” (I Sam. 1:7), she “...poured out (her) soul before the Lord” (I Sam. 1:15). Eli told her to “...Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him” (I Sam. 1:17).

Anna, a prophetess of old age “...departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day” (Lk. 2:37). Both of these faithful women of God sought solace and comfort in the House of God. Both were rewarded. Hannah was blessed with a son and Anna was permitted to see the Savior.

We, too, can find comfort in the House of God by learning from the experiences of Hannah and Anna. They obviously spent more time in the House of God than was required for regular worship service. To get the full measure of comfort from being in the House of God, we would do well to make sure we are there well before the service begins and remain for some time after the service ends.

If we arrive early, we can enjoy the blessings of quietly communing with God and allowing God to prepare our hearts and minds to receive a blessing from God. Just sitting quietly in the sanctuary for a time before the singing begins can bring a peaceful and calm countenance. If we rush in at the last minute and leave immediately after the conclusion of the service, we will miss much of the day’s blessings.

The House of God is a place of instruction. The prophet Micah wrote “...come, and let us go to ... the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways...” (Micah 4:2). As Jesus was being accused by the enemies of His doctrine, He told them “...I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple...” (Jn. 18:20). The disciples also taught the Word of God in His house. Paul “...entered into the synagogue, and reasoned with the Jews” (Acts 18:19).

We also have the opportunity to be instructed out of God's Word when we are in His house. When we go to the House of God, do we go with a great desire to learn? Are we hungry? Are we thirsty for His Word? If we think we have no need or if we have no desire, we will gain very little. When the children of Israel were "Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses" (Ps. 107:5-6).

We can find refuge in the House of God. King Hezekiah was in deep affliction when his enemies threatened him. He "...rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord" (Is. 37:1). Just as Hezekiah was able to find refuge, so can we who are seeking to draw closer to God. Jesus told of two men who went to the temple. One went to boast of all that he accomplished. The other went to seek solace and forgiveness. He could only utter seven words: "...God be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk. 18:13). He went to his house justified because he went to the House of God to seek refuge.

In addition to seeking refuge, we can seek a blessing. David in Psalm 122 reminds us of blessings that are available in the House of the Lord. Among the opportunities we have include praying for peace and for faith, giving thanks, and seeking good for others. Certainly it is possible to pray for these things at home or elsewhere, but there is a special blessing in being permitted to seek blessings in the House of God.

A special blessing that we can have from being in the House of God is to fellowship with those who are trying to follow Christ's example and to encourage each other. Paul encourages us in "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together..." that we might exhort one another. As we fellowship together with loved ones of like mind and faith, we are reminded of how fortunate we are to have a brotherhood who cares for us.

There are many reasons why we would want to go to the House of God. Surely there are many reasons that are beyond the scope of a short article. As we contemplate going to church, a place that is dedicated to so great a God as we have, we should look forward to being in a holy place where the Spirit of God dwells, and where we can learn more about the special privileges we have.

Self-Examination

There are numerous exhortations in the scriptures that encourage us to examine ourselves. As Jeremiah was lamenting his sins and the sins of God's people, he wrote "Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord" (Lam. 3:40). In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasized the importance of self-examination when He told the people to "...first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (Mt. 7:5). The Apostle Paul wrote "...let a man examine himself,..." (I Cor. 11:28) and "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith..." (II Cor. 13:5).

What does it mean to examine oneself? To examine means to search or scrutinize with a view to discover truth. Therefore, to examine ourselves requires a thorough searching to discover the truth about ourselves.

What is the purpose of self examination? What value does it bring to a child of God? In the scriptures that were cited above, there appears to be at least four different reasons for self-examination. Although there are differences among the reasons given, all are related.

In the first case Jeremiah recognized that the children of Israel had strayed far from the Lord. In the opening chapters of Lamentations, Jeremiah bewails the sad state of affairs in Jerusalem. He grieves over the afflictions that are placed upon the children of Israel because of their sins. "Jerusalem hath grievously sinned; therefore she is removed..." (Lam. 1:8). He confessed his sins and the sins of the people. He ends with a prayer, pleading for God's mercy, recognizing that they have strayed far from the Lord.

The purpose of Jeremiah's examination was to encourage the children of Israel to return to serving the one true God. "Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord" (Lam. 3:40). Jeremiah knew that as long as the people did not serve God, their lives would be very difficult. He also knew "The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him" (Lam. 3:25). Therefore, if the people would examine themselves they would find they had strayed from the Lord and could again receive the blessings of the Lord if they changed their lifestyles.

When Jesus chastised the people who were self-righteous, He instructed them that because of their sins they would not be able to help others who were in need. They must first remove the beam, a large piece of wood, from their eye so they could see clearly to remove the mote, a small particle, out of their brother's eye.

If we want to be spiritually helpful to others, we must first make sure we are spiritually healthy ourselves. To do otherwise would be to have the "...blind lead the blind (and they), both shall fall into the ditch" (Mt. 15:14). The Pharisees believed that they were righteous and had no sin. "Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth" (Jn. 9:41). They refused to receive help, therefore, they were unable to be helpful to others.

Paul explained the importance of self-examination in relation to taking part in the Lord's supper. As we remember the Lord's broken body and His shed blood, we are reminded of the seriousness of making preparation before taking part in communion. Surely children of God would not want to pollute the Lord's body or His blood by partaking with sin in our lives. If we eat or drink unworthily, we eat and drink "...damnation to(ourselves), not discerning the Lord's body" (I Cor. 11:29). Are we unable to tell the difference between the Lord's body or blood and sin? We can make this discernment if we examine ourselves.

Consequently, we have the opportunity to escape the fate of the world if we are willing to complete this self-examination. Who among us would want to be judged and condemned with the world? If we are willing to examine ourselves and be "...chastened of the Lord, ...we should not be condemned with the world" (I Cor. 11:32). By a careful self-examination in the light of God's Word and by then receiving the cleansing chastisement of the Lord, we can be found worthy to participate in Holy Communion. By being found worthy does not mean we have done so well we have earned the privilege of communion, but we have put our life in line with the Word of God.

The fourth reason for self-examination is to determine whether we have strayed from the narrow path that leads to eternal life. Satan is very cunning. He has many ways that he uses to cause confusion. One of these ways is to get us to gradually change from being in close communion with God to having veered off the path.

It is very difficult for us to recognize when we may be gradually drifting away from God. Small changes may not be noticed for some time. If we continue to drift slowly away from God, and if we have no check points we could eventually go too far. However, if on a regular basis we compare our lives to the Word of God we can easily recognize when we have gone astray. God's Word does not change. God does not change the principles of right and wrong, nor does He change what is required for salvation. Therefore by looking into the unchanging Word of God, we can readily tell if we have moved away from God.

What are the results of effective self-examination? One who is willing to hold his life up to the light of God's Word and is willing to say "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23-24) will find a blessing in self examination. God does not require more than we can do. He understands the trials Satan brings before us. Therefore, He has provided a method whereby we can remain true to Him and He is willing to help us accomplish it.

Self-examination is not always easy, nor is it always pleasant. However, the results of self-examination are such that, if conducted properly, will have eternal benefits. It can help us get back to the Lord if we have strayed. We can be more useful to God and His people. We can be assured that we are found worthy to take part in Holy Communion and we can detect if we are straying from God's plan for our life while there is still an opportunity to correct it.

Divine Protector

As the world grows more evil and as the inventions of man seem to make it easier for Satan to prevail, it sometimes brings fear to those who love and serve God. As we observe the advances of technology, the scriptural warning "...that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name" (Rev. 13:17) becomes more realistic with each passing day.

How does a child of God deal with these issues? Is it no longer possible for Christians to escape the wrath and deceit of Satan?

From the beginning of time God's people have been faced with these concerns and with the need to discern between the truth of God's Word and the deceitfulness of Satan. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve faced a similar problem. King Saul, as he watched the approach of the Philistines, faced the same problem. Peter, at the time of Christ's trial, also struggled with Satan's power of deceit.

The Word of God, His promises to His people to provide comfort and strength in times of trouble, and the power of prayer have not changed. God is still in control, His promises are true, and He does provide for His people. Although there is no promise that we will not face adversity, we are promised "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (II Cor. 12:9). God will not allow more to come upon us than what He will give strength to overcome.

The scripture has many examples of situations in which one or more of God's people felt completely overwhelmed by their circumstances. God provided them a way of escape, "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him" (II Chr. 16:9).

When Cain was placed under a curse after he killed Abel, he said that his burden was too great to bear. Even under these circumstances, when someone is willing to seek God's help, there is a promise. God set a mark upon Cain to protect him from his enemies.

When the children of Israel were leaving Egypt, the Egyptians pursued them. They were terrified when they saw the Egyptian horses and chariots. They cried unto the Lord and complained unto Moses because of their distress. "And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will shew to you today:... The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace" (Gen. 14:13-14). God delivered them out of the hands of the Egyptians and protected them as they safely crossed the Red Sea.

Many times throughout the history of the children of Israel, they forsook God and found themselves in deep distress. Psalm 107 reminds us a number of times about their difficulties and the problems it caused them. We are also reminded that "...when they cried unto the Lord in their trouble ...he delivered them out of their distresses" (verses 7,13,19,28). The Divine Protector saved them from their distress when they turned away from their sin and served the one true God. How much better would it have been for them if they would have remained faithful to God! "Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!" (Ps. 107:8).

When the King of Israel was angry at Elisha, he sent horses, chariots and a host of men to take Elisha. Elisha's servant was afraid when he saw the forces that were against them. Elisha encouraged him to not be afraid. He also prayed that God would open the eyes of the servant. "...and he saw: and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha" (II Ki. 6:17). Elisha prayed that

his enemies would be smitten with blindness. He then led them to Samaria where their eyes were opened. He then gave them bread and water and sent them to their master. God prevented the bands of Syrians from returning to Israel.

Many other Old Testament examples of Divine Protection could be cited. Gideon, with a band of three hundred men, defeated the Midianites. David, when pursued by Saul's army, was given special Divine Protection. Daniel was protected in the lion's den. His three friends were protected from the fire. The list could go on for some time.

The New Testament also contains many examples of God's Divine Protection for His people. Although many of the early followers of Jesus eventually died a martyr's death after their work was completed, in many situations they were delivered out of distress. As Paul neared the end of his ministry, he encouraged the Corinthians to hold fast to their faith. He recounted for them the suffering he endured for the gospel of Jesus Christ. (II Cor. 11:23-28).

Do these promises of the Divine Protector still hold for us today? Jesus promised us, "...That in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33).

Throughout the New Testament, there is promise of victory to the overcomer. The Apostle Paul wrote "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Ro. 8:35,37).

We also have reassurance in other scriptures that there is protection for God's people. "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith" (I Jn. 5:4). To each of the seven churches that John referred to in Revelation, there is a promise to overcomers. He closes His message to the churches with a very special promise. "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I overcame, and am sit down with my Father in His throne" (Rev. 3:21).

There are many promises that we have in the Word of God that give us courage to face the future. We know that there are many who have given their lives for the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are also many who have carried very heavy burdens, almost beyond endurance. We are not promised an easy way but we are promised that the Divine Protector will not leave us without hope. "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ro. 8:38-39).

Give Thanks Unto the Lord - I

“Now thank we all our God with heart, and hand and voices” (Zion’s Harp, No. 236). Many of our hymns kindly remind us that we have so many reasons to thank God. The scripture encourages us many times to give thanks unto the Lord and gives us many reasons why we should be thankful. Numerous Psalms begin by encouraging us to give thanks or praise unto the Lord. “O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good: for his mercy endureth forever” (Ps. 107:1). “Praise ye the Lord. O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good:...” (Ps. 106:1).

Although it would never be possible to list every reason for giving thanks and for praising the Lord, we are reminded in a hymn that there is much to be gained by spending some time and energy to focus upon the reasons we should thank God and to count our blessings. “When upon life’s billows you are tempest tossed, when you are discouraged, thinking all is lost, count your many blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done” (Count Your Blessings; Hymns of Zion, p. 116).

Among the many reasons to thank God are His power, His grace, and His mercy. We should also thank Him for sending His Son, for His Word, wisdom, compassion, orderliness, goodness, presence, love and protection. Other reasons to give thanks are for deliverance, triumph over Satan, victory over death and sin, forgiveness, His people, the Holy Spirit, life, sustenance and many others. The implications of the concepts in this list, which could be much longer, are almost beyond human comprehension.

To think of the power of a God as great as the one true God is somewhat overwhelming. His power to create the universe and all that it contains is evidence of a loving and gracious God. The earth is but a dot in the vast universe, yet it contains all that we need for life and many luxuries that go far beyond “need”. The air we breath, the water we drink and the food that is available are given in abundant measure. The other planets would not sustain human life for one or more reasons. In addition to providing needs, the earth contains many of God’s creations that make it a pleasant place to live. The vast array of color, the numerous kinds of plants and animals, the variety of formations and the seasonal changes on the earth all provide us with examples of God’s goodness and power.

In spite of the magnificance and detail of the earth, God’s power is so great that it took Him only six days to create it. Add to this the power of God to attend to all the details of keeping the earth and the life thereon going, the vastness of the universe, and the interrelatedness of the parts of the universe. Thus, we can soon understand that God’s power is reason to give thanks.

Beyond the physical needs that He provides are many spiritual blessings. There are many times when we need love and help that we do not deserve. There are other times when we realize that we have failed to achieve the standards of His Holy Word. In the times of need He provides us with “...an abundance of grace...” (Ro. 5:17) that gives us love we do not deserve and help to serve Him in ways far beyond what we could do ourselves.

The Apostle Paul prayed fervently that God would remove his affliction. God’s reply to this request was “...My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness...” (II Cor. 12:9). He was not granted relief but he was granted the assurance of strength to endure. There are times when we may be too persistent in making a request that is not good for us. God may give “...them their request; but (send) leanness into their soul” (Ps. 106:15). We must be thankful that God does have the compassion to say “no” to us from time to time because He does not want us to experience spiritual leanness.

Many times we fail and realize that justice would require that we pay a penalty for inappropriate behavior. In times such as these we should thank God "...that (we) may find mercy of the Lord in that day" (II Tim. 1:18). We can be thankful that He withholds from us many hardships that we deserve as we err from time to time.

Although His great love for us is manifested in many ways, it is demonstrated most powerfully in His willingness to send His Son to earth to fulfill the old law and to open the way of salvation to those who will submit to His call and plan. He devised a plan of salvation that had a cost beyond our ability to pay. Knowing we could never pay the price, He sent His Son to pay it for us. This gift of His Son fulfilled a promise contained in His Word that has been preserved for us for thousands of years.

In addition to being thankful for His Son, we rejoice in knowing that He inspired faithful servants of old to write and to preserve His Word. His Word provides us with all of the instructions we need to work out our salvation. The unchanging stability of His Word enables us to know what is expected of us to truly be His child. He didn't make His Word so complicated that we can't understand it, nor does He change it every so often to make it impossible to know what is required. We can be thankful that His Word is so powerful that its truth and application fit all people for all times. Its timelessness makes it just as applicable today as it was at the time it was written.

The words that man writes need to be revised and refocused frequently and there is no end to what man will write. "...of making many books there is no end..." (Ec. 12:12). "But the word of the Lord endureth for ever..." (I Peter 1:25).

God's wisdom and His compassion assure us that He will provide for all our needs and yet withhold what is harmful if we will allow Him to do so. He knows our needs and in His infinite wisdom He "...shall supply all (our) need..." (Phil. 4:19) and eliminate from us some of the things that we desire that may harm us. He does not always grant our request, but "...no good thing will be withheld from them that walk uprightly" (Ps. 84:11).

The next article in "The Light From the Word" will continue this topic.

Give Thanks Unto the Lord - II

In the previous article in “Light From the Word” a number of reasons for us to give thanks unto the Lord were reviewed. This article is a continuation of that theme.

Our lives would be so very confusing if God would not have created orderliness in the world. We know that spring will follow winter, day will follow night, and harvest will follow seedtime. “While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease” (Ge. 8:22). The physical laws that He has set in order make many things in our lives very predictable. Without this predictability (gravity, freezing, boiling, etc.), many of the things we take for granted would not be possible and would, therefore, remove many of the conveniences we enjoy. We can count on the orderliness of God’s creation knowing that it is good.

How can we possibly show enough appreciation for the goodness of God? Jesus reminded us of the specialness of God’s goodness when He said “...there is none good but one, that is God:” (Mt. 19:17). Perhaps we can come close to appreciating God’s goodness by meditating on some of the evidence of His goodness that is contained in His Word. “O taste and see that the Lord is good...” (Ps. 34:8). “The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble...” (Na. 1:7) and “...knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance” (Ro. 11:22). These three passages, which are only a few of the many that could be cited, instruct us that the goodness of God can be a blessing to us physically (by what we taste and see), emotionally (by being a stable force to us in time of trouble) and spiritually (by allowing us the privilege of repentance).

One of the results of God having sent His Son is that it gives us many additional reasons to be thankful. Because Jesus Christ was faithful, withstood all of Satan’s temptations, died for our sins, and conquered death, we have the opportunity to be delivered from sin. Jesus came to “...preach the gospel to the poor; ...heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives,...” (Lk. 4:18). Not only can we be delivered from past sins, we can find the grace to overcome future sins and to triumph over Satan if we will follow His teachings. “...Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. ...Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Ro. 6:1-4). Just as Christ conquered death, we by the grace of God, can conquer sin. If we are faithful and conquer sin, we can also have victory over death and sin. “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? ...But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Cor. 15:55-57).

Among the blessings we have is the opportunity to obtain and give forgiveness. Perhaps there is no reason to be thankful that is of greater importance than knowing through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ, we can be redeemed and find forgiveness for our sins. We do not need to carry the burden of sin to the grave nor do we need to hold on to the disappointments that others may have caused for us. Numerous times in the scripture we are reminded of the opportunity to “...forgive, and ye shall be forgiven” (Lk. 6:37).

In many situations in life, if we share something with others we have less of that item for ourselves. Our relationship with God is different. We can share the bounty of God’s mercy, the gift of conversion, the power of His Spirit, our faith, love and zeal with others and not diminish what we have for ourselves. In all these cases when we share we have more than we had when we started.

Therefore we can readily see that one of the powerful blessings we can appreciate is the privilege of being with God’s people. We can feel an increase in our blessings by sharing what we have with those who are in need. We can also feel an increase in our blessings as others share with us. This sharing, of

course, is not limited to the material blessings. We can share with one another the emotional and spiritual blessings which are even more precious than the physical blessings.

In addition to the blessings we have previously mentioned, we can be thankful for the gift of the Holy Spirit and the power that accompanies this gift. “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you:...” (Ac. 1:8). The Holy Ghost will serve as a constant source of comfort and as a guide to keep us from evil. “But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me:” (Jn 15:26). “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth:...” (Jn. 16:13).

The very fact that we are alive is a gift from God. If we would have never lived and had not become a “...living soul”, (Gen. 2:7) we would not have the opportunity to spend eternity with God. Jesus came that we “...might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). God gave us life and He will sustain us. “And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever...” (II Tim 4:18).

Although we realize we cannot list nor even bring to mind all of the reasons we have that should make us thankful, we would do well to pause from time to time and think upon the many gifts we have from God and the many reasons we have to be thankful. We know that “...God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19). Therefore, “Being enriched in every thing to all bountifulness, which causeth through us thanksgiving to God” (II Cor. 9:11). Our thanksgiving to God should know no bounds “... for his mercy endureth forever”. Psalm 136 reminds us of this 26 times.

Be Ye Separate

“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing;...” (II Cor. 6:17). From the very beginning of time God warned His people to separate themselves from evil. Not only were they to not become engulfed in evil, they were not even to touch it. In the Garden of Eden God warned Adam and Eve of the danger of becoming involved in sin. In reference to the fruit on the tree of knowledge of good and evil that was in the midst of the garden, God said, “...Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die” (Gen. 3:3).

Separate means to be unconnected, not united, or distinct. If we want to follow Jesus, we must try to do as He did. Jesus was “...holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners,...” (Heb. 7:26).

Because Satan knows that he can cause confusion in the hearts and minds of man by encouraging God’s people to ignore the admonishment to live a separated, sanctified life, he has tried to deny the value of separation. He even goes so far as to say that God does not tell the truth about separation. Satan told Eve, “...Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4-5).

Since that time mankind has been engaged in a battle to understand the consequences of separation or lack of separation from the world. At various times in their history, the children of Israel ignored God’s warning to be separate from the world. They moved into the cities of heathen, became very involved in their businesses and even married into their families.

Many of the children of Israel married into heathen families. Many times those who married heathens began to worship the gods of their spouses. This brought reproach to the children of Israel and caused great distress. At the time of Ezra, those who had done so were commanded to “...separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives” (Ez. 10:11).

Jeremiah also warned the children of Israel of the dangers of intermingling “...in the assembly of the mockers...” (Jer. 15:17). If they would return to the Lord “...and if thou take forth the precious from the vile,...” (Jer. 15:19), the Lord would deliver them out of the hands of the wicked.

When there was strife between the herdsmen of Lot and Abram, Lot was given the opportunity to choose whether he would go to the right hand or to the left. Lot chose to go to the well watered plains in the direction of Sodom. It was a decision that would cause him to intermingle with those of Sodom who “...were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly” (Gen. 13:13). It was a decision that would bring much sorrow into Lot’s life. He would ultimately lose everything except his two daughters and the clothes they were wearing at the time they were led away from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Separation from evil is especially important in the house of God. The Lord has instructed us in many places to remove evil from among us. We are to examine ourselves first (I Cor. 11:28). In Matthew 18 we are given clear instruction on how to remove evil that might come between us and our brother. After self-examination we should go to our brother “...and tell him his fault between thee and him alone:... if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that ...every word may be established. And if he neglect to hear them, tell it to the church: But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Verses 15-17).

The Apostle Paul wrote that “...ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly,...” (II Thess. 3:6) and “... have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (Eph. 5:11). Other scriptural warnings to separate ourselves from evil include “...avoid

them...” (Ro. 16:17), “...not to keep company..., with such an one, no, not to eat” (I Cor. 5:11), “...withdraw thyself” (I Tim. 6:5), “...from such turn away” (II Tim. 3:5), and “...neither bid him God speed” (II Jn. 10).

In spite of all the warnings to separate ourselves from evil and those who are involved in evil, God’s love must continue in our lives toward those who have fallen. We are instructed to “...count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (II Thess. 3:15). The ultimate goal of all of this is that the wayward individual may be brought back to the Lord.

In a world so filled with sin, how do we maintain separation? Jesus, in the parable of the tares sowed by an enemy, told us that there would be times when we could not totally remove ourselves physically from all evil. When the servant asked if they should go and gather up the tares the master said “Let them both grow together until the harvest ...and bind (the tares) in bundles to burn them:...” (Mt. 13:28-30).

Although we may not be able to completely and physically separate ourselves from evil, we do not need to allow ourselves to be spiritually unprotected. We can learn from Peter’s example after Christ’s arrest. Peter wanted desperately to do the right thing. He kept himself somewhat separated from the world as they took Jesus to His trial, but Peter made a very serious mistake. He allowed himself to get too far from Jesus. “And Peter followed him afar off, even into the palace of the high priest:...” (Mk. 14:54). Peter allowed enough space between himself and Jesus to allow Satan to get between them. He tried but failed to keep his promise of faithfulness.

If we want to be separated from the world, we must stay close to Jesus. We cannot always avoid contact with the world but we can avoid being involved in the sin. The Psalmist recognized the progression of evil into the lives of one who may be careless. “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful” (Ps. 1:1). Satan would like us to walk with sinners, stand with them and, finally, sit with them. Jesus did not avoid contact with sinners but he did not allow himself to become a part of their activities. If we stay close to Jesus, He will keep us safe from harm.

The Folly of Sowing Wild Oats

From time to time we hear people say that young people need the opportunity to “sow their wild oats” before they become adults and settle down. This is based on the assumption that they will get their fill of sin, realize that it will not be beneficial to them, and grow out of it.

Is there any scriptural reference that would encourage this thinking? Is there anything in the Bible that would lend support to the idea that if we become heavily involved in the world that we will eventually have enough of the world and be satisfied to lay it all aside?

While there are certainly examples in the scripture that tell us of those who finally reached the point where they understood that sin would not bring them the joy they expected (for example, the prodigal son), there are no examples in which sin is encouraged in youthful years so we will be ready to give it up when we become adults.

There are other examples that explain spiritual immaturity in youth. We read in I Cor. 13:11 “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” Paul also reminded us of the importance of spiritual maturity when he wrote “That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine,...” (Eph. 4:14).

Instead of encouraging youth to get sin out of their system by getting their fill of it, the scripture warns against evil sowing. We are warned about the fruit that sin will bring, the misery that results from sin, and the wages of sin. As time goes on sin is more likely to increase than to decrease and this will bring serious consequences. “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Ga. 6:7). If we sow seeds of sin, what are we going to reap?

Seeds of sin can produce bitterness, selfishness, deceitfulness, corruption, a desire for fulfilling the lust of the flesh, disappointment and separation from God.

As we sow, if our “...vine is the vine of Sodom, and of the fields of Gomorrah; their grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter:” (De. 32:32). Israel reached the point where as a nation, they were so selfish that they were described as “...an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself:...” (Ho. 10:1). Jeremiah, while lamenting over the sins of the people wrote “And they will deceive every one his neighbor, and ...through deceit they refuse to know me...” (Je. 9:5-6).

Jesus reminded us in His Sermon on the Mount that sin must bring forth corruption; “Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit” (Mt. 7:17). Paul wrote “Now the works of the flesh are manifest ,...that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Ga. 5:19-21).

Jeremiah, in praying for his people said “...we looked for peace, and there is no good; and for the time of healing, and behold trouble” (Je. 14:19). Jesus warned of the finality of a life of sin and how it will eternally separate us from God when he said to those who did not serve Him “...Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil, and his angels” (Mt. 25:41).

Sin will bring extreme misery. The fear in the heart of sinners will be so great that “in the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were even! and at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning” (De. 28:67)! Paul wrote of the fate of evil people that “Destruction and misery are in their ways:” (Ro. 3:16) and that “...the wages of sin is death;...” (Ro. 6:23).

Sin is somewhat of an addiction. The more we are involved in sin, the more likely it is that it will consume us. Rather than getting our fill of sin, we will become a captive of it. Ezra prayed "...O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens" (Ezr. 9:6). Jesus said "For this people's heart is waxed gross, their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them" (Mt. 13:15). Paul wrote to Timothy that "...evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse,..." (II Tim. 3:13).

We cannot deny that sin has consequences, some of which last a lifetime. Solomon wrote "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment" (Ecc. 11:9).

The story is told of a young boy who was rebellious and refused to listen to his father. Finally in desperation the father told his son that there was a post at the end of the lane. For each disgraceful deed the son committed a nail would be driven into the post. For each honorable deed, a nail would be pulled out. Finally the post was nearly filled with nails. The son realized his life was in shambles and he resolved to do better.

The day finally came when the father could pull the last nail from the post. He took his son with him and as he pulled out the final nail the son began to weep. The father asked what the problem was, thinking the son would be happy that the last nail was gone. "It is true", the son tearfully replied, "all of the nails are gone, but the scars remain."

We do not gain by trying to get our fill of sin. It will only bring us to grief. God reminds parents to teach their children to choose to do good. "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Pr. 22:6).

How Long, O Lord, How Long?

Nearly every child of God experiences severe trials at some point in his life. Sometimes the situation lasts long enough and is severe enough that it can test the faith of even the most faithful of God's people.

When the test is strong enough and long enough to cause us to ask questions, it can also make us feel guilty for questioning God. Sometimes we ask what we did to cause the problem? Why do others find relief and we don't? Why are there those who seem to ignore God and live wicked lives and yet prosper? Why does God allow these things to happen? Will it ever end?

Most of these questions have been asked for thousands of years by various individuals who were trying to do God's will and yet suffered significant problems.

When Jesus' disciples saw a man who was blind from his birth, they asked, "...Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" (Jn. 9:3-4). Jesus healed the man of his blindness and he promptly faced another problem.

The Pharisees soon found fault because the man was healed on the Sabbath day. The man who had been given sight was then put through a severe trial, including being cast out of the synagogue. Through faith he was able to gain a clearer understanding of who Jesus was. Through the ordeal, Jesus opened his physical and his spiritual eyes so he could see clearly.

The trials that come upon us are not necessarily related to our behavior. There are times when our behavior can be the cause of tribulation, but there are also times when our trials come for no apparent reason, and God can use this as an opportunity to make Himself manifest to others. There are also times when God uses adversity in our lives to help us grow in our faith.

We can read numerous accounts in which requests for healing were granted immediately. When Jairus' daughter died, Jesus went and raised her from the dead (Mt. 9:18-25). The high priest's servant whose ear was cut off was healed with a touch of Jesus' hand (Lk. 22:51). We can read of the multitudes that came to Jesus and were healed (Mt. 14:36; Mt. 15:30). Although we do not know the length of time those in the multitude suffered, we know they were healed at the time that they requested healing from Jesus.

There are other situations where healing was requested but not granted. Paul besought the Lord three times that his thorn in the flesh could be removed and he was told "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (II Cor. 12:9). Eleven of the twelve original disciples endured hardship for the Lord. Ten of them suffered a martyr's death. John was exiled on the Isle of Patmos. Not all who ask are granted relief. However, all who ask in faith can receive grace to endure.

Earthly blessings do not always come to those who are faithful and are not always denied to the wicked. The poor widow who gave all she had (two mites) was credited with giving more than those who gave much. We do not read that she became wealthy in this life for her faithfulness. The churches in Macedonia "...in great trial of affliction ...and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality ...beyond their power..." (II Cor. 8:2-3) gave - but they remained poor.

Job tells us that sometimes the wicked prosper. They become "mighty in power ...their seed is established ...their houses are safe from fear... their cow calveth...their children dance" (Job 21:7-11). Solomon wrote that "...there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life..." (Ecc. 7:15). The laborers who

only worked in the vineyard one hour were made equal to those who bore the burden of the day (Mt. 20:1-16).

Why does God allow these things to happen? Does He not care? God has always allowed mankind to have a choice. God does allow sin although He hates it. "I hate every false way ...vain thoughts ...lying..." (Ps. 119:104; 113; 163). Many other references to God's hatred of sin could be cited. Since God hates sin, why does He allow it, especially when it hurts His people? Perhaps it would be more accurate to say God allows mankind to make choices, to choose to do good or evil, to choose to obey God or to disobey Him.

Since we know God has allowed us to have a free will of serving Him or rejecting Him, it is not beneficial to simply ask why God allows evil. It may be more beneficial to ask why mankind chooses to do evil even if it hurts us or others. That is not an easy question to answer. The Apostle Paul addressed this question in his epistle to the Romans where he wrote of the carnal and the spiritual mind.

Paul recognized that Satan can cause us to even do things we hate as long as we are under the carnal mind. He recognized that there was no good thing that dwells in the flesh. In himself he found the desire to do good, but in himself he found no way to perform the good. When left to the carnal mind, we would not do good but rather do evil.

Paul's struggle of the flesh versus the spirit is a struggle that each of us faces in our life. He found that he could never achieve the spiritual mind through the law. But God, by "...sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh; and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; that righteousness...might be fulfilled ...not after the flesh, but after the spirit" (Ro. 8:3-4).

The afflictions that we endure may come from our struggle of the carnal versus the spiritual mind. However, they may also come as a result of the wickedness of others. After the Lamb opened the fifth seal, those who had been slain for the Word of God asked, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood ...and it was said unto them that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren should be killed..." (Rev. 6:10-11).

How long will it continue? God knows the limit of our endurance. "He ...will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (I Cor. 10:13). Perhaps the affliction will last as long as someone will benefit from it, and then "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes;..." (Rev. 21:4).

Men Pleasers

God's people often feel pressure from mankind as they face a variety of decisions. This pressure to be men pleasers has been felt throughout most of human history. The scripture gives us many examples of pressure to be men pleasers. Sometimes the results are good. Often the results are very sad.

As young men, Daniel and his three friends faced pressure to eat of the king's meat and drink his wine. They could very easily have convinced themselves to go along with the king's order to eat forbidden foods because it seemed to be a small thing. They could have followed the king's orders to avoid a conflict. Later, if a "larger" issue came up, they could have asked the king to allow them to keep their faith because they had cooperated with the king on "little" issues.

They realized that this would not work. They knew that if they compromised in any area of right and wrong, it would be more difficult for them to stand firm later. By the grace of God, they consistently tried to do what was right regardless of how important the issue seemed to be. They knew that disobedience to God is never a small issue.

Blind Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus to have mercy on him. Many who were there told him to be quiet, but he continued to cry out "Thou son of David, have mercy on me" (Mk. 10:48). Jesus called for him to come to Him. Because of his refusal to listen to a group that pressured him to make a bad decision, Bartimaeus "...immediately received his sight" (Mk. 10:52).

Although there are times when pressure brings good results, it seems that there are so many examples which resulted in poor decisions and made men pleasers rather than God pleasers.

Saul was to go to battle with the Philistines and the men of Israel were afraid. Samuel had promised to go to Saul within seven days to offer sacrifices before the children of Israel went to battle. When Samuel did not arrive at the appointed time, Saul feared what the people would do so he offered a sacrifice. When approached by Samuel, Saul said he did not want to go to battle without making supplication to the Lord first. He blamed Samuel for not keeping his promise and said, "I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt offering" (I Sam. 13:12). Saul's desire to be a people pleaser cost him his kingdom.

When Peter and several other apostles were commanded to stop teaching the people about Jesus, they did not allow threats of physical harm to keep them quiet. They continued to spread the gospel because "...We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

At the time of Jesus' crucifixion, in spite of their promise to the contrary, "...all the disciples forsook him, and fled" (Mt. 26:56). Not one of the twelve was able to resist the pressure of the situation and turned away from Jesus.

The chief rulers knew Jesus was not guilty of the charges brought against Him, but because of the Pharisees, they did not confess Him. They knew it would have caused them to be put out of the synagogue, and "...they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (Jn. 13:42).

Jesus wanted desperately to escape the cruel pain of the death He faced. Everyone turned against Him. He faced death alone. He could have tried to be a people pleaser by leading a revolution against Roman oppression. There was support from the people to do this. However, He knew that it was not right. He pleaded for strength to do His Father's will and overcame the temptation to avoid the cross.

King Herod killed James, “And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also” (Acts 12:3). King Herod was more concerned about retaining favor with the Jews than he was to do the right thing. To displease the Jews may have cost him his position. Festus made a similar mistake when he was “...willing to do the Jews a pleasure,” (Acts 24:27). He wanted to send Paul to Jerusalem to be judged even though he knew Paul would not receive a fair trial in Jerusalem.

Even Peter, after his conversion, allowed the pressure of the Jews to cause him to err. He understood that God had removed the barrier between Jews and Gentiles but “...withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision” (Ga. 2:12). This caused dissimulation among other Christians, so Paul found it necessary to withstand Peter to restore order.

We would do well in our time to learn from examples of the past. It is not always popular to do the right thing. However, if we want our faith to be preserved for those who come after us, we must be willing to go up against our nature, to resist the pressures of the world, and to follow the teachings of our Lord and Savior. “...choose you this day whom ye will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:15).

We see the impact of people pleasers in our day. Government officials often make decisions based on the results of polls that are taken to see what the people want. It would be much better if decisions were made because it is the right thing to do rather than because it is popular.

We are not spared of this problem in the household of faith. When we are gathered together in the house of God, surrounded by faithful brothers and sisters and an atmosphere of holiness, it is relatively easy to make good decisions. It can be quite different when we are among co-workers or in other situations where the impact of the world can be quite strong.

Do we have the God-given courage to stand up for what is right when the prevailing opinions seems to encourage us to do differently? Do we carefully follow God’s Word, even in small things, when we are away from brethren? Do we compromise in small things and resolve to do better if a bigger issue is at stake?

It is never right to do wrong and it is never wrong to do right. To be a people pleaser at the expense of serving God will bring us to harm. We must dare to be a Daniel and we know by the grace of God we never need to stand alone.

Signs

A sign is an event that is intended as proof of something.

At various times in the scripture, God provided a sign for those who were to fulfill special assignments. Gideon asked for a sign that the Lord would save Israel by his hand. In the first request the Lord made a fleece of wool wet and the ground around it dry. Gideon recognized that he was risking the anger of God by asking another sign, but he humbly requested that God give him a second sign in which the fleece of wool would be dry and the ground wet. The Lord granted him his request (Ju. 6:36-40).

Hezekiah asked the Lord for a sign to assure him that he would recover from his illness. The Lord "...brought the shadow ten degrees backward,..." (II Ki. 20:11) and Hezekiah lived an additional fifteen years.

Most of us have had times when we were uncertain about a decision we needed to make. Even after diligent prayer and seeking counsel from those who have faithfully served the Lord for many years, we may be uncertain of our decision. At times like these we may wish God would simply tell us what to do.

Since God normally doesn't speak to us in clearly spoken language, we may seek alternative ways to understand God's will. Many times people seek a sign from God to help them know what they should do. Requesting a sign from God may make us uncomfortable.

Is it okay for us to seek a sign? Are we wrong to ask for reassurance when we make important decisions? There are examples in the scripture that may reassure us that seeking signs is acceptable and there are examples that may cause us to question whether we should seek a sign.

In addition to the examples cited earlier, others have asked for and received signs. Moses received numerous signs as he tried to convince God that he was not able to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. On the way from Egypt to the Promised land, the children of Israel received many signs, even when they were not very faithful. At a later time when God was reassuring His people that He would be with them, He promised to "...make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water" (Is. 41:18). When Lazarus died, Jesus used his death as an opportunity to help the people understand that He was sent from God. "And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me" (Jn. 11:42).

In other situations, people were chastised for seeking a sign. When Zacharias asked how he would know the message of the birth of John the Baptist was true, he became "...dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed,..." (Lk 1:20). The scribes and Pharisees asked for a sign and were told that "...An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign..." (Matt. 12:38-39). Paul wrote to the Corinthians that "...the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom:" (I Cor. 1:22) because there appeared to be too much dependence on the wisdom of man.

If we look at the previous examples, we can see that our attitude plays a big role in the response God may have in our request for a sign. Those who were doubting God's power and, in effect, asking Him to prove Himself to them were often answered in a way that had some negative consequences.

On the other hand, those who believed God but just seemed to need a little reassurance were often rewarded with a favorable request. The example of Zacharias and Mary in Chapter 1 of the Gospel of Luke makes it clear that it isn't simply a difference of wicked and righteous people who are chastised or

rewarded when they ask for reassurance. Zacharias asked for proof (“whereby shall I know this?”), but Mary simply asked how it would happen (How shall this be,...?). One appeared to be skeptical and one appeared to humbly accept it.

With the examples given in the scripture, we do have some guidelines concerning the asking of signs. We must sincerely want God’s direction and humbly seek it. We must be sure we are seeking His direction in a situation where we need help and not merely asking His permission for something where we have already made up our minds and we want Him to confirm our opinion. We must be careful what we ask for because we might receive it.

As we seek God’s direction, we must be very careful that we do not consciously or unconsciously manipulate the situation to get the “sign” we want. It is often quite easy to set up a situation where the end result is determined by the circumstances we have created.

We would also be wise to realize that when we seek a sign, we need to be of a ready mind to accept God’s answer. Asking God for direction and refusing to accept His will can be very serious. Jonah knew what he was supposed to do and he chose to run the other direction. Saul (Paul) thought he was doing God’s will, but was shown very clearly that God was not pleased with him. When he received direction from God, he was willing to submit even when he only understood a step at a time.

God speaks to His people in many different ways. Sometimes the answers are clear and rather quick in coming. At other times the answer is not so clear and may be quite some time in coming to us. Whatever the situation we need to be patient and submissive. If we diligently search His Word and humbly seek Him in prayer, we can usually understand His message. There may be times even with diligence, when we may be a bit uncertain about the direction God would have us to go.

We can receive some additional guidance if we try to think about the likely outcome of a decision. Will it draw us closer to God or will the end result fulfill our carnal desires? Will we be tempting God with our request or will we be serving Him?

It is not wrong to ask God for direction and reassurance. It is not wrong to search His Word to clarify the direction we should go. It is not wrong to plead with God to show us clearly what He would have us do. However, we must remember that when we ask God to help us, we must be willing to receive His message and not interfere with His plan for us.

The Hearing Ear

“The hearing ear, and the seeing eye, the Lord hath made even both of them” (Pr. 20:12). “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; Rev. 3:6, 13, 22).

We hear a lot about sending clear messages, about sounding the alarm, about making sure the trumpet gives a certain sound. In school we spend many hours learning how to write a message so the reader can understand what we are trying to convey. We also spend numerous hours trying to learn to speak clearly. If the message is not clear, the hearer will not know what we really meant.

We also hear many prayers pleading with God that the message in a sermon can be spoken in simplicity and with clarity. Often we hear prayers asking God to provide a Holy Spirit inspired message. This is all well intended, and it is good, and sincerely appreciated by those who are called upon to speak. We are frequently reminded in the Scripture that words are important. “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver” (Pr. 25:11). “The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow himself up” (Ecc. 10:12).

Sending a message to another is important. It needs to be done well. Without clarity, the chances of a correct message getting to the intended audience is very slim. However, sending the message is only part of the communication process. A major part of communication is receiving a message, and we seem to spend very little time learning how to really listen. No one who is called upon to speak the Word of God would ever question the need for prayer that the words spoken would be Holy Spirit inspired. However, do we pray just as fervently that we, and others who are in the audience, will have Holy Spirit inspired listening?

On occasion, someone expresses a concern that they were not fed by a sermon or that they received no blessing that day. Certainly those who speak the Word of God bear the responsibility to be of a mind to be used by God to bring forth the message as best they can by the grace of God. Is there also a responsibility on the part of the listener to be ready to receive a message from God?

When we consider that approximately 1/4 to 1/3 of our services are hymns and reading directly from God’s Word, is there perhaps a bit of a problem on our part if we receive nothing from a service? If we heard nothing but the scripture reading, we have open access to God’s Word and that by itself should give us a blessing.

Not all who are called upon to speak are gifted orators. Some days those who speak have more difficulty than on other days. In each case, however, when a significant percent of a service is hymns and words taken directly from the Bible, if we do not receive any blessing or if we are not fed at all, have we really prepared ourselves to be Holy Spirit inspired listeners?

As was stated in the opening paragraph, there is biblically based encouragement to hear. For most of us, God has provided the mechanism for hearing. We need to use what God has given us. How then can we become Holy Spirit inspired listeners?

There are a number of steps we can take that will improve our chances of receiving the message that God will bring to us. Have we filled Saturday evening with husks from the world? Have we gone places or have we done things that fill our minds with the vanities of this life? Have we taken the time on Sunday morning and Wednesday before services to prepare our minds to receive a message from the Word of God? Do we take time to be holy or do we involve ourselves in work or other activities until the last minute and then rush into church as the final hymn is ended, hoping to be fed? Certainly this can

happen to anyone from time to time, but if it is a regular event, perhaps we need to examine our priorities and adjust our schedules. This will only happen if it is important enough to us that we will make it happen.

We can also improve our listening skills by focusing on God's Word more intently. Do we open our Zion's Harp and actively sing or do we passively and only partially listen while others sing. After the scripture is read, do we close our Bible and casually sit back in our seat or do we keep the Bible open during the sermon so we can try to connect the message to the Word that was read?

The attitude we take with us to church will have a powerful impact on what we take home with us. If we consider it a privilege to be in church, to hear God's Word, and to spend time with other believers, we will increase our chances of receiving a blessing. If we go to church with a negative attitude, we will hinder our chances for a blessing. Are we partial to the ministers? If we "just know" that we will not be fed if a certain brother speaks, we probably will not get much out of the service.

Do we really focus on what is being said or do we allow our minds to be preoccupied by past events or future concerns? There are many distractions and our minds easily wander. We can, however, work at focusing on what is being said. Listening for key words or statements that relate to the scripture reading may be helpful. Relating past experiences to what has been said may also be of value. If we listen intently and repeat in our minds what has been said we may find it easier to focus on the message.

After services have ended and we have time to fellowship, do we discuss some of the key concepts or do we limit ourselves to shallow conversation about topics that are relatively meaningless?

Communication is a two way process. Each end of the process bears a responsibility. Those who speak must prepare their minds in such a way that God can use their talents to send a message from God "For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father..." (Mt. 10:20). Those who come to listen must be prepared so we can "...hear, and your soul shall live..." (Is. 55:3). If we receive as much as we pray for, in faith believing, how much will we receive? Within reasonable limits, we determine how much we are fed from the Word of God.

Joy in the Midst of Turmoil

“What joy I feel, what peace is mine, As I my all to Thee resign! ...”

“Trust and Confidence”
Hymns of Zion - #259

It would be easy in a time of war, turmoil and uncertainty for a child of God to become distressed and allow Satan to impact our thinking. When beset by distress, we could become so overwhelmed that it could eventually cause us to lose courage.

How can a child of God escape the mindset of distress, discouragement and fear? How can we be joyful when there seem to be so many problems around us?

Spiritual joy is a glorious and triumphant state of mind. It is a pattern of thinking and a way of looking at life. It is keeping our eyes upon the goal as we deal with day to day concerns. Obviously, this is not always easy to do, but neither is it impossible.

The scripture contains many examples in which extreme hardship was faced, but with an eye upon the goal, joy was achieved. At the most trying time of His life, “...Jesus ...who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). What an example that is for us! In spite of all of the physical and mental anguish that Jesus was enduring, He looked at the joy that was set before Him! The joy was victory over Satan and knowing He had paid the supreme price so you and I have an opportunity for salvation. We might say, and with a bit of justification, that we hardly can be that strong and have that much foresight as Jesus.

There are additional examples in the scripture of men who, by the grace of God, endured much hardship. Joseph, from the human perspective, had every right to be bitter because of his circumstances. Sold into slavery by his brothers, sent to prison as a result of unjust accusations by his master’s wife, forgotten in prison after interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh’s butler and baker - all of this, and yet he remained faithful.

Stephen, facing death, was so confident in God’s grace that “...all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him saw his face as it had been the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15). He preached his final sermon to his murderers “And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:60).

In Revelation the 144,000 which “...were redeemed from among men, being the first fruits unto God and to the Lamb” (Rev. 14:3-4), had successfully overcome evil could now sing “...a new song before the throne...” (Rev. 14:3) in the heavenly choir. Hebrews 11 contains a list of faithful servants of God “Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong...” (Heb. 11:33-34). They were given the grace and strength to look beyond the present cross and see the joy that awaited them.

What can God’s people do today to find the grace to be filled with joy in the midst of trial? It is probably a little too easy for us to focus our attention on the things we would like to have rather than on the things we have. If we were to lose everything we have by fire, flood, or some other disaster and then by the goodness of God, have it all restored we would consider ourselves most fortunate. We are

reminded to “Count your many blessings, name them one by one, And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done”. “Count Your Blessings” - Hymns of Zion - #116

As we count our blessings, what do we include? If we could list all of our blessings, putting them in order of priority, what would be in our top ten? We actually “list” our top priorities every day - based on how we spend our time and how we allocate our resources.

Without a doubt those of us who have been fortunate enough to taste the goodness of the plan of salvation would put that at the top of our list. Perhaps following that would be our family (biological and church family), our friends, etc. Does our life validate this list?

How can we keep our priorities in the proper order? The Apostle Paul gave us good advice in this matter: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, ...honest, ...just, ...pure, ...lovely, ... good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Phil. 4:8).

If we fill our minds with hymns of faith, if we spend ample time reading God’s Word and in prayer, if we focus on the many privileges we have as children of God and if we ask God to “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer” (Ps. 19:14), then we invite joy into our lives.

If we consider it a privilege to go to the house of God on Sundays, midweek and at other appropriate times, it will help us receive a blessing. We can help ourselves to look forward to worship by spending time, before we get to church, thinking about God’s Word.

Most of us have a significant amount of time during the week that our minds are free to roam. By filling our “free” mind time with godly thoughts, it will have a positive impact on our attitude. If we have a good attitude the future is bright.

God has given us a mind to use as we wish. He has placed us in circumstances that require us to make many choices every day. He has provided a way that we can choose to be joyful. He allows us to choose otherwise. Certainly there are times when the events of our life bring grief that is beyond our control. However for most of us, joy is a choice we can make. “...choose you this day whom ye will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:15).

The Call of God

Those of us who have been fortunate enough to repent, be converted and become children of God, realize that it was only by the grace and mercy of God that He called us to be His child. The call of God is necessary for us to become His child.

Unfortunately there are those who believe they have never been called of God and therefore have put off their repentance, waiting for His call. What is the call of God? How can we recognize it? Can those of us who have been exposed to the Word of God much of our life really claim that we have never been called of God? If God called us one time and we ignored it, can we expect to be called again?

God calls His people in many ways and for many reasons. Certainly the call to repentance is one of the most important reasons God calls us. Additionally He calls us to do His work, perhaps to lead, and to worship Him.

There are many scripture passages that tell us that God does not want anyone to spend eternity separated from Him. Isaiah wrote "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else" (Is. 45:22). Jesus said "Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage" (Mt. 22:9). Paul wrote to Timothy that our Savior would "...have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4). Finally, John wrote "...And whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17).

Therefore, if we believe that God would have all men to be saved, can we believe He would not call us? How can we recognize His call? There are some who were called of God in ways that could hardly be mistaken. Moses' attraction to the burning bush and his subsequent conversations with God could hardly have been missed. Gideon received two very clear signs with the fleece and the dew as he sought the courage to follow God's direction to lead the children of Israel against the Midianites (Ju. 6). Saul (Paul) also had a calling that was very dramatic and caused him to make a complete turnaround (Acts 9). There are many other examples, both in the scripture and in other sources, in which very clear calls were made to various individuals. However, most of us do not receive calls of this nature. So how do we know when we are called?

God reminds us to remove ourselves from the confusion of the world and seek His will in quietness. The Psalmist reminds us to "Be still, and know that I am God..." (Ps. 46:10). In despair Elijah was seeking God's assurance that he was not alone in serving God. He searched in the strong wind, in an earthquake and in the fire, but it was not until he listened to "...a still small voice" (I Ki. 19:12) that he found God.

We can also hear God's call in the quietness of His creation. The call to repentance may come in the quietness of a sermon when the message of repentance is preached. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20). Sometimes the call may come in the quietness of the night when there is nothing but the ticking of the clock to break the silence.

The calls to repentance by John the Baptist (Mt. 3:2) and Jesus "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 4:17) were neither harsh nor calamitous. They were simply statements of fact. If one wishes to enter the kingdom of God, there are some tasks that must be done.

In the quote from Rev. 3:20, Jesus simply stood and knocked. He gave us two tasks: hear and open. Therefore, from this we can understand that, although the call comes from God, we do have some responsibility. We must be willing to hear and we must be willing to open the door of our heart.

We might prefer a call that is so strong and unmistakable that there are no questions in our mind. However, we need to be careful what we ask for. Jonah was given a clear, but simple message, "Arise, go to Nineveh" (Jonah 1:2). Jonah knew what he was to do. He understood clearly, but he rose and went a different way. God was merciful to Jonah. After three days and nights of a very frightening experience in the belly of the fish, he was given another chance. He obeyed God's command but he did not do it with submission. He was rebellious toward God.

Other examples of clear, strong, but distressful calls include: Zacharias (Luke 1:5-22), a lord of King Jehoram (II Ki. 7:2), Peter (Mt. 14:22-31) and Thomas (Jn. 20:24-31). Each of these had doubts when called by God for a special task. Each of them had a time of trial because of their doubt.

When we consider what God has done for us, we would do well to answer His call without requiring something special. For many of us He has given the knowledge of what is required for salvation. He has given us a means of acquiring the knowledge and of applying it to our lives. He has placed us in a situation where it is relatively easy to put our knowledge into practice. He has allowed a measure of conviction to come upon us that encourages us to yield to His call.

How often will He call? No one knows for sure. We can be sure He will call one time, but we have no assurance of multiple calls. If we are willing to admit that each time we hear the truth of God's Word spoken we have received a call from God, we must acknowledge that we have been called many times.

Perhaps the call of God is accurately described in the words of a hymn: "Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, Calling for you and for me. See on the portals He's waiting and watching, Watching for you and for me. Come home ...Come home, Ye who are weary come home. Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, Calling, O sinner, come home!" (Tabernacle Hymns No. 128). We would do well to answer a tender call rather than demand a stronger one that may bring us deep distress.

Participation in Social Activism

There is little doubt that in America today there is a serious decline in traditional morality. Although we claim to be a nation “under God”, there is a clear trend away from the Christian influence which in the past formed the foundation of our social-moral outlook.

The degree to which our nation’s moral structure is weakening can often be distressing to believers in Christ. The very fact that 1.5 million babies are aborted each year causes anguish in a believer’s heart. Likewise, the growing promotion of homosexuality, the high incidence of venereal disease, the availability of pornography, and the general anti-Christian bias and moral wantonness in the arts and media are dismaying to those seeking to uphold biblical truth.

The rapid rate of moral decline and family breakdown may tempt a believer to become involved in social action. Distraught hearts may be drawn into the fray of public discourse, attempting to better society through various means of confronting the forces of social decline, without considering the many implications of such activity.

It may be helpful to view the present social decay from a historical perspective. Many nations have never known the influence of biblical truth as part of their moral foundation. In addition to abortion, some have practiced infanticide and left their elderly to die unattended. Moreover, in some societies, acts of public sexuality were commonplace. History indicates that war, plunder and “ethnic cleansing” took place on the soil of many nations. Political depotism, injustice and religious persecution resulted in victims being tortured, beheaded, and burned at the stake. They had no civil rights. However, we live in a democracy which retains a sense of fairness and justice and still guarantees religious freedom.

Much more importantly we should view this subject from a biblical perspective. The Lord Jesus’ short life span was during a time of harsh political oppression. There was no democracy. A rigid class system favored the ruling elite. Slavery existed along with other grave social injustices. Individuals who did not conform to the rigid standards of oppressive rulers were unmercifully persecuted.

Yet, Jesus quietly endured these inequities. He did not offer an agenda of social and political reform. He said, “If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight” (John 18:36). His vision pointed beyond this short life. His focus was on that long and endless eternity; and He promised a home in heaven for all who would humbly repent for their sins and follow Him.

The mission for followers of Christ remains the same today. The primary objectives of the church are first, saving souls and then, nurturing them spiritually in the warm bond of brotherhood, so they can overcome sin and remain faithful until life’s end.

Entering into the fray of social activism presents many risks for the devout Christian. Almost invariably this results in strife and contention. The Apostle Paul taught Timothy that “...the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient” (II Tim. 2:24). He also said that the “good soldier of Jesus Christ” does not entangle himself with the “affairs of this life” (II Tim. 2:4). The arenas of social activism are not conducive to the virtues of restraint and gentleness. Instead there are outbursts of temper and strong, self-willed expressions which bring reproach to the name of Christ. The Word teaches, “Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go” (Prov. 22:24).

Loud, boisterous and partisan demonstrations are manifestations of the works of the flesh (reveling and variance) and are in no way reflective of Christ’s gentleness and lowliness of mind. Even a

calm show of force (as in an orderly march) is nonetheless a form of intimidation and can cause a contentious reaction.

Perhaps one of the most distressing changes in our society is the loss of respect for biblically-based truths. There seems to be a growing hostility toward Christian values. Many consider organized efforts to promote Christian influence as an imposition by the “religious right” which is deeply resented.

What can be done? If sincere believers seek to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-14), the true and gentle spirit of Christ will enable them to offer constructive and meaningful influence. First and foremost should be sincere prayers for “all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (I Tim. 2:1-2). Believers can also convey thoughtful suggestions to public officials and teachers, write respectable letters of concern to elected legislators, and record their preferences at the ballot box. Creative ideas, void of extremes, can be forwarded to an array of decision-makers. These low-key actions can allow a separated believer to exert an effective influence in society while maintaining the respect of fellow citizens in a Christ-like manner.

All power is of God (Rom. 13:1). It is He who installs and replaces political power. The Bible teaches the believer that no matter what state he is in he should be content (Phil. 4:11). We can be very thankful that even in the midst of a time of deterioration, the true believer can find contentment. We can also be comforted by the assurance that “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom. 5:20).

The cautious, low-key approach advocated by our church does not imply submission to any earthly authority or ordinance which would require our disobedience to God’s Word. If this conflict should arise someday, we must say as Peter, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), no matter what the cost. We can be assured that we will be able to withstand every test and trial, if we put our trust in the power of God and walk in humble obedience to His Word.

Unbelief

Unbelief is the inability or unwillingness on the part of someone to accept something as the truth. Undoubtedly each of us has experienced unbelief to some degree at some point in our lives. Even the most faithful of God's servants have had to battle with unbelief in special circumstances.

Abraham had doubts when he was told that Sarah, at age ninety, would have a child (Gen. 17:17). Moses had bouts with unbelief as he led the children of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land (Nu. 11:21). Zacharias was unable to believe that he and Elizabeth could have a child in their old age (Lk. 1:19-21). John the Baptist, at a time of discouragement while he was in prison, had a brief battle with unbelief when he asked "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3)

The disciples had the advantage of spending many hours with Jesus, and yet they had times of unbelief. The disciples tried unsuccessfully to remove a demon from a child. When they asked why it was not possible to remove the devil, Jesus said "...Because of your unbelief..." (Matt. 17:20). After His resurrection as the disciples were eating with Jesus, he "...upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart..." (Mk. 16:14).

Additionally, we could read of others who experienced times of unbelief even after having witnessed many miracles (Jn. 12:37). Isaiah lamented that there would be much unbelief about the coming of Christ, "Who hath believed our report...?" (Is. 53:1)

With all of these examples, we should not be surprised if we struggle with unbelief from time to time. However, even though we are confronted with unbelief, we must not underestimate its seriousness.

Unbelief is sin and will bring upon us the wrath of God: "...he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (Jn 3:36). Unbelief could keep us out of heaven just as it kept the children of Israel out of the Promised Land. "So we see they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Heb. 3:19).

What causes unbelief and how can we avoid it?

Satan is a master at causing unbelief. If he can get us to listen to him for even a short time he can cause confusion. Eve's first mistake was not when she ate the fruit. She engaged in a conversation with Satan and gave him an opportunity to raise questions. "...Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" (Gen. 3:1). Eve gave Satan an opportunity to bring deception into her life and she fell into sin. Many more examples could be cited.

Unbelief can be brought on by carelessness, a desire for riches, lust, ambition for power, or nearly anything that will lead us into sin. Also, mixing the truth with untruth will cause confusion and can lead to unbelief.

Because unbelief is so serious, God has given us many ways to resist this sin or to escape it if we find ourselves somewhat overtaken in unbelief.

Undoubtedly one of the most important weapons that God has given us to fight against unbelief is the ability to establish a benchmark of truth - His Word. Although what we believe to be true may change over a period of time, truth itself does not change. If we willingly search God's Word, we find that it is just as applicable today as it was several thousand years ago.

To establish a benchmark, we must be willing to invest time in studying God's Word and in prayer. We must also be willing to soften our hearts, to be teachable, and to separate ourselves from those who cause us to doubt.

To combat unbelief we must be willing to believe and to admit that we need help. The father of a child who had a dumb spirit recognized his weak faith. Jesus told him that all things were "...possible to him that believeth...and (he) said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mk. 9:23-24).

We can learn a lot about combating unbelief from this situation.

The father could have given up after the disciples could not cure his son.

He didn't give up. He continued to pursue help. He went directly to Jesus. We also have the privilege of going directly to Jesus.

The father also displayed sincere humility. He didn't go to Jesus in anger or bitterness because the disciples were unable to help him. After explaining the situation to Jesus, he pleaded to Jesus to "...have compassion on us, and help us" (Mk. 9:22). Finally, the father recognized his weakness and asked for additional help. In tears he begged for greater strength to believe.

To combat unbelief we must be willing to receive belief without raising barriers that would hinder the truth. Thomas set parameters that he had required for him to believe. "...Except I shall see... and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe" (Jn. 20:25). He was given the opportunity to have his demands fulfilled but with a cost. He lost a blessing that comes with unconditional belief and he is forever remembered as "doubting Thomas".

Searching the Word of God to discover its internal consistency can also help combat unbelief. As we consider the various parts of scripture, written by different men from a variety of backgrounds covering thousands of years and discover the validity and consistency of its contents even for our time, we can gain confidence to overcome unbelief.

Experiences that we have as a result of following the teachings of the Bible also help to remove unbelief. If we are willing to be obedient and submissive to the principles laid out in the Bible, we find that our lives are transformed and our outlook on life is improved. Often we find that those who continually withhold a part of their selfish desires of the flesh just do not find total peace and contentment. Those who are willing to be totally submissive to God can find themselves "...as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God" (Ro. 6:13).

It is not possible to address all aspects of unbelief in a relatively short article. We can only scratch the surface. We can use the tools God has given us to remove unbelief from our lives, including His Word, prayer, His faithful servants and experiences in our lives that confirm the truth of God's promises.

Glorifying God

To glorify is to praise, to magnify and to honor in worship. Therefore to glorify God we must praise Him, magnify Him and honor Him as we worship Him.

It is both a duty and a privilege to glorify God. There is no greater power on the face of the earth than the one true God, the Creator of all that is in the universe. To refuse to glorify Him will bring us to destruction eternally. To truly glorify Him will lead to life eternal.

The Holy Bible contains many examples, in both the Old and New Testament, of those who glorified God. As King David was gathering money and materials that would help his son Solomon build the temple, he said “Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all” (I Ch. 29:11).

Isaiah wrote “...Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory” (Is. 8:3).

As the multitude saw “...the dumb to speak, the maimed to be whole, the lame to walk, and the blind to see: and they glorified the God of Israel” (Mt. 15:31). The Sadducees, in trying to silence Peter and John, threatened them and let them go because they could find no real reason to punish them, “...because of the people: for all men glorified God for that which was done” (Acts 4:21).

In the Revelation of Saint John the Divine we read “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Rev. 4:11). Also we find “Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest” (Rev. 15:4).

In addition to examples of those who glorified God, we are given at least four reasons to praise Him: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation; a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (I Pe. 2:9). To be considered chosen of God, royal, holy and peculiar certainly sets God’s people apart from those who are not His children.

How can we, who seem so insignificant, glorify so great a God as the one true God who has provided for so many generations? There are a number of ways we can glorify God. We can praise Him, we can consecrate our lives to Him, we can exhibit thankfulness and gratitude, we can strive for spiritual unity, we can be submissive and obedient to Him and we can allow Him to use us for good works and thus bear fruit on His behalf.

Not only are we given reasons for praising God, but also in His Word we find special ways we can praise God. We are encouraged to “Sing praises to the Lord, which dwelleth in Zion: declare among the people his doings” (Ps. 9:11). We can also praise Him in word: “My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord.” (Ps. 145:21). We can even recognize that God’s works praise Him: “All thy works shall praise thee, O Lord;...” (Ps. 145:10).

We can also glorify God by consecrating our lives to Him. To consecrate means to set apart or dedicate to the service of God. Paul wrote “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service”

(Ro. 12:1). To adequately consecrate our lives to God requires dedication, thoroughness, a willingness to please God, and to recognize that even after all of this we are only doing what is reasonable.

Living a life that exhibits thankfulness and gratitude also demonstrates our willingness to glorify God. We certainly thank God through prayer. We can also thank Him by living our life so those who observe us can see that we appreciate being His child. Do others see in our attitude a sense of joy and a contentment in our life? If we truly love God and believe we are saved, we ought to be the most contented people on the face of the earth. Certainly there may be times of distress when our joy may be less evident; but, even in difficult times our love for God and our desire to glorify Him should be apparent in our daily walk of life.

As we walk with fellow pilgrims, do we walk in spiritual unity or are we out of step with the teachings and guidelines the Bible has for the church? The Psalmist wrote “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (Ps. 133:1). Paul wrote “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Cor. 1:10). We can see by these scriptural exhortations that in order to glorify God we must be in spiritual unity based upon God’s Word.

Submission to God and obedience to His Word are also ways we can glorify God. “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” (Ja. 4:7). It is rather easy to do those things that we are clearly convicted to do, but it requires a great deal of humility to submit in areas where we may not hold a strong conviction. King Saul had to learn the hard way that obedience is required even in times of distress.

After he had assumed the authority to sacrifice, contrary to the law, he was rejected by God for disobedience. “And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,...” (I Sam. 15:22).

Finally, to glorify God we should allow Him to use us when He calls us to His work. Many passages in the scripture remind us of the importance of bearing fruit in our lives. The Fruit of the Spirit gives ample opportunity for us to be useful to God. To bear fruit for the Lord, we must be faithful. “I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit; for without me ye can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5).

We are surely a fortunate people to be given the privilege of glorifying our God. He has given us many opportunities to glorify Him and has made it clear that the rewards for serving Him are abundant and eternal.

An Independent Spirit I

The strength of a church is dependent upon a strong biblical foundation and unity of the brethren based upon biblical principles. Only by the grace of God, and by working together and submitting to His Word, can a church survive.

Satan will use any method he can to try to destroy God's children and the faith that they have. One very powerful tactic that Satan uses is to encourage individuals to determine for and by themselves what is right. This method of disruption, often referred to as having an independent spirit, is a major concern in our brotherhood today.

An independent spirit can be defined as having an attitude of not feeling much need for others and as looking at things our own way. In everyday language we could call it "doing our own thing". Those with an independent spirit are much too strong in their opinions or are too sure of themselves. In the book of Judges it was described as "...every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Jud. 21:25).

There are numerous examples in the scripture of those who had an independent spirit. King Saul exhibited an independent spirit a number of times. He offered sacrifices (I Sam. 13:9-13) when Samuel didn't come when expected. He saved the best sheep and oxen for sacrifices when he was told to destroy them (I Sam. 15:13-26). He was rejected of God because of his disobedience.

Jonah displayed an independent spirit by refusing to preach to the people of Nineveh. He paid dearly because he followed his own stubborn will.

Perhaps the most striking example of an independent spirit is the fall of Lucifer. Lucifer exalted himself when he said "...I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount ... I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High" (Is. 14:13-14). If an independent spirit can lead to the fall of angels, it certainly can destroy us.

One of the strongest influences in our culture today is the attitude of an independent spirit. We need to be sure we examine ourselves to keep the spirit of self under the control of the Holy Spirit. We need to learn to recognize the independent spirit in ourselves. Jesus said "...If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mt. 16:24).

How serious is the problem of having an independent spirit? Paul wrote that we must bring "...into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;" (II Cor. 10:5). Solomon wrote "...as he thinketh in his heart, so is he:..." (Pr. 23:7). Jesus said "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Lk. 12:34). From these scripture passages we can see that it is very serious for even our thoughts, not just our actions, to be brought under the submission of the Holy Spirit.

It is possible that the influence of an independent spirit can impact us and we don't realize it. Job recognized that this can happen. He was concerned lest his "...heart hath been secretly enticed..." (Job 31:27).

How can we recognize if we have a problem with an independent spirit? A good start may be to examine how we spend our time and our resources. Do we find plenty of time to read the newspaper and other types of pleasure reading and yet struggle to find fifteen minutes each day for serious Bible study? Do we diligently keep up with financial markets or the foolishness of sports and yet have very little of the

Word of God memorized? Are the private and very personal aspects of our lives focused upon God and His Word, or on thinking of the things of the world?

How do we react when things do not go our way? If we experience struggles in our marriage, do we entertain the thought of being free? Do we secretly wish we could get out of the situation rather than working our way through it?

If something happens in our church, locally or nationally, how do we respond? Do we consider changing congregations instead of working through the situation, or do we carry it further by entertaining the thought of leaving our church altogether? Do we entertain the thought that we are not leaving the faith, just the fellowship; when in fact, what we are doing is walking away from the faith to a broader way?

Do we have a casual attitude about things such as apparel? Do we take worship seriously? Are we in the house of God as often as we can be? Do we plan to get to church early or do we barely make it before services begin? Do we walk away from a church office or responsibility in which God has called us to serve because it might require us to change our lifestyle or because something has not gone our way? Holiness and a casual attitude are opposites.

If we have an independent spirit, it is a lot easier to justify our actions when we disagree with what is happening. How much is at stake if we are allowing an independent spirit to prevail in our lives? Does it really matter if our commitment to the principles of our church is weak?

There is much that is at stake. Our church has many unique and valuable attributes. The orderliness and reverence in our assemblies are very important. The concept of brotherhood and the concern that we have for one another are very important. The concept of brotherhood requires us to put the welfare of the body, Christ's body which is the church, above our own welfare. It requires that we forebear with one another as we help each other through this life. There are times when we will need to accept some criticism about some things we have done in order to more closely align ourselves with the body of Christ and the Word.

The degree of willingness to submit to the biblically based standards of the brotherhood tells a lot about our love for the body of Christ. Self sacrifice and obedience to God's Word will help us defeat the independent spirit.

This topic will be continued in the next issue of the Silver Lining.

An Independent Spirit II

In the previous article of “Light from the Word”, an independent spirit was defined as an attitude of not feeling much need for others and looking at things our own way. Several scriptural examples were cited. The seriousness of the problem was briefly outlined. Some ways were given by which we can recognize if we have a problem of an independent spirit and what is at stake if we allow this condition in our lives.

This article will continue to focus on what is at stake if we have an independent spirit and will offer some solutions that will help us avoid or eliminate the attitude of an independent spirit.

The love, unity and peace in our brotherhood are at stake. The deep and abiding commitment that we have to the Apostolic Christian body of believers will be weakened if we allow an independent spirit to prevail. What is ultimately at stake is our way of worshipping, our lifestyle and the very nature and character of the Apostolic Christian Church.

In addition to causing problems within the brotherhood, an independent spirit can cause us much grief in our family. Our marriage can be severely disrupted if we insist on fulfilling our selfish desires rather than meeting the needs of our spouse and children. Relationships with others can be damaged by a selfish attitude. An independent spirit will increase the chances of looking for a way out of a problem rather than seeking God’s help to find solutions.

There are solutions to the dangers that we face as a result of an independent spirit. The solution begins with an examination of ourselves. It will require a change of attitude.

If we begin by recognizing what others need to improve upon, we have missed the first point. We need to be renewed in the spirit of our minds with godly attitudes (Eph. 4:23-24). Each day we need to put on the mind of Christ with its special virtues - lowliness of mind, meekness, a submissive spirit and putting the welfare of others above our own.

Are we nurturing the carnal mind or the spiritual mind? The carnal mind craves the entertainment of the world. Predominant topics in the media today are immorality, violence and sensationalism. Paul reminded us of this when he itemized many evil things and then wrote that there would be those “Who, knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them” (Ro. 1:32). Paul recognized that there would be people who loved to engage in sin as well as those who were entertained by watching it.

Nurturing the carnal man unsettles the spiritual man. Avoiding the evils of movies, television, ungodly internet sites, etc. helps us clear our mind of evil and allows us to focus on the spiritual man. Again the Word of God is clear on these issues: “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners” (I Cor. 15:33). The Bible doesn’t say it might corrupt, it says it does. Do we think we can escape? If we abstain from these things, we will not miss anything we need.

An essential part of the solution is to heed warnings that are given by the Word of God. “Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip” (Heb. 2:1). Do we appreciate the cautions or do we get a bit weary of the “negative” messages?

We also must avoid the trap of self-righteousness whereby we require a much stricter way than the scripture requires and what is taught by our church. A self-righteous outlook causes us to become so

critical of others, and so sure of ourselves that we are blinded to our own faults. We must become more discerning in recognizing the independent spirit in ourselves.

We can also help ourselves by spending quiet time with God. We must get away from the loud, fast-paced environment and in a very quiet manner focus on God in prayer and reading His Word. “Be still and know that I am God...” (Ps. 46:10). When Elijah was looking for God, he did not find him in the strong wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire. He found him in “...a still small voice” (I Kings 19:12).

If we spend quiet time in serious reading of the Bible and studying it to find ways that we can apply it to our lives, we will grow spiritually and weaken the independent spirit that wants to occupy so much of our lives. Serious study of the Word will also help us mature in our faith so we can partake of the meat of the Word. “But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Heb. 5:14).

Additionally, we can use opportunities to keep busy with the Lord’s work to keep our minds off of self and dwelling on things of eternal value. There are many opportunities to serve others and to fill our lives with the Fruit of the Spirit, thereby reducing the opportunity for the works of the flesh to occupy our time and thoughts.

Jesus gave a good summary of how we can keep the independent spirit under control. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength and with all thy mind and thy neighbor as thyself” (Luke 10:27).

An independent spirit goes hand in hand with pride and casualness. It is incompatible with obedience and submission. An attitude of this nature makes it easier to make bad decisions and to justify doing things we should not be doing. An independent spirit will lead us away from the moderate, reasonable, Bible-based positions of our church and lead us off to the right or to the left. It doesn’t respond well to warnings. An independent spirit can lead us into such deception that we are convinced the Lord is telling us to do something when it is actually our own self will that is leading us.

If we can recognize the independent spirit and seek God’s help in removing it from our lives, this will make a significant difference in our service to God. It will also go a long way toward preserving and strengthening our beloved church.

Except Ye Be Converted

Jesus said “Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 18:3). Jesus made it very clear that being converted was extremely important; so important that it is a requirement for entry into heaven. When we use the word “except” in this manner, it means that there are no alternatives. Unless we do this we will be excluded from heaven.

Since conversion is so important, it is necessary that we understand what it is and the impact it has on our life. What examples do we have in the scripture that help us understand how we can fulfill this extremely important step in our life? How does one become converted?

To be converted means to be transformed, to be changed, to become a different person. Before we are converted, we are not a child of God at that point in life. We really cannot call ourselves believers in the atoning power of the shed blood of Jesus Christ. It is important that we understand that it is not possible to go from being an unbeliever to being a child of God without becoming a different person.

Time and space do not permit a review of each of the dramatic examples of conversion that are contained in the holy Word of God. A few examples can help us understand the significance of conversion, the profound impact that it had on the one who was converted, and the thoroughness that was necessary to become useful to God and to remove the control that Satan had upon them.

Before Christ came to earth, it was apparent that conversion was necessary if someone wanted to serve God. When Saul was anointed King of Israel “...God gave him another heart:...” (I Sam. 10:9).

Peter was bold, very sure of himself and profane. Peter told Jesus “...I will lay down my life for thy sake” (Jn. 13:37). A few hours later “...began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man...” (Mt. 26:74). As his best friend was going through His most trying time, Peter could not even admit that he knew Jesus. He was of no use at all to Jesus at that time. Previously Jesus had told Peter “...when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” (Lk. 22:32).

Jesus knew that Peter needed to be changed and purified by faith in His shed blood. This profane man, who was of no use at one time, was so thoroughly converted that by God’s grace he was able to perform miracles of healing (Acts 5:15) and restoring of life to the dead (Acts 9:40). Obviously it was not Peter, but the power of God working through him that allowed these miracles to be performed.

Saul was willing to lead Christians to their death and even participate as a supportive bystander in the killing of a servant of God (Acts 9:1 and 7:58). After he was converted, Paul was willing to give his life for the cause of Christianity and comforted those who were distressed at the possibility of him being persecuted unto death (Acts 21:13).

Numerous other examples, such as the Philippian jailer, the man possessed of demons and the woman of Samaria, show the power of conversion.

What message or lesson is there for us in these examples? Can the power of God still be depended upon to transform a lost (and spiritually useless) soul into a dynamic force for the message of Jesus Christ?

None of the individuals cited, and no one who has ever been converted, accomplished the task by themselves. They all were converted by the power of God. They had to become completely submissive to

the will of God. Saul had to reach the point where he willingly submitted to God's call. "And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do...?" (Acts 9:6). He was told what his assignment was, one step at a time, and he willingly did it, even when it must have seemed very difficult.

What happens when a soul is only willing to become partly converted? Simon the Sorcerer believed and was baptized, but it appears to be obvious that he was neither submissive nor completely converted. He had pride and wanted power, even offering money to obtain it. Peter made it very clear that this was sin: "...for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:21-23). Partial conversion is an open invitation to Satan to destroy a soul. Simon didn't want to separate himself from the world. He wanted to keep the old life and add the new life to it.

Jesus made it abundantly clear that the old life must be put aside if we want to have the benefit of God's plan of salvation. We cannot "...put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish:..." (Mt. 9:17). Both the wine and the bottles were lost.

If we try to put a new life into an old lifestyle, all will be lost. The conversion must be complete. We must separate ourselves from individuals and from behaviors that will cause us to be lost. "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing..." (II Cor. 6:17). The separation from evil must be complete. The scribes and the Pharisees tried to be partly righteous and partly preserve their old life. Jesus said "...except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:20).

How thoroughly must a soul be converted? The rich, young ruler who came to Jesus wanted to know what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus reminded him of the commandments. The young man had observed all of these from his youth. Jesus' response to the young man was very sobering: "...One thing thou lackest..." (Mk. 10:21).

This does not mean if we make one mistake we are lost. Jesus didn't say "You made one mistake" but He taught us that if we have anything in our life that is more important than serving God, it must be removed so our sins "...shall be as white as snow..." (Is. 1:18). Does this sound too hard? "With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible" (Mk. 10:27).

Songs of Victory

Other than prayer, reading of God's Word, and meditating upon God's Word, perhaps there is no part of worshipping God more important in our faith than singing. Included among the many beautiful hymns we treasure are songs of victory.

God's people have long been encouraged by songs of victory. Moses, in leading the children of Israel out of Egypt to the promised land, led the children of Israel in a song of victory. The children of Israel had feared greatly when the Egyptians pursued after them. They thought they were trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea. But God delivered them out of the hands of the Egyptians. Moses said "...I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously;..." (Ex. 15:1). Moses then went on to list in his song many things that the Lord did to deliver the children of Israel from the Egyptians.

After Deborah and Barak led Israel over Jabin and Sisera of Canaan, they sang "Praise ye the Lord for the avenging of Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves" (Jud. 5:2). They also went on to sing about many of the details of what the Lord had done to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Canaanites.

John, while banished on the Isle of Patmos, recorded that he "...heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters ... and they sung as it were a new song before the throne ... which were redeemed from the earth" (Rev. 14:2-3). John also saw at the time of the seven last plagues, "...them that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God. And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb,..." (Rev. 15:2-3).

We also have the opportunity to sing songs of victory. Godly singing has so many potential applications in our lives beginning at the time our parents sang to us as infants and continuing to comfort through old age.

Music can awaken an unconverted soul, soothe a broken heart, encourage a weary pilgrim, provide an avenue of thanksgiving, calm a troubled spirit and inspire the faithful to greater faithfulness.

How many of us in our unconverted life were reminded by the words and melody of a hymn that we were undone before our God and condemned eternally if we did not turn to the Lord? "Almost persuaded, harvest is past! Almost persuaded, doom comes at last! Almost cannot avail; almost is but to fail! Sad, sad, that bitter wail, Almost, but lost!" ("Almost Persuaded", Hymns of Zion #212). This is undoubtedly one of the saddest verses in any hymn we sing if unheeded, but it becomes a song of victory when it awakens a soul to repentance.

Undoubtedly most of us who have been children of God for any length of time can recall situations in which we were greatly distressed when a hymn, by the power and grace of God, brought relief. When we sing "He'll lighten the load, And level the road And bear thee on hands of compassion" ("The Best Refuge", Zion's Harp #46) and other hymns of encouragement, our spirits can be lifted by the powerful message and the beautiful melody.

Many hymns tell a story of a successful journey by a pilgrim, who at times in the journey may have been a bit discouraged, yet in keeping sight of the goal, was encouraged to complete the race and gain the victory. "I saw a wayward trav'ler, In tatter'd garments clad, And struggling up the mountain, It seem'd that he was sad; His back was laden heavy, His strength was almost gone, Yet he shouted as he journeyed, Deliverance will come. The songsters in the arbor, That stood beside the way, Attracted his

attention, Inviting his delay; His watchword being 'Onward!' He stopped his ears and ran, Still shouting as he journeyed, 'Deliverance will come.' I saw him in the evening, The sun was bending low, He'd overtopped the mountain, And reached the vale below; He saw the golden city, His everlasting home, And shouted loud, 'Hosanna, Deliverance will come!' While gazing on that city, Just o'er the narrow flood, A band of holy angels Came from the throne of God; They bore him on their pinions, Safe o'er the dashing foam; And joined him in his triumph, - Deliverance had come! Then palms of victory, crowns of glory, Palms of victory I shall bear." ("Deliverance Will Come", Gospel Hymns #225, verses 1,3,4,5).

We often sing songs of praise and thanksgiving to God for his goodness and mercy. Many hymns in our song books are songs of Thanksgiving, providing words and messages more beautiful than most of us could write ourselves. "Now thank we all our God, With heart, and hands and voices, Who wondrous things has done, In whom the world rejoices, Who from our mother's arms Has blest us on our way With countless gifts of love, And still is ours today" ("All Come and Thank the Lord", Zion's Harp #236).

We can also find calmness for a troubled soul in many hymns. When we sing "Though troubles assail And dangers affright, Though friends should all fail And foes all unite, Yet one thing secures us Whatever betide, This promise assures us: 'The Lord will provide!'" ("The Lord Will Provide", Zion's Harp #86).

Many hymns inspire us to greater faithfulness. "My faith gives joy and sweetest rest, Leads me to heaven and the blest, To Thee, my God and Father. The comfort of mortality Preserve with steadfast faith in me; I'd follow Thee forever. Salvation is the noblest part; Impress this deeply on my heart." ("The Assurance of True Faith", Zion's Harp #102).

Undoubtedly we would all agree that the hymns we sing and the hymnbooks we use should never be considered as a replacement for the Bible nor do we put the importance of these books on equal footing with the Bible. Nothing should ever replace nor equal the holy scriptures, but we can gain much comfort and encouragement from the hymns we sing.

Stumbling Blocks

Satan has many devices to cause confusion and heartache for God's people. One of the tools he uses so successfully is to cause stumbling blocks to be placed in our paths.

A stumbling block is something which causes us to err or to stray from the truth. Casting a stumbling block in one's way is the opposite of being our brother's keeper.

The seriousness of casting a stumbling block in one's way was made very clear by Jesus when He said "But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in" (Mt. 23:13). The very ones who should have been helpful were guilty of making it more difficult for God's people to do what was right.

The problem of causing others to err has been evident since long before Christ. Isaiah wrote "...Cast ye up, cast ye up, prepare the way, take up the stumbling block out of the way of my people" (Is. 57:14). Malachi also wrote of the problem when he chastised the messengers of the Lord who "...are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts" (Mal. 2:7).

Ezekiel wrote at length about the shepherds who were more concerned about their selfish interests than they were about feeding the flocks. In Ez. Chap. 34 he wrote of those who neither cared for the diseased nor sought those who were scattered. The sheep wandered upon the face of the earth and no one searched for them. The stumbling block was acts of selfishness and neglect.

From this example and other scriptures, we can understand that there are many ways we can cast a stumbling block in the way of God's people. Perhaps the most serious stumbling block of all was committed when the Savior was put to death. This was done to discourage others from following Him. The Jewish leaders at that time were willing to go to any extreme to silence the message of salvation and to prevent anyone from following Jesus.

Persecution against Christians has been a tool that Satan has used ever since Christ arose from the dead. "...And at that time there was great persecution against the church..." (Acts 8:1). Throughout history and continuing to our time, persecution has made it difficult for those who want to worship God.

The preceding examples have been quite blatant and easy to recognize. We must also understand that there are more subtle, but very effective, stumbling blocks that cause men to fail. We must be careful that we do not allow ourselves to be guilty of them.

"Christian liberty" has often been used as justification to engage in activities that, at best, are borderline sin. It is true that Christ came to earth to liberate us from Satan. It is also true that we "...shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption unto the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Ro. 8:21) and "...where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (II Cor. 3:17).

The Apostle Paul wrote much about liberty. In Romans 14 he encourages us to have forbearance with a weak brother who may not have faith to do as we do. However, he also wrote of the need to "...take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak" (I Cor. 8:9) and to "...use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Ga. 5:13). Peter wrote that we must not use "...your liberty as a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God" (I Pe. 2:16).

How, then, can we be sure we do not put a stumbling block in our brother's way? God is faithful. In His Word He provides instruction that helps us in this matter. "He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him" (I Jn. 2:10).

Jesus said "This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you" (Jn. 15:12). If we love our brother as Christ loved us, there will be no sacrifice which is too great. If Christ was willing to die for us, we ought to be willing to go to great lengths to see that we do not cause another to fall.

Paul helps us understand that we should be willing not only to avoid sin to help our brother, but that we should be willing to go much further. If there is something that we see as harmless that might offend one with a weak conscience "...for whom Christ died" (I Cor. 8:11) we really must be willing to do what we can to be helpful to others.

Clearly, Paul saw no harm in eating meat, even if it was sacrificed to idols because he knew "...an idol was nothing in the world, and there is none other God but one" (I Cor. 8:4). Even though he knew idols were nothing and eating meat was harmless "...if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend" (I Cor. 8:13).

Jesus Christ came into the world that we all could have the opportunity to be saved. He came to save us from eternal separation from God. He makes it clear that we are to love and help one another. He also made it clear that there are two destinations for the souls of man. One is eternal bliss with God. The other is "Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched" (Mt. 5:12). If we follow the teachings of Jesus we will help one another reach our goal of eternal rest. If we do not follow His instructions we could cast a stumbling block in the path of our brother.

Letting Go of Life

“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die:...” (Ec. 3:1-2). “There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death...” (Ec. 8:8). “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:” (He. 9:27).

Undoubtedly all of us believe that we will physically die unless Christ’s second coming is soon. We had no impact on when we were born, and until fairly recent times, there was little that anyone could do to significantly delay the time of one’s death. Medical science has advanced to the point where it is now possible to keep the human body “alive” far beyond what was possible a short time ago. In many cases this has been very beneficial. Many diseases and injuries can be cured that would have been fatal several decades ago. Children who are born with serious medical problems can now live nearly normal lives.

In addition to the benefits, there are serious negative effects. It is now necessary for many families to make very difficult decisions that previous generations did not need to consider.

The desire for long life seems to be a normal human trait. In the Ten Commandments we are told to “Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee” (Ex. 20:12). Hezekiah, when told to get his house in order because he was going to die, turned his face to the wall, prayed, and wept sore. He was given an additional fifteen years to live. (II Ki. 20:1-6). When Lazarus died, Jesus was filled with compassion and restored his life (Jn. 11).

One very difficult question that our grandparents did not have to consider is whether we allow someone to die or do we do all we can to preserve life. Is it wrong to allow someone to die when they could be kept alive, perhaps for long periods of time? Is it wrong to keep someone alive when it is nearly certain that they can never recover enough to enjoy life? There are even those who would ask if it is ethical to administer medication that would hasten death.

We must understand that there is a significant moral difference between allowing death to come and intentionally causing death. Allowing someone who is terminally ill to die does not prevent us from having hope for the eternal welfare of that soul. The dying process can be a meaningful spiritual experience for the dying person and their loved ones. Paul wrote “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). When a soul is prepared for death and has found peace with God and man, to require him to continue to live when there is no hope of recovery is of questionable value.

How do we decide whether to use life support methods or whether to continue them after we have allowed them to be put in place? The decision, of course, is very weighty. None of us want to play God on either side of the issue. In addition to ethical questions, there may also be legal issues.

The legal issues undoubtedly can be handled by having individuals make decisions and provisions for carrying out those decisions while they are still mentally competent to decide. Requests such as clarifying that one does not want life support technology to be used to extend life when there is no hope of recovery can be helpful to the family members who must make difficult decisions under very stressful circumstances. These are matters which should be very carefully and prayerfully considered prior to the time when they must be implemented.

Spiritually, morally, is it acceptable to allow a loved one to die? We have numerous examples in the Bible in which God’s servants, even when in good health, did not try to avoid death. History seems to

tell us that John was the only one of the twelve apostles who died a natural death. We know that our “...body is the temple of the Holy Ghost, which is in you, which you have of God, and ye are not your own” (I Cor. 6:19). God determines if the time has come when our work here is complete.

We know that physical death is not the end of our existence. “Jesus said,... I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die...” (Jn. 11:25-26). Many other scriptures could be cited that promise eternal life to the believer (Mt. 25:46; Jn. 6:27; I Tim. 6:19). From these and other scriptures we know that physical death is not the end. Therefore, for a believer it is not wrong to allow this life to end.

The difficult part, however, is to know when a soul has reached the point of no return. How do we decide when to stop delaying the inevitable?

There appear to be some factors that can be considered in making this decision. Is the person ready to meet God? What is the quality of life that the person is experiencing? Is there a great deal of discomfort for the one who is nearing death? Does the individual wish to continue the struggle? What are the benefits of sustaining the life? What is the harm that can result from allowing the person to die or from keeping them alive? What is reasonable or just to the person who is ill, to his or her family or to society? Are we interfering with God’s plan?

Perhaps none of the above questions individually will help us make the right decision. Certainly the answers to those questions should be sought prayerfully and with counsel from those who are in a position to help. Medical experts can help us understand the likelihood of reasonable recovery. Those sound in the faith may be able to help us deal with spiritual and personal concerns. Are we selfishly trying to keep someone alive?

It may be that the best way to honor God and respect the life of the individual is to simply provide physical, emotional and spiritual comfort to the dying soul. We must be honest with them about their condition and yet we must not discourage them.

In the final analysis we must remember it was God who gave life (Gen. 2:7). We are taken out of life by God: “...thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust” (Ps. 104:29). If we allow God’s purpose in our life we “...shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified and meet for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work” (II Tim 2:21). What greater blessing could we have than letting go of a loved one who can say “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge; shall give me at that day:...” (II Tim. 4:7-8)?

Self-Sacrifice

“Let your whole life be an offering to God and to Christ the Lord. None who here to Him surrender will regret it, for His Word gives us peace and release, Sweet rest after battles cease” (“Self-sacrifice” vs. 1, p. 159, Zion’s Harp).

The world suggests that we take care of “number one”, to indulge ourselves, or to believe it is about time you do something for you. Human nature is such that the more we have the more we want and the more we want the less satisfied we are with what we have.

What does the scripture tell us about self indulgence versus self sacrifice? There are numerous places in the Bible that explain the folly of trusting in riches. “He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man:...” (Prov. 21:17). “But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth” (I Ti. 5:6). To the church in Laodicea John wrote “...thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.”(Rev. 3:17).

It is quite obvious from the scripture that material wealth does not bring peace with God. It tends to make one self centered and is deceitful. Solomon, in all his glory, had many problems that were made worse because of materialism. Jesus said that all of Solomon’s glory did not even array him as a simple lily of the field.

Self sacrifice, on the other hand, if done in humility and in accord with the Word of God can bring joy, peace and contentment. The church at Smyrna was regarded as a poor church. However, Jesus said “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich)...” (Rev. 2:9). Because of their faithfulness and willingness to sacrifice all for God, they will receive a crown of life and, if they overcome, “...shall not be hurt of the second death” (Rev. 2:11).

Jesus said to his disciples “...If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Mt. 16:24). To truly live a life of self-sacrifice, we must put Jesus Christ ahead of self, home, family, friends, business, or anything else that would come in the way of serving Jesus Christ as our Lord and Master. It may seem a bit harsh and demanding to be required to put all these things in their proper place, but Jesus recognized the seriousness and deceitfulness of idolatry. Therefore, he wanted to make certain that our priorities are in order.

To encourage the importance of putting our relationship with Christ first He said “if any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Lu. 14:26). The desires of the flesh must be mortified and put off (Col. 3:5-9) so we can put on the new man and the characteristics of a godly man (Col. 3:10-16).

It is very encouraging that the Apostle Paul was inspired to recognize that simply emptying our heart and mind of sin (mortify and put off) would not be enough. An empty heart would leave a vacuum for Satan to fill. Therefore, he went on to instruct us to “put on” those characteristics that would fill our lives with godly attributes that will defeat Satan.

We sometimes find ourselves too absorbed in our work. It may cause us to ignore our families as we work our way up the financial ladder. It may also cause us to miss regularly scheduled church services. It may consume our mind and energy to the point that we cannot focus on our spiritual needs even on Sunday.

We know that we are commanded to work, to provide for our own and “in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread...” (Gen. 3:19). We also know that if we place too great of emphasis on materialism, it could be our downfall. ”And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry” (Lu. 12:19). What did Jesus say about our work? “...he went forth, and saw a publican, named Levi, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he said unto him, Follow me. And he left all, rose up, and followed him” (Lu. 5:27-28). Certainly not all are called to leave their work completely as the disciples were, but we need to keep our priorities in godly order. It is not likely that many men on their death bed wish they would have spent less time with their wife and children and more time at the office.

There are many rewards awaiting those who are willing to sacrifice self and serve God. We are promised that if we are willing to sacrifice self, the fleshly lusts will be subdued. “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Ro. 6:6).

Self-sacrifice will help us control the desire for the cares of this life. “And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares” (Lu. 21:34).

The Apostle Paul recognized the value of self-sacrifice in helping him serve Christ. “Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ” (Ph. 3:8).

Jesus gave a very clear summary of the value of self-sacrifice. “...There is no man which hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God’s sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting” (Lu. 18:29-30).

What inheritance do we want to leave for our children? Do we want to leave them many material blessings so they are not required to do without any of the creature comforts? Or do we want to leave them with a rich heritage of faith that will sustain them when Satan brings trials upon them?

When we realize the value of serving God and the fleeting nature of the things of this world, we can better appreciate the words “Tis important to be striving for this goal, O, child of God, and to realize the calling wherefore we live on this sod, not that we gathering be riches here that only flee” (Self-sacrifice, v.4, p.159, Zion’s Harp).

Who Shall Be Able to Stand?

In the book of Revelation we read of a time when the moon will become as blood, the stars in heaven shall fall to the earth, and the kings, great men, rich men, chief captains, mighty men, bondmen, and free men will hide themselves in the dens and the rocks of the mountains so they will not have to face the wrath of the Lamb. “For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?” (Rev. 6:17).

All of the things that the world trusts for security - government power, greatness, wealth, military might and physical strength shall fail. What will cause them to fail? A Lamb! One generally thinks of a lamb as gentle, meek and mild. These are hardly the characteristics that are thought of to stand up to the forces of strength in this world.

The scripture gives us direction about who shall be able to stand. In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus told a story of two men who built a house. One house fell and one stood firmly against the flood and the wind that beat upon that house (Mt. 7:24-25). Why did one house stand and one house fall? The difference is the foundation. The house that fell was built on a foundation of sand. The house that stood was built upon a foundation of rock.

Each of us is building a spiritual house. If we want our house to stand, we would do well to build our house on a foundation of Rock. The Word of God gives us plenty of material to use in building, not only the foundation but the entire house. We know that in building a house there are materials we should not use and materials we should use. So it is in building a house of faith. There are things to avoid and things to hold fast.

The Lord hates evil. Throughout the scriptures we are encouraged to “...follow not that which is evil...” (III Jn 11). So much does God hate evil that we are to “Abstain from all appearance of evil” (I Thess. 5:22). Evil is everything contrary to God’s Word. Therefore, we should avoid all that is contrary to His Word.

We are also cautioned to avoid placing our trust in men, even if they seem like great men. “Put not forth thyself in the presence of the king, and stand not in the place of great men:” (Pr. 25:6). We might wonder about placing our trust in those who have faithfully followed God. Are they not great men and can they not be followed? Those who were men of God knew that it was really God who was to be followed, not themselves. Solomon, when he was very faithful, realized that he could not rule by his own wisdom. When asked by God what he wanted he said “...I know not how to go out or come in ...Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart ...for who is able to judge this thy so great a people” (I Ki. 3:7-9)?

We are also taught not to trust in “...uncertain riches...” I Tim. 6:17), to “...keep ourselves from idols...” (I Jn. 5:21) and “...we should not trust in ourselves...” (II Cor. 1:9). There are many other cautions in the Word of God of those things we must not place our trust in that space does not permit to list.

There are many very encouraging statements in the Bible that tell us where to place our trust so we can stand in the day of judgment. The most obvious, of course, is to “...love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength... and thy neighbor as thyself...” (Mk. 12:30-31).

Such thoroughness may be difficult for us to comprehend, but we are encouraged that God will not ask more of us than what He will give strength to do. “The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms: and he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee...” (De. 33:27). God’s promise of help continues to the end of our life. “And even to your old age I am he: and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you” (Is. 46:4).

The first requirement for us to be able to stand is to have faith in God. We know that “...without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is...” (Heb. 11:6). We can read of many examples of men who felt they could not do what God wanted them to do. They feared they could not stand in the face of trials. But, when they put their trust in God, they were able to stand faithful against great obstacles (See Heb. 11).

If we allow the Spirit of God to dwell in us, He will help us to stand fast. “And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them” (Ez. 36:27). We cannot stand fast if we trust in the flesh “But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you...” (Ro. 8:9).

Not only must we have faith in God and allow His Spirit to dwell in us, but we must also rely upon His grace to see us through trials and temptations. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). We must strive to grow in grace throughout our lives: “But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...” (II Pet. 3:18). When we feel weak and believe we do not have sufficient grace, we can take comfort in the words of our Savior: “...My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness...” (II Cor. 12:9).

There are many characteristics that help us to stand firm in God’s service. Faith, the Spirit of God dwelling in us, grace and many others could not be expounded upon because of space limitation.

Who shall be able to stand? Perhaps David summed it up for us very well. “He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully” (Ps. 24:4).

Legalism or Holiness?

In many places in the scripture we are exhorted to be holy. From the very beginning of time God commanded His people to obey His laws. The fulfillment of God's promise to send His Son to defeat Satan and shed His blood for our sins brought great changes to the lives of God's people. Much of the detail of the old law no longer applies to our lives. However, at no time did the need for holiness diminish. "...be ye holy: for I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 20:7) is no less important today than when it was written many years before Christ came to earth. The encouragement to be holy is repeated in the New Testament. Peter wrote "...Be ye holy; for I am holy" (I Pet. 1:16).

We know that sin cannot enter into heaven. Unless we are purified and cleansed from all unrighteousness, we cannot be saved. In spite of the clarity of the scripture that our spiritual garments must be clean and spotless, many professing Christians deny the need for holiness for an individual to enter into heaven. Simply professing a belief in God or accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior are regarded as all that is needed to enter into heaven.

Many professing Christians consider the requirement of holiness to enter the kingdom of heaven as "legalistic". The standards that warn us to flee from evil and to separate ourselves from the world are often dismissed as simply the rules of man. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that they should "...come out from among them (idolaters), and be ye separate..." (II Cor. 6:17).

It is true that we must be careful to not add to the Word of God and to not make the way of salvation appear that we can "earn" our way into heaven by following the guidelines of man. It is also true that Christ's righteousness and His sacrifice do not relieve us of the need to be righteous, to be free from the pollutions of the world, and to be holy. We cannot be like the world and be a child of God. To be a child of God we must be quite different from the world, so different that we will be peculiar. Christ "...gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works" (Titus 2:14). Paul wrote that we "...are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people..." (I Peter 2:9).

There are those who believe and teach that it is not possible to live righteously and to live an overcoming life. They maintain that Christians are nothing but saved sinners who continue to sin daily. Many professing Christians state that those who believe we must attain unto holiness, live sanctified, purified lives, and be Christ-like are legalistic and reverting to the old law. Many deny that our lives must demonstrate holiness, purity and the fruit of the Spirit.

Those who would espouse a false doctrine of continuing in sin are "...ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 4). John was inspired of God to write to the church of Pergamos that there were those "that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate"(Rev. 2:15). The church of Ephesus was commended because they "...hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate" (Rev. 2:6). The Nicolaitanes were those who followed Nicholas, one who taught that the grace of God could be stretched to cover all unrighteousness and that it was not necessary to live a righteous, overcoming life.

There are many scriptures that tell us we must indeed live a holy life, one of faith in God and of works that bear fruit. To all seven of the angels of the churches in Asia which John was commanded to write, Christ said "I know thy works". Also, to all seven of the churches, there was a special promise made to those that overcome.

Paul wrote that those who were guilty of the works of the flesh "...shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:21). He also wrote that "...they which commit such things are worthy of death..." (Ro. 1:32). John was inspired to write that those who are guilty of unholy acts described in Rev. 21:8 "...shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death."

There are those who teach that because "...all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Ro. 3:23) that there is no way we can become free from sin. The Bible teaches us that we "were" sinners, "...but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of God" (I Cor. 6:11). "...Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16).

There is no condemnation to those who "...walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law hath made me free from the law of sin and death" (Ro. 8:1-2). This does not mean we are free to sin, but rather by the grace of God we "...shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Ro. 8:21). Although we do have liberty in Christ, at no time is this liberty meant to free us to do whatever we wish. We can be free from the yoke of sin. This does not free us from the need to be holy. "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9).

Holiness is not legalism. If we have faith we "...can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13). We can love Him and keep His commandments for "...his commandments are not grievous" (I Jn. 5:3). If we fulfill His commandments we can truly have in our hearts the fruit of the Spirit "...love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law" (Gal. 5:22-23).

My Grace is Sufficient for Thee

Nearly everyone who has been a child of God for any length of time has had a problem which seems too heavy for him to carry. After pleading with God to be relieved of the burden, we may have found that the problem was not removed nor was it made lighter. At times such as this we may become concerned that we are not praying properly, that God is not listening to our prayer, that we may have fallen from grace, or that some other spiritual calamity has befallen us.

Satan, of course, does not miss such opportunities to try to weaken our faith. He will try to increase every concern or doubt that we have ever had. He will attempt to magnify the problem in our minds and cause us to believe that God does not really care about us.

The apostle Paul had a thorn in the flesh and he "...besought the Lord..." (II Cor. 12:8) three times that he could be relieved of his problem. Besought does not merely mean asked. It means to petition urgently or pressingly. We certainly can understand that Paul didn't pray in a brief or shallow manner. He pleaded with God for relief. Instead of removing the problem God told Paul "...My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness..." (II Cor. 12:9). God answered Paul's prayer, but not in the manner Paul had wanted.

How did Paul respond to God when he realized that God's answer was not what he wanted? Paul was able to look at it as an opportunity rather than a burden. He knew that it would not be of his own strength that would see him through his ordeal, but rather the power of Christ was resting upon him so he could say "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (II Cor. 12:10).

The grace of God is defined in a number of ways. It is often referred to as the undeserved love and favor of God. It may also be defined as the power that we have from God that enables us to do for God what we would not be able to do ourselves or simply the strength to endure trials and remain faithful.

How can we obtain the grace of God? What value does it have for us? After we have found the grace of God, how can we keep it as a vital force in our lives? After we have tasted of the grace of God, can we misuse or even lose it?

First of all, we must understand that we cannot earn the grace of God. It is freely given to those who will humble themselves and submit to His will. "...and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" (I Peter 5:5).

We must also realize that we should never think we have attained perfection where we do not need to allow God's grace to grow within us. We never reach the point where we can believe that we have fully matured and need no more grace. "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ..." (II Peter 3:18).

The value of grace, of course, is almost beyond our ability to comprehend. Without the grace of God we cannot be saved: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). The grace of God gives us faith in the atoning power of the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Without this faith we could not have forgiveness of our sins. "For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Mt. 26:28).

Although physical death is pronounced upon sinful man, by the grace of God eternal death can be avoided. The sacrifice of countless animals provided only a temporary atonement for sins. A perfect

sacrifice was required to pay the price of our sins. Christ's blood had to be shed for our sins for "...without shedding of blood there is no remission" (Heb. 9:22). Christ's sacrifice was the fulfillment of the covenant that God made with man that if we allow God to put his "...laws into (our) hearts, and in (our) minds ...(our) sins and iniquities will I remember no more" (Heb. 10:16 & 17).

We can only keep the grace of God in our hearts and lives if we are desirous of spiritual growth. "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ..." (2 Pet. 3:18). "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (I Pet. 2:2). "And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, patience; and to patience, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, charity. For if these things be in you ... ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful..." (II Pet. 1:5-8).

The grace of God is not for selfish use nor for abuse. We must be "...good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Pet. 4:10). If we are not good stewards of God's grace, we will find ourselves in the same position as the steward who was accused of wasting his master's goods and was removed from his stewardship. Numerous scriptural references indicate that we could lose the grace of God.

The Apostle Paul reminded us that we are the servants of those we obey. "...Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid..."

(Ro. 6:1-2). If we are the servants of sin it will bring us spiritual death and if we are obedient to God it will bring us to righteousness and life eternal with God. Paul also wrote "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace" (Ga. 5:4).

God will provide the grace we need to do His will if our heart is after the will of God. God wants us to feel His grace. He wants us to be able to escape the pollutions of the world and He wants to provide for our spiritual needs. He has a gift for each of us and He wants to give it to us. "But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ" (Ep. 4:7). God has "...no pleasure in the death of the wicked;..." (Ez. 33:11). He would "...have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4).

Spiritual Riches I

“Men strive for the wealth of this wide wicked world. They seek after honor and fame. So lavishly sporting their diamonds and pearls, they put the dear Savior to shame.” (“I’d Rather Have Jesus”; Luther Presley).

Men become very confused when it comes to riches. Some think they are rich when they are poor and some think they are poor when they are rich. Some think that their riches make them better than others. As they compare themselves with others they think they are better. In the parable of the publican and the Pharisee, the Pharisee thought very highly of himself because of all the good, including tithing, that he did. We are reminded that “...we dare not... compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise” (II Cor. 10:12). He would have been much better off recognizing his weaknesses and seeking spiritual wealth.

Trusting in material riches will lead us into difficulty. “They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches; None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him:” (Ps. 49:6-7). Jesus shocked His disciples when He told them “...How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God” (Mk. 10:23)! Clearly, material riches do not draw us closer to God.

In writing to the seven churches in Asia, John wrote to Smyrna, “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich)...” (Rev. 2:9). He wrote to the Laodiceans “Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich;...” (Rev. 3:17-18).

The church in Smyrna had the promise of a crown of life. Unless the Laodiceans took the counsel of God, He would spue them out of His mouth and they would have no hope of spiritual wealth. Why was there confusion? What was the difference? Smyrna trusted in spiritual riches and those from Laodicea trusted in material riches. Solomon recognized this difference when he wrote “There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches” (Pr. 13:7).

What are spiritual riches? What examples do we have of spiritual riches? How can we acquire them? How can we retain our spiritual riches?

All riches, spiritual and material, come from God. If we focus our lives on materialism, God may allow us to accumulate significant material assets. Material assets, if used properly and kept in proper perspective, may be a blessing. However, if we allow material riches to become too important in our lives, they could become an idol and cost us our salvation.

A young ruler approached Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. After a brief explanation of the commandments, Jesus said “...One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me” (Mk. 10:21). The young man clearly was seeking, and wanted, spiritual blessings. He knew there was something lacking in his life. When he learned what the cost of obtaining spiritual blessings was, he decided the cost was too great. He was not willing to give up his riches to serve God. This concept of not allowing anything to be more important than serving God is so important that the account is recorded at least three times (Mt. 19:16; Mk. 10:17; Lk. 18:18).

Spiritual riches also come from God and are the blessings we receive from serving Him. “The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it” (Pr. 10:22). It may be confusing to some who observe God’s people as they rejoice in what might appear to be a rather drab life. The blessings of God are not always apparent. At first they may even look like burdens. When we are in the midst of a “disguised” blessing and we read “...that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Ro. 8:28) it may be hard to believe it could ever be a blessing.

It may even be difficult for us to recognize God’s blessings after our affliction has ended and we know “...our light affliction, which is but for a moment...” (II Cor. 4:17). However, as we travel through this life we do learn that trials can become blessings after we have gained enough trust in God that we believe “...My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness...” (II Cor. 12:9).

We do not earn spiritual blessings. We simply cannot do enough good deeds to earn the rewards God gives us. “That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace, in his kindness toward us, through Christ Jesus” (Ep. 2:7). Although we may not receive everything we want, we have the assurance that God will give us all that we need. “But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Ph. 4:19).

Since we know that we do not earn the blessings of God by our goodness, we might come to the conclusion that our behavior has no impact on our blessings from God. How sad it would be for us to hold this false belief. Although God does not “keep score” of our behavior to determine whether He will bless us spiritually, it is very important that we understand that we can lose God’s blessings if we forsake Him. At a time when the children of Israel forsook God, they were warned “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord:” (Am. 8:11). The prodigal son learned of the high price of sin when he “...wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want” (Lk. 15:13-14). Forsaking spiritual blessings for the sake of material gain is very costly.

This topic will be continued in the next “Light From the Word”.

Spiritual Riches II

In the previous “Light from the Word”, the confusion of the world concerning the values of material and spiritual riches was introduced. Scriptural foundations concerning the value of spiritual riches, the deceit of material riches and a definition of spiritual riches were discussed. This article will focus on examples of spiritual blessings, some means of acquiring them and some assurances we have to help us retain our spiritual blessings.

Paul reminded us that God provides us with many blessings. “I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; That in everything ye are enriched by him,...” (I Cor. 1:4-5). As he was explaining some of his sufferings in the ministry, Paul reminded us that even in these distresses he found blessings: “As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things” (II Cor. 6:10).

By giving a little thought no doubt each of us could list many spiritual blessings we have received. The following list is not intended to be exhaustive but rather to spark a few thoughts.

- * We have a powerful, loving God who created all things with an orderliness about them. In this creation we have provisions for all we need (Gen. 1).
- * We most certainly appreciate having a loving Savior who paid the price for our sins and provides us a way whereby Satan can be defeated and we can have peace with God and man through all eternity (Jn. 14:27-31).
- * The Holy Spirit is a very present help in our battle with Satan. His presence enables us to remain faithful (Acts 1:8).
- * The Word of God is available to each of us in a manner that we can be fed as often as we have the desire (Lk. 8:11-15).
- * The grace of God gives us hope and assurance that He will help us (Ro. 5:15-19).
- * We have a church where the truth of God’s Word is preached (Acts 10:28).
- * Most of us have families who love us and help us to stay on the right path (II Cor. 12:24).
- * We have access to God through prayer and His Word (Ro. 12:12).
- * We have beautiful hymns whereby we can praise God and be encouraged (Eph. 5:19).
- * We have access to the history of those who sacrificed on our behalf so the truth would be preserved (Heb. 11).
- * We have the opportunity to worship God, to learn the truth and to live in a manner that will help preserve the truth for those who come after us (Jn. 4:23-24).
- * We have pillars of faith who went before us and who live among us (Ro. 8:17).
- * We live in a land of freedom where we have the privilege of worshipping God as we believe we are instructed to do in His Word (Act. 24:14-16).
- * We have multiple opportunities to help those who may have a need and we have those who will help in our times of need (II Cor. 8:1-5).
- * God will not allow greater temptations to come upon us that the grace will enable us to bear it (I Cor. 10:13).
- * We have the promise that ultimately Satan will be defeated (Rev. 20:10).

No doubt the reader could add many other blessings that we have.

How do we acquire spiritual gifts? We need to make spiritual investments, to have our priorities in godly order and we need to be willing to live for God. The Bible gives us ample instruction on making spiritual investments. Jesus said “But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (Mt. 6:20). He also said “...If thou

wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me” (Mt. 19:21).

Paul wrote “Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God,... that they be rich in good works, ...Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (I Tim. 6:17-19).

How can we retain the spiritual blessings God gives us? We hardly can exhaust the means God has provided for us to retain our blessing. We must live our life according to His instruction by working out our soul’s salvation in fear and trembling (Ph. 2:12). This, of course, includes remaining faithful (Jn. 15:1-11), loving the Lord and our neighbor (Mk. 12:29-31), and not placing the spiritual treasures that God gives us in an unwholesome atmosphere (Mt. 7:6).

God gives us many tools to help us serve Him. Prayer, reading God’s Word, singing hymns, fasting and sharing with others what God has given us. He also has provided us with talents to use the gifts He has given us.

We understand from Christ’s teaching that we will be asked to give account of what God provided for us. Those who waste their blessings will surely regret it (Mt. 25:14-30).

Our opportunities for spiritual riches are limited only by our willingness to serve God. We can be blessed in so many ways if we follow the Word of God (Mt. 5:1-11; I Cor. 13). When we truly understand the temporal nature of material blessings and the eternal nature of spiritual blessings, we can understand that Satan’s goal to deceive will be enhanced if we dwell on material blessings. We will also better understand the words of Jesus when He said “...provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not,... For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Lk. 12:33-34).

Here Am I

“...Here am I; send me” (Is. 6:8). This answer was given by Isaiah in response to a question the Lord had asked: “...Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (Is. 6:8). Isaiah did not feel worthy to take the Lord’s message to the people because he believed he was of unclean lips. A seraphim took a live coal from the alter and touched Isaiah’s lips to take away his iniquity and purge his sin.

Isaiah was willing to go in spite of the fact that he knew his assignment could be very difficult. He knew many would not listen to God’s message, but he also trusted God’s promise that there would be a remnant of Israel who would be faithful. The truth of God will be preserved and there will be those who remain faithful.

When Elijah was discouraged and thought that all of Israel had forsaken God, he was reminded by God that “...I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him” (I Ki. 19:18).

There are many examples in the Bible where God’s servants have responded to difficult assignments from God with “Here am I.”

At the very last moment of time when Abraham was called upon to slay his son “...the Angel of the Lord called... Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I” (Gen. 22:11). It was then that the Lord spared Abraham from offering his son. What would have happened if Abraham would not have recognized the voice of God or if he would not have obeyed God’s voice immediately? Very likely there would have been a tragedy that would have taken Isaac’s life.

At the time of Saul’s conversion, both Saul and Ananias heard the Lord’s call. Saul, who thought he had been serving God faithfully, said, “...Who art thou, Lord?...” (Acts 9:5). Ananias said “...I am here, Lord” (Acts 9:10). What was the difference? Both men thought they were serving God. Both men wanted to do what was right. Both men had a zeal for what they were doing. The difference was that Ananias knew and recognized the voice of Jesus. Saul, on the other hand, was so set in his own wisdom and was so confident in his own thinking that he was unable to recognize the voice of the Lord.

Fortunately for us, Saul (Paul) learned to recognize and submit to the voice of God very quickly. He said “...Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do” (Acts 9:6). From that time on, Paul was willing to do the Lord’s bidding. He didn’t insist on knowing the full assignment. He simply took it a step at a time.

How do we respond to the call of God? Do we recognize His voice and are we willing to do as He says? How can we know it is God’s voice or the prompting of another spirit? How does He speak to us?

Many of us needed more than one call from God to do the most fundamental requirement to be a Christian. For many of us, we did not submit the first time we were called to repentance. We may not have understood His call or perhaps we just weren’t willing to submit to His call and come out from the world.

Sometimes it may be difficult to know for sure what the Lord would have us to do. Sometimes we allow our selfish desires to get in the way of God’s will and the message may get blurred.

Perhaps the first thing we must do is to become completely submissive to God’s will and allow Him to completely convert us. If we have been completely converted, we will no longer have a desire to

partake of the evil of the world. "...the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life,..." (I Jn. 2:16). We must truly desire to give up these things because the Psalmist reminds us that when the children of Israel "...lusted exceedingly... and tempted God ...he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul" (Ps. 106:14-15).

To help us better understand the voice of God and the prompting of His Spirit, we need to become familiar with His Word. His Word "...endureth for ever..." (I Peter 1:25), is milk that "...ye may grow thereby" (I Peter 2:2), "...is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction..." (II Ti. 3:16), "...is the power of God unto salvation" (Ro. 1:16), will "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth" (Jn. 17:17) and is absolutely trustworthy: "Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away" (Lu. 21:33). Since we know the Word and the Spirit of God agree, we can be sure that the Spirit of God will not direct us to do anything that is contrary to His Word.

We may not always understand immediately what God is asking us to do. Many times it takes fervent prayer, diligent searching of God's Word and perhaps counsel from sincere and faithful brethren before we understand His mission clearly. It may be necessary for us to say "Here am I" before we get the full assignment. We may simply need to take a step of faith, trusting that the grace of God will be sufficient to help us do His will.

God speaks to us in a variety of ways. He speaks to us as we read His Word. He speaks to us through sermons, conversations with fellow believers, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in other ways to help us follow His instructions.

With the turmoil and confusion in society, it is necessary for us to separate ourselves so we are in an environment to receive His instruction. "Be still and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth" (Ps. 46:10). Space does not permit all that could be written that would encourage us to serve.

It is very easy to sing "Ready to go, ready to stay, Ready my place to fill; Ready for service, lowly or great, Ready to do His will". However, it is not always easy to be "Ready to suffer grief or pain, Ready to stand the test; Ready to stay at home and send others if He sees best. Ready to go, ready to bear, Ready to watch and pray; Ready to stand aside and give, Till He shall clear the way. Ready to speak, ready to think, Ready with heart and brain; Ready to stand where He sees fit, Ready to stand the strain. Ready to speak, ready to warn, Ready o'er souls to yearn; Ready in life, ready in death, Ready for His return." ("Ready", Hymns of Zion, #124)

Satan is Real - I

For a true child of God, the existence of Satan is a given. The Bible clearly indicates that Satan is real, that his influence in the world is evident and that God's people must constantly be on guard lest we be overcome.

In spite of what the Bible says, in spite of Satan's influence, in spite of the sadness that his work brings and in spite of what Jesus went through to defeat Satan and give us the opportunity for salvation, there are still many people who do not believe Satan is real. In a 1999 survey, fifty-eight percent of American adults believe that Satan is merely a symbol of evil but not real. In a 2001 survey forty-five percent of American adults who professed to be born again Christians denied the existence of Satan.

Who is Satan? Where did he originate? What are his goals? How does he operate? What will be the ultimate fate of Satan? How can we escape a similar fate? It is probably not possible for the human mind to fully grasp the significance of Satan, his work and his influence in the world. However, if we search the Word of God we can gain a significant understanding of Satan and what we must do to overcome his influence against us. God would not place us in this earthly battle between good and evil without helping us to understand the battle plan of the enemy. Any general going out to war would like to know his enemy's plan. If we understand Satan's plan, our victory will be that much easier.

Satan is described in a number of ways. He is referred to as Abaddon or Apollyon (angel of the bottomless pit), the accuser, the adversary, Belial, Beelzebub, the Devil, the god of this world, a murderer, the prince of devils, the prince of the power of the air, the prince of this world, the ruler of darkness, a serpent, the tempter, an unclean spirit, the wicked one and the great dragon. If one has any understanding of the meaning of these titles we can surely understand that Satan is a force to be dealt with.

From the scriptures we understand that Satan at one time was in heaven. "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground which didst weaken the nations" (Is. 14:12). Although Satan was defeated in his attempt to prevail against God, he will likely again try to gain power in heaven in the last times, but he will not prevail, "...neither (will) there place be found any more in heaven" (Rev. 12:8). The vanity, pride and self-exaltation of Satan caused him to rebel against God. This resulted in his expulsion from heaven and should help us to understand our ultimate fate if we also rebel against God.

Having been eternally banned from heaven, Satan's goal for each of us is a similar fate. From the very earliest scriptural account of Satan, we find that his goal is to deceive mankind: "...Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5).

Satan would like us to have pride and a fate similar to his. He said in his heart, "...I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God ...I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High" (Is. 14:13-14). He would like us to become as the king of Tyrus whose "...heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee" (Ez. 28:17).

Jesus reminded Peter of Satan's evil work and his goals for mankind. "...Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not:..." (Lk. 22:31-32).

Numerous passages of scripture tell us of the power of Satan and how he uses his power to deceive mankind. He was given the power to cause great affliction to come upon Job. Job's family was destroyed, his material wealth was taken away, he suffered much physical distress, his wife turned against him and his friends railed upon him.

Satan laid a false claim to authority over the entire world. He took Jesus to a high mountain to show Him all the kingdoms of the world and said to Jesus "...All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. If Thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine" (Lk. 4:5-7). If Satan will lie to Jesus and attempt to deceive Him, do we really believe he will not do so to us also?

Satan will try to blind the minds of unbelievers so they cannot learn the truth. "But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, shall shine unto them" (II Cor. 4:3-4). Jesus reminded his disciples of the blessings and importance of seeing clearly when He said to them "But blessed are your eyes, for they see,..." (Mt. 13:16)

Not only does Satan work to keep the unbelievers from learning the truth, he tries to cause confusion among the believers "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12). Satan lies to try to cause the truth to be mixed with deceit. "...When he (the devil) speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it" (Jn. 8:44). There are numerous examples in the Bible where lying caused much grief. Jacob lied to his father when he said he was Esau (Gen. 27). Joseph's brothers lied to their father about his death (Gen. 37). Ananias and Sapphira lied to Peter (actually to God) about the sale of their property (Acts 5). Peter lied when he said he did not know Christ (Mt. 26:69-75). In attempting to avoid the truth and take the "easy" way out, we can get ourselves into serious trouble.

This topic will be continued in next month's "Light From the Word".

Satan is Real II

In the previous editorial, some of the characteristics of Satan were discussed. This topic will be further developed this month.

Satan's work is like cancer. If left unchecked, it will spread far beyond its original point of impact. Eve's sin spread quickly to Adam and, of course, to all mankind. When Lot allowed himself to choose the better land and separate himself from Abraham, he ultimately moved into the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. King Solomon, having married many strange women, ultimately was led into idolatry. No doubt most of us have known someone who allowed themselves some "small" liberty only to be led further down the path of sin until they were consumed by it.

Satan will try to make saints look as though they are evil or that they serve God only because God has given them some special protection which, if taken away, would cause them to turn against God. When Paul was shipwrecked and landed on the island of Melita, as he stood warming himself by the fire, a venomous beast fastened itself onto Paul. The barbarians immediately assumed he was a wicked man. Even though Satan tried to make Paul look evil to the residents of the island, God turned the evil intent of Satan into good.

Satan tried to convince God that Job only served Him for selfish reasons. God gave Satan much latitude with Job, putting him through many grievous trials, but ultimately Job's faith prevailed. His faith stood the test of trials and his integrity toward God did not fail.

Mixing evil with good is another tactic Satan uses effectively. He sometimes appears as "...an angel of light" (II Cor. 11:14) causing great distress. He will try to remove the good seed (truth) and cause confusion.

As Jesus taught His disciples, He told them that some who hear God's Word will not understand it before "...the wicked one (will come), and (catch) away that which was sown in his heart..." (Mt. 13:19) and it (will) not yield good fruit. In other cases Satan will allow the truth (good seed) to sprout and grow. However, when the blade springs up there are also tares. When asked about the source of the tares, the householder recognized what had happened. "...An enemy hath done this..." (Mt. 13:28). Of course, Satan also just brings sin into the heart of mankind. As Jesus was with His disciples for the last supper before His crucifixion, "...the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him" (Jn. 13:2).

The overriding impact of all of Satan's devices is to cause deceit in the hearts of man. If he can cause us to either believe evil is not so serious or cause us to believe we are right when we are wrong, he will have accomplished his purpose. Undoubtedly many other examples and tactics of Satan could be cited. From the above, we certainly can understand that the devil will use any means and go to any extreme to cause confusion and bring sin into the lives of mankind.

Fortunately, it is not necessary for us to fall victim to Satan's viciousness. God has given us many tools to help us in our battle against evil. Just as Jesus was able to resist Satan, by God's grace we can do likewise.

Obviously the first line of defense against Satan is to become a child of God. We must repent (Mt. 4:17), be converted (Mt. 18:3), seek and receive forgiveness (Mt. 6:12), be baptized (Acts 2:38), and live pure (I Tim. 5:22) and sanctified lives (Ro. 15:16). If we are truly following the whole counsel of God, we can resist Satan's influence.

A child of God must learn to be watchful. In explaining to His disciples that they would face many trials and temptations, and exposing many of the tactics that Satan would use to try to cause them to fail, He concluded His warning with a very simple and clear warning: “And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch” (Mk. 13:37). Familiarity with God’s Word will help us in our watch. Studying His Word will alert us to many of the problems we will face.

Perhaps the first and greatest problem is our own weakness. Jesus recognized this when, in His hour of great temptation He said to His disciples “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt. 26:41).

We must be watchful because we know the Bible is true and there are many assurances that Christ will return and claim His bride, the Church, which will be made up of those who loved and served Him. Jesus told His accusers at His trial “...Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven” (Mt. 26:64).

There are also others in the scripture who told of the certainty of Christ’s return. As Christ was ascending into heaven following His resurrection, two men, apparently angels, said to those who were watching Him being taken up “...this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). In Revelation Ch. 6:12-17, we have a description of the return of Christ in the midst of turmoil when men will try to hide from the Lamb, but will find to their dismay that they will neither be able to hide from Him nor be able to stand before Him.

From these and other scriptures we know Christ will return to earth, not as a baby, but as a King. What we do not know is when He will return. Jesus said that mankind will be engaged in everyday activities - “...eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage...” (Mt. 24:38) when He returns and no one will know the time. “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my father only” (Mt. 24:36). To emphasize the unexpected nature of Christ’s second coming, John was inspired to write “Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame” (Rev. 16:15). No one really expects a thief to come at a specified time, so we try to take precautions that will have us prepared for an unexpected strike.

Since we do not know when Jesus will come, part of being watchful is to be prepared at all times. All ten of the virgins intended to be ready for the return of the bridegroom. Unfortunately, only five of them were ready at all times. When the five foolish virgins tried to make last minute preparations, “...the door was shut” (Mt. 25:10). Jesus emphasized the importance of readiness when He said that they must watch carefully for His return “Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping” (Mk. 13:36).

This topic will continue in the next article for “Light From the Word”.

Satan is Real - III

The past two articles dealt with some of the names, characteristics, purposes and tactics of Satan. This concluding article will focus on Satan's ultimate defeat and some scriptural instruction on how we can avoid a fate similar to Satan's.

With all of the temporary power that Satan seems to have, with all of the tactics he has refined and since mankind does not understand God's timing, one could become a bit discouraged in the battle against Satan. As we observe the world, it appears that Satan has already won significant victories. What does the Bible tell us about Satan's ultimate end? Will he ever be totally defeated?

A child of God can take courage from the record and from the promises in the Bible. Although Satan's ultimate fate has not yet been applied, he has been sentenced and he has been defeated many times!

The entire life of Jesus was a defeat for Satan. He tried to destroy Jesus as an infant. Through a series of miracles, Joseph was instructed to take steps that prevented Satan's evil work from being carried out by the hand of Herod. Satan tried desperately to make Jesus yield to temptation. After forty days and nights of fasting, Jesus was sorely tried in a variety of ways.

The Son of God refused to provide for His own physical needs in a manner that would have seemed reasonable - turn available stones into much needed bread. He refused to tempt God by doing something foolish (casting Himself off of the pinnacle of the temple) to see if God would intervene to keep Him from hurting Himself. He refused to give Himself power in an earthly sense by accepting all the kingdoms of the world from Satan - who had no authority to give them to Jesus. In each case Satan was defeated.

In what was undoubtedly the greatest temptation of all, Jesus pleaded with God that if it would be possible that He could avoid the need to go to the cross and suffer the cruelest death imaginable - crucifixion for sins He did not commit. He prayed desperately for a way out, but added "...O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done" (Mt. 26:42). How precious are the words "Thy will be done"!

Every time a child of God suffers martyrdom, Satan has been defeated! Every time a sinner comes under the conviction of sin and answers God's call to repent and be converted, Satan is defeated. Every time a child of God closes his eyes in death, a victory over Satan has been won! Think of the many times that by the grace of God a victory is won and Satan is put to an open shame.

What is Satan's ultimate fate? Total and final defeat! While we probably do not fully grasp the complete meaning of all that is written in the book of Revelation, we do know that an angel will lay "...hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and (bind) him a thousand years, ..." (Rev. 20:2). After that "...Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, And shall go out to deceive the nations..." (Rev. 20:7-8). Finally, "...the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Rev. 20:10). The final defeat of Satan is promised and God will keep His promise.

Mankind can avoid the ultimate defeat that Satan must face. Even though we are in a spiritual warfare, we are not left to the power of Satan. We have been given great armor and many weapons to help us in our battle. Also, we have been promised Divine protection to lead us to victory.

Armor is a habit worn for protection. There are numerous opportunities for us to put on the armor of God. We are cautioned to seek full protection, not just partial protection. “Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). We can be a little more specific in our armor bearing: “But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation” (I Th. 5:8). We can find complete armor “By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, ...” (II Cor. 6:7).

Armor is primarily used for defense. Weapons are instruments of offense. As David approached Goliath he said “...Thou camest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield; but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, ... whom thou hast defied” (I Sam. 17:45). Paul reminded us that “...the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword...” (He. 4:12) and that we should use “...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17). Jesus taught us the power of prayer, especially in what is referred to as the Lord’s Prayer (Mt. 6:9-15). Undoubtedly, the most powerful of all weapons is demonstrated by those who “...overcame him by the blood of the Lamb...” (Re. 12:11).

Throughout the scripture we are promised Divine protection. “For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him...” (II Chr. 16:9). “The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them” (Ps. 34:7). Jesus perhaps put it most clearly when He reminded His followers of the trials they would endure because of their service to Him. We may suffer persecution, trials and temptations “But there shall not an hair of your head perish” (Lk. 21:18).

It is not possible to include nor understand every detail about the reality of Satan, but this we can do: We can know that Satan is real, that he has significant (but limited) power, that his goal for us is eternal condemnation, that he has numerous tactics that he will use against us and that he will ultimately be eternally defeated. Most importantly, we can know that we are not doomed to fail because God “...gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Obedience

Thy Word, O Lord, forever is the mirror where we see our faults and duties as they are, Our likeness unto thee (“Obedience to the Word” Zion’s Harp p. 142).

Obedience means to do as requested or required. Whether one agrees with the request really doesn’t change the meaning of the word. There are, of course, some requests or orders we should not obey. There are so many who do not understand right and wrong as based on God’s, Word that we need to be careful who we listen to. Being obedient to those who advise us to behave contrary to God’s Word is, of course, very dangerous.

On their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, the children of Israel were often disobedient. The consequences of this behavior was severe. All except Joshua and Caleb, of the children of Israel who were twenty years old and upward, died in the wilderness and were denied entrance into the Promised Land because of disobedience.

As we study the Old Testament, we find many details in the old law that made total obedience seem difficult. Sometimes we do not understand why all of the detail is important. When Moses told the people what the Lord had said, they “...answered with one voice, and said all the words which the Lord hath said we will do” (Ex. 24:3). Later, when Moses had received much detail about the curtains in the tabernacle, various coverings, vessels, etc. we are told “Thus did Moses: according to all that the Lord commanded him, so did he” (Ex. 40:16).

What was the result of the willingness of Moses and the people when they did all that the Lord asked of them? “...the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Ex. 46:34-35). A similar incident occurred at the dedication of the temple. King Solomon had instructed the builders of the temple to follow the details without deviation. At the time of the dedication of the temple “...it came to pass, when the priests were come out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of the Lord” (I Ki. 8:10-11).

Throughout the scripture we read of many others who were also put to great tests and in faith obeyed God. David spared Saul’s life on several occasions because he knew of a truth “...who can raise his hand against the Lord’s anointed, and be guiltless” (I Sam. 26:9)? David’s obedience under difficult circumstances led to many blessings after he became king.

Under very trying circumstances Ruth the Moabitess chose to follow her mother-in-law and travel to a strange land. She knew that God would be with her and she said “...for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.” (Ruth 1:16). She was obedient to Naomi, her mother-in-law, after they returned to the land of Naomi’s people.

Esther was placed in a position, as Queen, where she could save the lives of her people by entreating King Ahasuerus. In order to do so she had to approach the king without having been called — an act punishable by death. After three days of fasting by all the Jews in Shushan, she went into the king with the attitude that “...if I perish, I perish” (Es. 4:16). Her willingness to obey saved the lives of her people.

The greatest act of obedience, of course, was the willingness of Jesus Christ to go to the cross and shed His blood for our sins. He was greatly burdened by this very difficult assignment. He knew the pain and agony that awaited Him. He prayed fervently three times that if there were another way perhaps He

could be spared this terrible ordeal. All alone, His disciples having fallen asleep while He prayed, He pleaded with God for an escape, but each time He added, "...nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mk. 14:36). Jesus won a victory of obedience to God.

We also are faced with many decisions about whether to obey God or not. Some of those decisions are obvious to us. Some are not so obvious. All of us must decide whether we will obey the call to repent, be converted, and take up the cross and follow Him. Although we may not always have recognized when God called us into His service, we did know that the time would come that we must answer the call.

But what about the daily tasks that confront us? Many times each day we face the need to make decisions about obedience to God. Some of the tasks are significant. Some may seem trivial. What happens to us if we ignore the "little" things?

"Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also?" (Is. 7:13). Jesus reminded us of the importance of obedience even in small things. A nobleman had given ten of his servants a pound to use until his return. The amount of return was not the issue. The diligence of the labor was. Those who were faithful were told "...because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities" (Lk. 19:17). Peter reinforced the importance of diligence and faithfulness in small things. "...be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless" (II Peter 3:14). It truly takes obedience in small things to make sure we are without "...spot, or wrinkle..." (Gal. 5:27).

There are many places in the scripture that remind us of the blessings of obedience to "...all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may enter in through the gates into the city" (Rev. 22:14). Jesus reminded us of the blessings of detail when He said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment" (Mt. 22:37-38).

Sometimes we may get discouraged and think it is just not possible for us to be good enough. It is just not possible to be as faithful as we would like to be. When John was on the Isle of Patmos and wrote to the seven churches of Asia, Jesus told him to write "I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) ..Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer ... and I will give thee a crown of life" (Rev. 2:9-10). "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation..." (Rev. 3).

Jesus knows our plight. He knows the deceitfulness of Satan. He knows the difficulties we face and He has a beautiful promise to him that overcometh.

Tearful Sowing

“Tearful sowing brings glad harvest where our Master’s will is done, when for Him, the Lord of Harvest, through His Spirit fruits are grown.” (“Sowing and Harvest”, Zion’s Harp pg. 30).

Our nation has been blessed for generations with an abundance of food. Most of us cannot remember many, or perhaps any, times when we did not have enough to eat. We may not have had our favorite food, and maybe it was even something we did not like, but we usually had enough.

With the abundance of food, it has not been difficult for our nation to take of our abundance and set aside ample grain to use as seed for the next year’s harvest. Throughout the history of mankind this has not always been the case.

In many parts of the world and at many times in history, food has been very scarce. Setting aside some of the precious grain to use as seed for next year’s harvest has required significant sacrifice. It takes faith to reduce an already scarce food supply by putting the seed into the ground and await harvest time. The “investment” of seed brings a glad harvest when we patiently wait for the crop to mature.

We may ask ourselves what that has to do with our spiritual life. There are many times when God’s people have been required to make an “investment” of faith to achieve a good end when it would have been much easier to do something different.

Noah was required to build an ark at a time and place that must have seemed very strange. God was ready to destroy all mankind because the wickedness of man was great in the earth. “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:8). Noah was willing to invest significant time to a task that likely brought ridicule from his neighbors. However, because he was willing to sow seeds of faith, he and his family harvested rescue from the flood.

Abraham was put through a very difficult trial to show God that he placed his full faith in God. Although details are not recorded in the scripture, it is not difficult to imagine that Abraham spent much of the night in tearful prayer, asking God to help him fulfill what He had asked. The trial undoubtedly got even more difficult when Isaac said “Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb...” (Gen. 22:7-8). The harvest that Abraham reaped was God’s promises “That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars in heaven” (Gen. 22:17).

Throughout the ages many of God’s prophets were subject to severe tests of faith. They were put through many trials. Hebrews chapter 11 tells us of the difficulties that many of the old pillars of faith endured “...having obtained a good report through faith” (Heb. 11:40).

Jesus expressed sincere and deep compassion in many situations where there was human suffering. He lamented for Jerusalem (Mt. 23:37), had compassion for the blind (Mt 20:34), was moved for the multitude who were “as sheep having no shepherd” (Mt. 9:36), and wept for Lazarus’ sisters (Jn. 11:35). The harvest of Jesus’ weeping and compassion culminated with His sacrifice on the cross for the sins of all mankind.

We are called upon in our time to trust God enough that we can sow tearfully in order to have a glad harvest. Our tearful sowing often begins with repentance and conversion (Lk. 13:3 and Mt. 18:3). When the sin load becomes too great and we finally are able to put Satan’s excuses behind us, a tearful confession of our need for a Savior is the beginning of a journey that leads to a glad harvest. When we

repent and allow God to convert us, we can, as King Saul experienced, have "...another heart..." (I Sam. 10:9). If we are faithful, we can keep our renewed heart.

Repentance, however, is not usually the end of the tearful sowing for a child of God. As we serve God and grow in faith, there are many difficulties that may confront us. When Jesus was on earth, He did not promise us an easy path to eternity. Jesus said, "If any man will follow after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mt. 16:24).

There are many trials that Satan will bring to the children of God. This should not surprise us because he has a long history of causing distress. He will tempt us to disobey, as he did to Eve. He will remove good seed that has been sown (Mt. 13:19) and sow tares with the good seed (Mt. 13:38-39). No trial is beyond Satan's goal. He will try to ruin our health (Lk. 9:42) and he will lie to us to bring deception into our minds (Jn. 8:44). If he was not afraid to tempt Christ (Mt. 4:1), he will not be afraid to tempt us. If he cannot make us sin, he will try to discourage us by making us think we have failed. This tactic nearly worked on Job but "In all this did not Job sin with his lips" (Job 2:10).

How do these tears bring glad harvest? Each victory that we win will make us stronger. Each trial we overcome will help us be better prepared to meet the next one. As we face difficulties and our faith may be weakened, we need to look for "sprouts" of faith to help us along. Large plants come from small cells of life. The mustard seed "Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree..." (Mt. 13:32). It started life as one microscopic cell and developed into a very large plant. Often our faith is tried to the point where it may seem to be as small as the cell of life in the mustard seed. With tearful sowing and gentle nurturing, our faith can grow strong enough that by the grace of God we can overcome all that Satan may bring before us.

There are undoubtedly numerous times when God's children face many tests and are called upon to make sacrifices for their faith. The sowing may be tearful but the harvest is glad. Jesus said what we give up "...for the kingdom of God's sake ...shall...receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting" (Mt. 18:29-30).

Surely there is no sowing that will bring a greater harvest.

Appreciating the Value of Standards - I

Standards are the parameters that are established as rules or measurements by a power to which we are subject. Governments, businesses, schools, civic organizations, churches and all other “groups” of people have standards that enable the members of the organization to function in a way that helps the organization achieve its mission. Could we live without them?

Governments establish standards (laws) that citizens must follow. We are commanded to “...be subject to the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Ro. 13:1).

We sometimes question how it is possible that some of the terrible rulers throughout history could be ordained of God, but it is not for us to question God. We do understand, however, that even “bad” governments are better than no government at all. When there is no government, the result is anarchy.

There is no one in control. People tend to do what they think they can get away with. The lawless environment results in confusion, violence and in many cases, death. Rarely are conditions worse than in periods of anarchy.

Most businesses have a policy handbook that helps employees know what is expected of them. Those who manage the business establish these guidelines to make the day to day operation of the company more pleasant for all concerned.

Guidelines in business are also necessary to control the quality of the product. While manufacturing parts that are interchangeable from one piece of equipment to a similar piece of equipment, precise standards must be met or the parts will not fit. Therefore, standards of tolerance are set and must be strictly followed. If the standards are ignored, the company will lose its customers.

We would not consider sending our children to a school that had no standards of conduct because we would fear for their safety. We would be concerned that they would not be prepared for adult life if they were not required to meet reasonable standards of academic achievement.

Families without a well defined structure and without clearly explained and enforced expectations often are families in disarray. Without standards, parents have difficulty being consistent. When parents are not consistent, children are often confused.

Children who grow up in a family mired in confusion frequently have a difficult time adapting to situations that require structure – such as school, work or as a member of some organization. They often have trouble submitting to authority at any level. This, of course, can have serious consequences in their performance in almost everything they try later in life. It is especially difficult for them to function well in their family and, as a result, the cycle often repeats itself in succeeding generations. “Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). On the other hand, “For where envy and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.” (James 3:16).

This discussion could be continued to include social and civic organizations as well. We can readily see that every organization that has a purpose must have a structure for making decisions. Also, every organization with a purpose must have someone, or a relatively small group of people, who is charged with the responsibility of making decisions for the organization. Those who have this responsibility must also be accountable for the decisions that they make. We simply cannot function unless we have a reasonably clear understanding of what is expected of us.

We may ask what all of this has to do with our faith and living according to the “standards” of the church. Is salvation not a matter of faith? It is true that “...by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). It is very important that we understand the grace of God and that we are saved by faith in “... the precious blood of Christ...” (I Peter 1:19).

It is also important that we understand that Jesus said “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, ... Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...” (Mt. 28:19-20). We are also taught “That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another” (I Cor. 12:25), that “... all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility...” (I Peter 5:5) and “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief...” (Heb. 13:17). The apostle Paul carefully explained in I Cor. 12 that all parts of the body are important, all must function together but different parts have different responsibilities. His analogy of the human body with the church helps us understand that the church cannot operate effectively if we do not all function within our role.

We would like to believe that we would all remain faithful without guidelines or without someone having the authority to enforce the guidelines. History teaches us that such is not the case. There was a time when “... there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Ju. 17:6). We can see how this soon led to idolatry and the destruction of Israel.

The church was given the authority to uphold the principles (or standards) that were taught by Jesus Christ. The church was given the power to bind and loose (Mt. 16:19; 18:18) and to remit or retain sins (Jn. 20:23). The church was also to deliver the decrees throughout the cities that were to be kept by God’s people (Acts 16:4). When there were disagreements about positions that the church should uphold, a method for settling these questions need to be developed. Acts 15 explains how this was done: “And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter (v. 6). They prayerfully considered the matter, reached a conclusion, and sent a letter to the brethren to explain the decision (v. 7-25).

This topic will be continued in the next “Light from the Word”.

Appreciating the Value of Standards - II

In the last “Light From the Word” the need for standards in nearly every phase of our life, including the church, was introduced. This concept will be continued in this article.

The Apostolic Christian Church follows a process similar to the Jerusalem conference described in Acts 15.

Those who are ordained of God to be spiritual watchmen are required to make decisions, feed the flock, warn of dangers and take the oversight of the flock (Je. 3:15; Eze. 33; Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:2). Those who are given the authority over the church are accountable for their oversight (Eze. 34; Heb. 13:17). As Apostolic Christians we believe this pattern of authority is to be followed today. The ultimate authority of the Apostolic Christian Church is Jesus Christ and is carried out through those ordained for this responsibility, the elder body. No one individual has the authority to make decisions for the national brotherhood. Each local elder is responsible for implementing the decisions of the elder body in the local congregations.

Our brotherhood does have standards. Some standards are issues of doctrine, some are traditions and customs and some are application of scriptural principles to everyday situations. Some standards are needed to help the operation of the church run smoothly and may have no significant spiritual impact. Examples of this are starting time for services, day of the week for midweek services, etc.

The standards of doctrine, tradition and application of scriptural principles are based upon the Word of God. Each individual in our brotherhood must decide whether he or she will follow the standards. Those who choose to not follow the standards risk exposing themselves to the danger of drifting away from the brotherhood. Why should we appreciate the standards of our brotherhood? Of what value are they? If they restrict our liberty should we heed them? Some individuals say they have no conviction about a certain issue and therefore they see no reason to follow the established position.

The Bible instructs us to “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief.” (Heb. 13:17). Submission, by definition, is only necessary when we disagree. There are numerous times in the Bible in which we are instructed to sacrifice self-will and submit to another - to God, to the authority of the church, to government, wives to husbands, children to parents, servants to masters. Even Jesus had to submit when He “...fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt” (Mt. 26:39).

Why should we willingly submit to those in authority? A few of the many benefits of submitting and following the standards of the church include the following:

Failure to submit to those in authority can cause discord within the brotherhood. Discord destroys the peace of individuals and of the brotherhood. It can cause individuals to lose confidence in the leadership of a congregation or the national brotherhood. It can also undermine the faith of individuals and give Satan an opportunity to lead a soul astray. The Lord hates “...(him) that soweth discord among brethren” (Prov. 6:19). Surely no one would want to do what the Lord hates.

Submission to godly authority brings blessings of God. Jesus said “...There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God’s sake, Who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting” (Lk. 18:29-30). The

willingness to deny self for the benefit of others is just one of many ways that we can show others we care about them.

Submission to one another in godly order enables us to “...be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (I Peter 5:5). If we allow pride and self interest to direct our lives, we will interfere with the grace of God which we desperately need to enable us to live according to God’s will.

The devil must flee from us when we are willing to do God’s will. “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (Ja. 4:7). The obvious corollary to this is if we do not obey God and resist Satan, he will continue to be in our midst. This would create an atmosphere that would increase our chances of falling into sin.

If we follow the will of God, we can establish a divine relationship. “For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mt. 12:50). To be a child of God and a brother or sister of Jesus Christ is the most important relationship that anyone can have.

Obedience to scriptural standards helps us gain spiritual knowledge and brings us into complete service to God. “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (Jn. 7:17). We should serve God “Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers: but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart;” (Eph. 6:6).

Submission to the standards of the scripture makes our life secure and brings delight to our heart. “When a man’s ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him ” (Pr. 16:7). “I delight to do thy will, O my God; yea, thy law is within my heart” (Ps. 40:8).

Following Biblical standards enables us to have access to God’s kingdom “...for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Lk. 17:21). “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Mt. 6:10). No doubt, it would have been easier for Mary if the birth of Jesus could have come a little later, after she was married. This, however, would not have fulfilled God’s plan, so “...Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy Word...” (Lu. 1:38).

Standards bring order and happiness to our lives: “Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he” (Prov. 29:18).

Most importantly, of course, is that adherence to the standards of God brings salvation to His people. (Lk. 19:9-10; Heb. 5:9).

Why I Appreciate The Apostolic Christian Church

At the August 11, 2005, Conference, we were encouraged to write a two and a half page expression of why we appreciated our church. Even though there was no intent to collect the “assignment”, a significant number of brothers and sisters did submit their thoughts. The following editorial is of somewhat different style. Rather than an essay in standard paragraph form, it is an attempt to incorporate many of the thoughts expressed in the lists that were submitted. It was not possible to include every comment, nor is it intended to be an exhaustive list. It is simply designed to prompt some thought and help each of us develop a deeper appreciation and greater thankfulness for being part of the Apostolic Christian Church.

I am thankful for the Apostolic Christian Church because:

- *-We believe there is one true God, the Creator of the universe.
- *-Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God. He came to earth, lived a perfect life, and died to redeem fallen mankind by shedding His perfect blood on Calvary’s cross.
- *-We are offered salvation by faith in Christ’s shed blood, not by our good works. God is in control of our lives. His love for us is unconditional, though we must rid our lives of sin if we want to spend eternity with Him.
- *-We believe we can receive guidance from God in decision making through prayer and reading of the scripture.
- *-We believe the Bible is the infallible Word of God to man and we are encouraged to follow the whole counsel of God, not simply to pick and choose what may appeal to us.
- *-We can rely upon the Holy Spirit to guide us and help us to be overcomers of the various temptations we face. After we repent and find peace, we can leave the old life behind.
- *-We believe in a sincere repentance and a true conversion, not a shallow acceptance of Christ.
- *-We recognize the value of confession of our sins, making restitution for our errors, seeking forgiveness from those we have wronged, finding peace with God and man, baptism of adults by immersion, and sealing of the Holy Spirit into our hearts through a prayer of consecration.
- *-The preaching of the Word is by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, rather than the wisdom of man. Our ministers are not paid, thereby reducing the pressure to preach to itching ears.
- *-We are working toward a common goal, the salvation of lost souls.
- *-Holy Communion is a special time of self-examination, sharing with our brothers and sisters the special blessings of what Christ did for us, and a time of peace within the church.
- *-Marriage is by faith in God’s direction, rather than by the dating system which exposes us to the lusts of the flesh. It is a life long commitment, based on God’s plan for mankind.
- *-Our spiritual life is something we take seriously each day of our lives, not simply a Sunday exercise.
- *-We are taught the importance of works as a demonstration of our thankfulness to God and Jesus Christ for our salvation.
- *-We are taught that the grace of God is available to all who will humble themselves before God, answer His call, and seek to do His will.
- *-A modest lifestyle is encouraged, rather than materialism and the casualness of the world.
- *-We are accountable to God, to Christ, to the church, and to one another. Discipline of erring brethren is carried out to help those who have fallen, to serve as a warning to others, and to preserve the purity of the church.
- *-We greet with a Holy kiss as a token of love for one another, sometimes even before we know the name of the brother or sister and where they are from. We also greet each other as Brothers or Sisters of Jesus Christ, not simply a casual greeting.

- *-Congregational singing is practiced, rather than just by those who have the most talent or have the most beautiful voices. The Zion's Harp hymns have a deep spiritual meaning that reflect the faith of those who wrote them. The hymns are a source of inspiration that encourages us to greater faithfulness.
- *-Our sisters wear a modest head covering, are in subjection to their husbands or fathers and are silent in the church.
- *-We recognize the power of Satan and that he is never finished trying to cause us to fall, but we know that God is all powerful and will help us defeat Satan.
- *-We have standards by which we live, but we leave the eternal judgment to God.
- *-We appreciate the name of our church, Apostle-like, Christ-like.
- *-Sermons are for instruction, encouragement and admonition rather than for entertainment.
- *-Elders, ministers, Sunday School teachers and others who serve the church are chosen from the congregation.
- *-Our simple faith has been preserved over the years by faithful brethren who were willing to sacrifice self for the benefit of others who would come after them – including us.
- *-We believe our faith is precious and worth preserving.
- *-Elders and ministers do not require more of the brethren than they are willing to do themselves.
- *-We are taught the standard of godly headship. Brothers are the spiritual leaders of the home and of the church. Humble submission and accountability to church leadership and to the brotherhood helps preserve the faith.
- *-Separated seating, rather than family pews, helps to make us united and encourages us to branch out among the brethren. We are equal in God's eyes.
- *-We have a cappella singing, and encourage all to participate.
- *-Elder conferences and the annual Brotherhood Conference are a blessing and help keep us united.
- *-We understand the value of keeping our homes free from the evils of television and other worldly entertainment, thereby helping us to avoid much of the works of the flesh.
- *-Children are taught from infancy to have a reverent attitude when praying and worshipping.
- *-We have Sunday School to instruct our children about the importance of loving and serving God. They are taught the value of folded hands and closed eyes during prayer.
- *-Brethren and friends of all ages interact with one another, thereby helping us all to gain from the experience of others. All age groups are important. This mixing of ages is especially important in helping us take advantage of the experiences of those who have weathered many storms and have remained faithful.
- *-The King James Version of the Bible is our standard.
- *-We have midweek services to encourage us to greater faithfulness.
- *-The structure of our leadership is such that no individual must bear too great a load over too long a period of time.
- *-We are taught that we can have a personal relationship with God. Each brother, sister, convert and friend is encouraged to read the Bible and pray so they can learn of their responsibilities toward God. We are taught that He knows and loves each of us as individuals. He is truly our Heavenly Father.
- *-Each one of us has an opportunity to serve. There are multiple opportunities for service in the church and in World Relief activities.
- *-There are many traditions that make us unique and that help us to stay farther from sin.
- *-Converts are welcome to go to the Elder's home at any time of the day or night, with or without calling first.
- *-We do not use New Age tactics nor entertainment to attract people to church. We attract people by telling them the truth of the Bible.
- *-Our main focus is on Jesus Christ and Him crucified.
- *-Testimonies before baptism are a blessing to the entire church. We are encouraged that God is still answering the prayers of repentant souls.
- *-We are encouraged to take up our cross daily. We are willing to sacrifice for each other.
- *-When we are examining ourselves, we use the Bible as our mirror.

- *-We know that others are praying for us in times of distress as well as good times.
- *-Many of our singings and sermons are on tape so we can listen to them for additional comfort and encouragement.
- *-Many brethren are willing to do servant tasks, regardless of how lowly the task.
- *-Those who were not raised in the Apostolic Christian faith are brought into the faith with no distinction of background, social position, or wealth. They are accepted as equals.
- *-We have been able to establish closer relations with the brethren in Europe and other parts of the world, to help us appreciate our heritage.
- *-Church lunches, funeral meals, etc. are served to all so all can participate.
- *-Funerals are comforting to the families without unnecessary eulogizing.
- *-Written and taped materials are available through the Apostolic Christian Publications. They have helped preserve our heritage and give us information that is helpful when we need additional encouragement.
- *-Apostolic Christian Counseling Services are available for those who need special help.
- *-The Silver Lining provides us with spiritual support and helps us keep in contact with brethren of other congregations.
- *-Our heritage focuses on God, not on individuals.
- *-We have a common bond that goes beyond age, social position, wealth, or where we live.
- *-We can visit with people we do not know and feel a common faith. We can stay in homes of those we do not know and have no fear of harm nor loss of possessions.
- *-Christian greetings of love are extended from one congregation to another.
- *-The noon lunch period encourages fellowship.
- *-Morning and afternoon services help make the entire day holy, not just a small part of the day.
- *-Travel of the single groups, of married brethren and of friends add a spiritual richness to our lives. Our faith is our social circle.
- *-Special singings at homes or in our fellowship halls add a spiritual richness to our lives.
- *-If we have a serious problem, we have the entire church we can call on.
- *-When we enter the church, we can feel an atmosphere of love and fellowship.
- *-Our faith is a way of life, not just a Sunday diversion.
- *-We share each others' joys and sorrows.
- *-We find doing for others a rewarding experience.
- *-If we move to another congregation, we know that there will be a welcoming atmosphere. We do not have to worry about whether we can make new friends in our new congregation.
- *-"Complete strangers" are not strangers at all. They are simply brethren we have not learned to know yet.
- *-We recognize that what we do really does impact future generations.

It would no doubt be possible for us to add many more statements to this list. We encourage each of our brothers, sisters and friends to prayerfully consider why we appreciate the Apostolic Christian Church.

What Will Ye Give Me?

“Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests, and said unto them, What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver. And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him” (Mt. 26:14-16).

Balaam was overcome with a desire for riches that were offered to him if he would curse God's people. He was told that he should not do this evil deed. The offer of riches and fame was increased. He again asked God's permission to go curse God's people. God told Balaam that he could go if the men came again and if he would do as God commanded. Balaam did not wait for the men to return. He "...rose up early in the morning ...and went..." (Nu. 22:21).

God was angry because Balaam was disobedient. In His mercy He caused Balaam's beast to turn away from danger on three separate occasions. Balaam was so intent upon getting the riches offered to him that he became blinded to the warning that God sent. He became so angry and so consumed by his greed that, when his beast spoke to him, he didn't recognize it as being unusual.

Ahab, king of Samaria, was overtaken by covetousness in his desire to get Naboth's vineyard. He offered Naboth money or another vineyard for it. Naboth believed it was wrong for him to give the inheritance of his father to another. Ahab became very angry. Ahab's wicked wife, Jezebel, said that Ahab was governor of the kingdom of Israel and, therefore, he should be able to have what he wanted.

Jezebel falsely accused Naboth of blasphemy, had him killed and said to Ahab, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezraelite, which he refused to give thee for money: for Naboth is not alive, but dead" (I Ki. 21:15). It now appeared that Ahab could have what he wanted and not even have to pay for it.

King David was overcome by the desires of the flesh. He yielded to temptation, took Uriah's wife, and then, after failing to deceive Uriah, had him killed so he could have his wife. David was so consumed with evil desire that he was willing to send an innocent man to his death to try to hide his own sin.

What do these four examples have in common? In each of the examples cited, selfishness, greed, and covetousness drove the guilty men to commit very serious sins. They became consumed by the same sin that is so rampant in our society today: What's in it for me?

So many people believe that they can attain happiness if they achieve material gain, honor in the eyes of man, or some other achievement that will soothe the fleshly desire of man. We hear of many people who suffer a "mid life crises" because they either have not attained the material or social standing that they planned to have or they have achieved that standing only to discover that it didn't bring them the joy that they expected.

The realization that they never would gain the prestige that they dreamed of, or the realization that attaining their goal was really a shallow "victory", becomes a major disappointment. The result is an overwhelming emptiness and guilt that weighs heavily on them.

Judas was consumed for the rest of his life ("from that time he sought opportunity") to do what he needed to do to get thirty pieces of silver. His disappointment and guilt were so great that, after failing to return the silver, he took his own life.

Balaam was fortunate in that he was able to see the error of his way before it cost him his life, but he was required to give up all the reward that was offered him. It took Balaam quite some time to do what was right, but he finally realized that “if Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the commandment of the Lord,...”(Nu. 24:13).

Ahab, when faced with the reality and horror of his sin, was able to repent of his sin, “...he rent his clothes, put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth...” (I Ki. 21:27). The judgment that was pronounced upon him was delayed, but Ahab had to live with the knowledge that his sin would bring evil to his country during his son’s reign.

When confronted with his sin in the form of a parable, “David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, as the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die” (II Sam. 12:5). Imagine David’s shock and grief when Nathan said “Thou art the man” (II Sam. 12:7). David, as he did throughout his life when confronted with his sin, confessed his sin, repented, fasted and pleaded with God for mercy. A price had to be paid. The child that was born as a result of David’s sin died. David recognized that his sin was the cause of great distress and “...has given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme...” (II Sam. 12:14).

What can we learn from these and many other examples from the scripture that could have been cited? If we attempt to find peace and satisfaction in material gains or in the satisfaction of the desires of “...the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life...”(I Jn. 2:16), we will meet with great disappointment. If we are covetous for what we do not have instead of content with what we do have, there will be a price to pay. Our life will be empty and we will be as deceived as the Laodiceans who said “I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing: and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:...” (Rev. 3:17).

There is an alternative. We need not be deceived by “What will ye give me?” The alternative, “Blessings of God”, will be the subject of the next article.

Blessings from God

In the previous editorial, the folly, disappointment and emptiness of “What will ye give me?” was discussed. The alternative to selfishness and greed is to strive for blessings from God. Several examples of selfishness and the grief it brought were cited. How can we attain the standards of those of Smyrna to whom Christ said, “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich)” (Rev. 2:9)?

Just as we can find examples in the Bible of the results of a life of sin and greed, so also can we find examples in the Bible of the results of a life of self sacrifice and obedience to God that will result in attaining God’s blessings.

There is, of course, no better example than that of Jesus Christ. The selfless example He offered will serve us well. We may think that because Jesus was the Son of God, there were no battles against temptation that He needed to fight. The beginning of His ministry and the end of His life tell us that such was not the case. After His baptism and after fasting for forty days and nights, Satan came to tempt Him with an easy way to receive bread, a basic need of life, with an “opportunity” to prove if God would be with Him at all times, and with power and glory. In all three cases He answered Satan with the Word of God (Mt. 4:1-11). Throughout His ministry, He relied upon the Word and power of God.

As Jesus faced severe trial prior to His crucifixion, as He pleaded with God to help Him complete the very mission for which He came to earth, Satan was there, tempting Him to find another way. Three times His “...soul (was) exceeding sorrowful, even unto death...” (Mt. 26:38). He prayed “...if it be possible, let this cup pass from me:...” (Mt. 26:39-42). Each time, however, He added “...nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Mt. 26:39).

If it was necessary for Jesus to be in total submission to God, can anything less than total submission take us to a safe haven? Holding any selfish desire for ourselves will put us in danger of eternal separation from God.

We are promised that if we serve God without reservation we will be blessed beyond our comprehension. In answer to Peter’s question of the value of following Christ, Jesus said “And everyone that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life” (Mt. 19:29). Nothing we could gain for this life is worth more than our salvation. That point was also emphasized when Jesus asked “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul” (Mk. 8:36-37)? There are examples in the scripture of individuals who were willing to give all that they had to serve God. The poor widow put only two mites into the treasury. It was all she had. Jesus said “Verily I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living” (Mk. 12:43-44).

The widow of Zarephath had only a handful of meal in a barrel and a little oil in a cruse. She was gathering sticks so she could make a final meal for herself and her son to eat, knowing there was no more and they would then starve to death. Elijah asked her to make a little cake for him first and then make one for her and her son. She was promised “The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth” (I Ki. 17:14). How difficult it must have been to take that little bit of meal and oil and give it to a stranger when she and her son had so little. Because of her willingness to give all, “...she and he and her house did eat many days” (I Ki. 17:15).

In Hebrews 11 we can read of the faith of many who were willing to sacrifice all they had and be obedient to the Lord. Verses 33 through 38 graphically describe what they endured to serve their God. Just a few of the trials were scourging, stoning and being sawn asunder. Through faith they endured these afflictions.

Of the eleven disciples who remained faithful, history would indicate that ten of them died a martyr's death. John was banished to the isle of Patmos where he received the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Paul spent his adult life travelling and spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ, eventually giving his life for the Lord.

What lessons are there for us? We need to be extremely careful we are not so fascinated by material possessions that we allow them to become idols. We have many opportunities to share what we have with those who are less fortunate.

We often hear the term "sacrificial giving" and we appreciate the opportunities we have to share with others. However, for most of us we are really only giving of our abundance. In addition to sacrificial giving we need to pray earnestly that we can follow sacrificial living. We know that "...by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:" (Eph. 2:8) and that "...we have redemption through his (Jesus) blood" (Eph. 1:7).

As we observe the examples of those who went before us, who gave their all, including many who gave their life, we certainly need to spend much time in prayer and self examination so we are not overcome by the world. To each of the seven churches that were addressed in the book of Revelation there was a promise to him that overcometh. The promises included access to the tree of life, to not be hurt by the second death, to receive the hidden manna, power over nations, that Christ will confess our name before God and His angels, to be a pillar in the temple of God, and to sit with him in his throne. (Rev. 2 & 3).

Jesus Christ asked one thing for himself - that we remember His suffering and death. This small request can be distracted by a world that offers so much as we travel through this life. If we are not careful, we will not attain our goal. It is so easy to sing "To win this precious treasure and matchless pearl I would give honor, wealth and pleasure, yea, every earthly good; I gladly would surrender the dearest thing which might obscure my Sun's bright splendor, and rob me of His light." (Life and Full Abundance in Jesus, verse 3 Zion's Harp #178).

Do we lightly sing these words and stubbornly cling to what the world offers us? Surely each of us want to remember His suffering and death and be among the overcomers.

Look We For Another

John the Baptist was being severely tried. The work that he had been sent to do was nearly accomplished. His primary mission was to announce that "...the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 3:2). Each of the Gospels tell us something about his task. He was to inform the world that the promised Messiah was here. John was "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mk. 1:3). The Gospel of John gives a more detailed account of John's responsibility (Jn. 1:6-8 & 19-28).

John introduced Jesus to the world, "...Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world" (Jn. 1:29). John baptized Jesus (Mt. 3:13-15) "...and saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:16-17).

In spite of all this, while John was in prison his faith was tried. He sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask him "...Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another" (Mt. 11:3)? Jesus told John's disciples to "...Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them" (Mt. 11:4-6). John was reassured that Jesus was in truth the Son of God, the promised Messiah.

Jesus then asked the multitudes what they were looking for when they went to see John. There was confusion among the masses about John and his mission. In our time there is also much confusion and we could ask the same question of the masses about Jesus Christ: what are you looking for?

It may be that there is more effort to find the truth today than at any time in history. People are searching for answers. Scientists are trying to solve all kinds of mysteries from cures for diseases to the origin of mankind. God has allowed mankind to unravel many mysteries and to cure many illnesses. Much good has been found for this life; however, in spite of all of this effort to find the "truth" there is still much confusion. Men are "Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (II Tim. 3:7) because they seek the truth in the wrong places.

We should not be surprised at the emphasis on searching for truth. Daniel prophesied this when he wrote "...many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased" (Da. 12:4). Amos clarified the problem even more when he wrote "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord; And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it" (Am. 8:11-12).

The confusion and lack of contentment is so great that many do not know what they want nor do they know where to look for peace. Of course, if they do not know what they are looking for, they will not know where to look, nor recognize it if they find it.

The world makes many promises designed to make us happy. Unfortunately, the closer we come to gaining the solutions offered by the world, the greater the disappointment among those who are searching. Part of the problem, of course, is that the world can only offer material goods to solve our problems. Materialism does not solve the inner problems of mankind.

So what do we look for? What will bring true peace and contentment? The answers to the problems of discontent are readily available. Imagine for a moment that you could find a friend with the

following characteristics: He is all powerful and eternal. "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending...which is, and which was, and which is to come the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8); "(He)is faithful..." (I Co. 1:9) "...and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I Jn. 1:9), "...(He is) love" (I Jn. 4:7). He is good; He gives us His grace; He is holy, merciful, righteous, wise, gentle, forbearing, compassionate, available, jealous for us and a righteous judge; He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, is like no other, is majestic, perfect, sovereign and forgiving.

We would also do well to consider the following characteristics and how they impact our lives. First, of course, is that He came and "...shed (His blood) ...for the remission of sins" (Mt. 26:28). There is no greater gift anyone has given to mankind than this. How would we like to know someone who could heal the sick, raise the dead, calm the storms, bring comfort to the distressed, live and teach the message of salvation, teach us how to pray, feed the multitudes, put to silence the critics, teach us about faith, forgive our sins, heal sick minds, and teach us the real meaning of love?

Surely there is neither a list that could be compiled about any human being nor any benefit we could gain from the world that would come close to equaling the blessings we receive by having a friend like the one just described. Although there is no human friend who could do all of the above, there is a friend of human beings who meets, and far exceeds the above criteria. "...We have found the Messiah..." (Jn. 1:41).

The world has long sought for the truth and, for all the searching and research that has been done, they have not found it. They have sought the truth in the things of the world instead of in the Creator. "(They) changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the creator..." (Ro. 1:25). However, the children of God have found the truth "...thy (God's) word is truth..." (Jn. 17:17). Since we have found the Messiah, why would we seek for another? We have found God, the One who "...so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jn. 3:16). "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (Jn. 15:13-14). Clearly we will find nothing better than our heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

Life's Ultimate Decision

Each of us makes many decisions every day. Some are quite insignificant and are made without a great deal of thought or prayer. Some decisions impact primarily ourselves. Other decisions are weighty and will impact us throughout our life and throughout eternity. Some decisions impact many people, including generations yet unborn.

There is no decision that we are called upon to make that will have a greater impact on our future and the future of those who come after us than the one we make about serving God. The church we attend, the level of commitment we make to the church, the degree to which we become involved in the church, and the level of commitment our church has to following the Word of God all have lifetime and eternal consequences for each of us.

Moses recognized the importance of the need to serve God. He "...refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Heb. 11:24-25). After having received the Ten Commandments from the Lord, he saw the idolatry of the children of Israel. Moses' anger was great and, after punishing them for their sin, he asked "...Who is on the Lord's side? let him come unto me..." (Ex. 32:26). All sons of Levi went unto Moses. There were three thousand who did not choose to serve the Lord. They were not given a long time to decide. The scripture tells us that those who chose not to serve God were put to death "...that day..." (Ex. 32:28).

Joshua required a similar decision, with a similar time limit. In explaining the fate of those who would serve false gods, he said "...choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served ... or the gods of the Amorites, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Jos. 24:15). Apparently at that time most of the children of Israel said "... God forbid that we should forsake the Lord, to serve other gods. For the Lord our God ... brought us ... out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage ..." (Jos. 24:16-17).

Elijah also emphasized the importance of choosing quickly to serve the Lord. In confronting Ahab and the prophets of Baal, he called upon the children of Israel to make a decision. "...How long will ye halt between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him..." (I Ki. 18:21). By the end of the day the prophets of Baal were slain.

Jesus also taught the people that they must make a decision about who they would serve. He had told His followers that they must eat His flesh, drink His blood and endure many trials. Having said this, "many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" (Jn. 6:66). We can feel the sadness in Jesus' voice when He said to the twelve, "...Will ye also go away?" (Jn. 6:67). Peter understood the importance of the question and answered "...Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God" (Jn. 6:68-69).

Too often there are those who seem to think it is not particularly important that we make an early decision to serve God. We are living in a country in which we have the freedom to choose who we will worship, how we will worship, and when we will worship. Many of us know of individuals who, very late in life, found their salvation. For this we are thankful because we do not want anyone to suffer eternal condemnation. Because it is possible to be saved with a death bed conversion, there are people who think timing is not a significant factor. The Word of Life has been available to us all of our lives. Sunday after Sunday we expect to be able to go to church and hear the Word of God. We do not expect that our access to the Gospel of Jesus Christ will soon be denied. As long as there is life, there is hope.

It seems that one of the most effective tools that Satan uses is to try to convince us that there is plenty of time to decide about serving God. He tries, quite successfully, to convince us that we have all the time in the world to serve God so there is no reason to rush the decision. While it is important that we count the cost of serving God, we must not tarry too long.

Undoubtedly all of us would agree that the time will come when we must die. Most of us will agree that at the time of our death "...every one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Ro. 14:12) and "...where the tree falleth, there it shall be" (Ecc. 11:3). We are taking a serious risk by thinking that there is plenty of time to serve God, "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night" (I Th. 5:2). We are taught "But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only" (Mt. 24:36).

Time is not endless for any of us. We must make a decision to serve the Lord without delay. Paul reminded us of this when he wrote "...Today if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the day of provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness:..." and repeated the urgency "...To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:7-13). We can only benefit from Christ's shed blood if we "...take up his cross and follow (Christ)..." (Mt. 16:24).

The urgency of the decision to serve God goes far beyond our own life and eternal destination. Imagine the impact on future generations of those who reject God's call and live for the pleasures of this life. On the other hand, think of the influence of faithful servants of God as they upheld the faith and provided a foundation for future generations to build upon.

Parents may think that they will allow their children to make their own decision about serving God. However, if we do not teach our children the truth and the value of God's Word by what we say and by the way we live, we are teaching them that God is not important. We are reducing the likelihood that they will serve God. If we do not teach them by example the importance of choosing to serve God, we are teaching them that it is acceptable to serve Satan.

We cannot escape responsibility for teaching the Truth to those who come after us. Paul, in his letter to Titus reminds us of the importance of the aged men and women to teach the younger to "...be in behaviour as becometh holiness..." (Titus 2:3). Holy living is living as God wants us to live. "...be ye holy; for I am holy" (I Peter 1:16).

We Have Found the Messiah

“...We have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ” (Jn. 1:41). Andrew realized that Jesus was more than just a prophet. When he heard John the Baptist speaking to Jesus, he knew this was no ordinary man and he was anxious to share the news with those he loved.

Andrew went to tell his brother Simon Peter he had found the Messiah. It does not appear that Andrew and Peter spent much time in deciding what to do. Even though it was the tenth hour of the day when Andrew realized that Jesus was the Christ, he took Peter to Jesus. Jesus, when he saw Peter, called him to be an Apostle.

The next day Jesus called Philip to be an Apostle. Philip then found Nathaniel and gave him the same message Andrew gave Peter: “...We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (Jn. 1:45). We can feel the joy in their hearts as they shared this wonderful news with others.

The good news spread rapidly. And why shouldn't it? A promise made by God about four thousand years earlier had been fulfilled! The apostles, of course, at this point did not really understand Jesus' true mission, but they knew their lives would never be the same. They rejoiced that a long standing promise of God had been fulfilled.

Not all of the Apostles were as easily convinced as Andrew, Peter and Philip. Nathaniel didn't think anything good could come out of Nazareth, but he soon learned that Jesus was “...the Son of God; ...the King of Israel” (Jn. 1:49).

Jesus saw James and John, the sons of Zebedee, while they were in their ships mending their nets. “...He called them: and they left their father Zebedee in the ship with the hired servants, and went after him” (Mk. 1:20).

Levi (Matthew) was going about his daily routine collecting taxes for the Roman government. Jesus said “...Follow me. And he arose and followed him” (Mk. 2:14). Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon called Zelotes, Judas the brother of James and Judas Iscariot were also called.

Scripture does not record all of the details of the calling of each of the twelve apostles but we have enough information to believe that they willingly followed Jesus. In a discussion with His disciples concerning the difficulties they would face, Peter, in apparent reference to himself and the other apostles said “...Lo, we have left all, and have followed Thee” (Mk. 10:28). It provides us with evidence that each of the twelve apostles were very willing to leave all they had to follow Jesus.

Not all who were called by Jesus willingly left all to follow Him. One man asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. After a brief discussion Jesus told him “...One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions” (Mk. 10:21-22). It was not simply the possession of material goods that Jesus was concerned about. Anything that we regard as more important than serving God (father, mother, wife, child, etc.) would make so we cannot be Jesus' disciple (Lk. 14:26).

On another occasion, after He had told His followers that they must eat His flesh and drink His blood, “...many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. Then Jesus said unto the

twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered Him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life” (John 6:66-68).

So what does all of this have to do with us in the twenty-first century after Jesus’ birth? The message of the gospel of Jesus is still available to mankind. Each of us must make a decision about Jesus’ message. Some will receive it and some will not.

The joy of finding the Messiah has not diminished with the passage of time. When a soul comes under conviction of sin and is, by the grace of God, able to repent, be converted and ultimately find peace, the joy they experience is similar to what was expressed by the Apostles nearly 2000 years ago.

As Elders work with converts and see their struggles as they battle temptation, Elders often encourage them to continue the battle, and assure them they will find peace at the appropriate time. The joy in their expression “I have found peace” is usually mirrored by their countenance. The joy of finding the Messiah cannot be hidden if one is truly converted and finally freed from the bondage of sin. Many times those who have found peace can hardly wait to tell others of their experience.

Unfortunately, just as it was in the days of Jesus’ time on earth, not all who are called are willing to follow. Just as the rich young man was unwilling to give up his wealth, so are there those who have an idol that they cannot (or will not) give up.

God, in His mercy, often calls sinners many times but each time He is rejected by a sinner, there is a risk that there will be no more opportunity to yield to the Lord. We all know of individuals who have good intentions of repenting but they keep putting it off until, ultimately, it is too late. The hoped for “one more chance” didn’t come, and they were called out of this life in a sad state of condemnation.

No doubt there are those who expect God to continue to call them until they finally heed the call. God will not force us to serve Him. Again, consider the case of the rich young man: although Jesus loved him, when the young man walked away, Jesus did not follow him and try to force him to change his mind. We have a free will. We can find the Messiah or we can reject Him. There is hardly a more heart rending verse in any hymn than the one that says “Almost persuaded, harvest is past! Almost persuaded, doom comes at last! Almost cannot avail; Almost is but to fail! Sad, sad that bitter wail, Almost but lost!” (Hymns of Zion #212 “Almost Persuaded”)

Our lives do not need to end in bitter disappointment. If we will heed the Master’s call, “He’ll lighten the load, And level the road And bear thee on hands of compassion” (Zion’s Harp #46 “The Best Refuge”). We can still find the Messiah, and the reward for finding Him is eternal life in heaven!

Afar Off

“But Peter followed him afar off unto the high priest’s palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end” (Mt. 26:58). “But when he (Peter) saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me” (Mt. 14:30).

“But Peter said unto him (Simon the Sorcerer), Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter; for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity” (Acts 8:20-23).

If we did not know the situation, we could hardly believe that the first two paragraphs give insight to the same man. Peter was very bold and quite willing to speak without giving careful thought to the likely results of what he said or did.

How is it possible for one man to respond so differently when in each case he really was trying to work for the Lord? After all, in the two incidents described in the first paragraph, Peter was following Jesus or following Jesus’ instructions. Peter did follow Jesus from the garden of Gethsemane to the high priest’s palace. Peter did step out of the boat at Jesus’ command. Peter’s intentions were very good. He wanted to serve his Master. He had promised to follow Christ where ever He went, even to the extreme of promising to “...lay down my life for thy sake” (Jn. 13:37). By offering to fight for Jesus, Peter again showed his desire to serve his Master. He “...drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest, and smote off his ear” (Mt. 26:51).

However, something happened to Peter from the time he put up his sword until Jesus was led away. He allowed himself to be separated from Jesus. Satan was given an opportunity to get between Peter and Jesus and the results were disastrous, leading to Peter’s denial of Jesus only hours after promising to die for Him.

In the second incident, Peter actually began to walk on the water. However, Peter took his eyes off Jesus and looked at the dangers around him. The fear that came to Peter when he focused his attention on the world rather than on Jesus caused him to lose faith.

What application does Peter’s experience have for us? The experiences of Peter can be applied to the struggles of both the converted and the unconverted. Peter’s experiences show us the danger of not walking closely enough to Jesus.

Those of us who have been able, by the grace of God, to respond to the call of God have undoubtedly noticed that there are times when it is easier to resist temptations than at other times. Why is this true?

The power and persistence of Satan’s attacks vary significantly. The stronger temptations, of course, are much more difficult to resist. There may be times when temptations seem stronger because our desire or ability to resist are weaker. These are occasions when it is necessary for us to examine our lives more carefully. Have we grown careless in our prayer life and scripture reading? Have we allowed things to enter our life that may give Satan an opportunity to bring distress? Have we simply become too busy in our work or other activities that there is just not enough time to focus on the Word and on the message of Jesus? Have we become a bit too self confident, as Peter did when he took matters (the sword) into his own hands?

Have we allowed the fears that can come from focusing too much attention on what is happening around us that we become distracted and lose sight of the fact that God is still in control? Peter initially had the faith to follow Jesus, but the cares of the world (soldiers in the one case and the forces of nature in the other) caused him to lose his focus on what really mattered. No doubt numerous examples could be cited, each of which could cause us to get farther from Jesus and give Satan greater opportunity to tempt us.

The need to focus on Christ does not mean that we ignore what is happening around us. If the forces of nature are putting us in danger, we need to take reasonable steps to protect ourselves. When Satan tried to convince Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the temple to see if God would protect Him, Jesus said to Satan "...It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God" (Mt. 4:7). If the evils of the world are pressing heavily upon us, we must become aware of it so we can follow the instructions Paul wrote to Timothy: "...flee these things: and follow after righteousness...: (I Tim. 6:11). Ignoring danger around us is really abusing the grace of God.

If we have not yet been converted, we can also apply Peter's experiences to our lives. Peter was not converted at the time of the incidents cited earlier. He thought he was serving God, but he was not in total submission to Him. It was not until after Peter denied Christ ["And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord...And Peter went out, and wept bitterly" (Lk. 22:61-62) when he truly repented and was converted. Only then did he truly serve God.

Perhaps we, converted or unconverted, believe we are trying to do God's will. We may love the Lord and want to do what is right. We may even call ourselves "Christians", but have we really made Him the focus of our lives? Have we become willing to forsake all, take up the cross daily, and walk with Jesus? Do we walk closely enough with Christ that there is not room for Satan to get between us and our Lord? Are we really walking beside Jesus rather than following Him "afar off"?

If we can truly answer the above questions with a sincere and thankful "yes", we will find ourselves drawing near to Jesus Christ and to God. We can ultimately walk next to Him, knowing that by His grace we will have eternal life in heaven with God.

Why Should We Be Thankful

The scripture instructs us “In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (I Th. 5:18). We are also reminded in other passages to be thankful: “Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him and bless his name” (Ps. 100:4). Many more passages could be cited.

The world is so full of sin, violence, greed, etc. that it would be easy to become cynical and question whether it is possible to give thanks “in everything”. Satan is so ruthless and sly that he could convince a child of God that there are few reasons to be thankful. In the sin sick world where we live, we must keep things in perspective. The world is sinful, but God is good. The world is dark but God is light. Many people are wicked, but the Lord promised us “...Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved: For he will finish the work...” (Rom. 9:27-28). The prophet Elijah became so discouraged when he was fleeing from Jezebel that he thought he alone was serving God. “...I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life to take it away ...but God said... yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him” (I Ki. 19:14 & 18).

How can we keep from getting discouraged in such distressful times when the world seems to be wicked and violent? We are reminded in a hymn, “When upon life’s billows you are tempest tossed, When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost, Count your many blessings, name them one by one, And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.” (“Count Your Blessings”, Hymns of Zion #118).

While it is not possible to list all of the reasons to be thankful in one brief article, we can list a few and encourage each one to count our blessings and think upon the things that are good. Perhaps the first reason for us to be thankful is simply that there is one God who is good and full of mercy. “O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever” (Ps. 107:1). In Psalm 136 we are reminded twenty-seven times that the mercy of God endureth for ever.

We can also be thankful for the love of God. “And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love...” (I Jn. 4:16). In fact, He loved us so much that He gave us His Son as a gift: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16). The gift of God’s Son to mankind included, of course, the shed blood of Jesus Christ which was shed for many for the remission of sins (Mt. 26:28).

How can we ever be thankful enough for the grace He has given us and for the redeeming power of His blood? This allows us to have victory over death and the grave. We were all under the sentence of death. The Lord God said to Adam that “...in the day that thou eatest thereof (of the tree of knowledge) thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:17). We are reminded in the New Testament “...the wages of sin is death...” (Ro. 6:23). We can be saved from sin’s death sentence if we follow God’s plan for us, knowing that “...the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Ro. 6:23). “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Ro. 8:1).

If we suffer from the same fear that Elijah had—that we are alone in serving God—we can be thankful to know there are others who are saved. “But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you” (Ro. 6:17). As a result of our conversion, we have a faith that is encouraging: “...because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth” (II Th. 1:3).

God put us in a land where we can freely worship as we are instructed by His Word. The Bible teaches us how we should live. Although we are not all “ministers” in the formal sense, God has put us in a place where we can share our faith: “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry” (I Tim. 1:12).

When we feel discouraged, alone, or far from God, we have many promises that God is near. “I have set the Lord always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved” (Ps. 18:8). “The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit” (Ps. 94:18). “That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us” (Ac. 17:27). Even in times of distress, these promises give us reason to be thankful.

Undoubtedly none of us expect to be as wise as Daniel. We do, however, have the same God to guide us as Daniel had. When we need answers, we have access to God for direction. It may not be revealed to us as quickly as to Daniel, but we can be thankful that we have the “...God of my fathers, who hast given me wisdom and might, and hast made known unto me now what we desired of thee: ...” (Da. 2:23).

The faithfulness of God is everlasting. It has been recognized for generations. At the time of Moses’ death, God showed him the promised land and repeated the promise He had made earlier. “...This is the land which I sware unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying, I will give it to thy seed...” (Deut. 34:4). David also recognized God’s faithfulness when he wrote “I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread” (Ps. 37:25). The everlasting promises of God should make us thankful.

It is not necessary to think very long for one to realize we are a most blessed people and have much to be thankful for. Our helplessness in expressing it fully is well summarized by the author who wrote “Could we with ink the ocean fill, And were the skies of parchment made; Were ev’ry stalk on earth a quill, and ev’ry man a scribe by trade; To write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry; Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Tho’ stretched from sky to sky.” (“The Love of God”, Hymns of Zion #289, verse 3).

The goal of each of us to be thankful is not completely achieved in this life. Those who remain faithful will understand what it means to be thankful when they enter heaven to spend eternity with God.

Wise Men Still Seek Him

From the earliest times, mankind has recognized a need for a god. Even in societies that do not believe in the one true God, there often is a need to worship some form of a higher power. Throughout the scripture, the importance of seeking God, the Creator of the universe, has been emphasized. God warned His people of the dangers of serving other gods and of the blessing of seeking the one true God. “But if from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul” (Deut. 4:29).

King David recognized the need to seek God: “O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where his water is” (Ps. 63:1). Isaiah also realized the importance of not losing the opportunity to seek God. “Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near” (Is. 55:6). Many more passages in the Old Testament could be cited that encourage seeking the Lord.

To seek means to go in search of, to look for by going from place to place. To seek implies that there needs to be diligence, not simply a casual effort. Searching for, and finding God, needs to be a priority in our lives.

In addition to seeking God the Father, and recognizing God’s promise of a Savior, many men have understood the need to find this promised Messiah. The Wise Men we read about in the Gospel of Matthew were given enough understanding about the events surrounding the birth of Christ that they wanted to find him.

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him ...Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men,...sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also... and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, ...stood over where the young child was ...And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child... and fell down, and worshipped him ...”(Mt. 2:1-11).

The story of the search for the child Jesus by the wise men is very familiar to those who know the account of the birth of the Savior. Perhaps the significant part of the story of the wise men is that they were willing to go to great lengths to find Jesus. While we do not know for sure how long they were looking for Jesus, we do know they spent a considerable amount of time and effort to find Him.

Most likely, about two years passed from the time the wise men first saw the star in the east until Herod knew they had no intention of coming back to tell him they had found Jesus. The interval of time was no doubt the basis for Herod’s decision to kill all from two years old and under (Mt. 2:16). It also appears that most of those two years were spent by the wise men searching for Jesus. There was very little time between Herod’s request that they tell him when they found Jesus and when he realized they were not coming back. Joseph was told to “...Arise, and take the young child and his mother and flee into Egypt...” (Mt. 2:13) to save Jesus’ life. Joseph knew he did not have much time to go.

What message is in this account that we can use? The wise men saw His star because they were searching for Someone. Are we looking for the light of Jesus Christ? Are we willing to search diligently for Him?

Apparently, the wise men put aside all of their earthly pursuits to focus on this important task. We also need to be willing to make the most important task in our lives that of finding Jesus Christ. If finding and serving God and our Savior is not our most important goal in life, we place ourselves in great danger.

The promise of salvation for all of eternity and the help we have with the problems in this life if we seek and find the Savior, are precious almost beyond description. The blessings of finding the Savior are worth all the efforts that we could expend in finding Him. There is no greater goal and no greater joy than to seek and find our Lord.

When men lose sight of God and the importance of serving Him, they not only refuse to seek God but they hide from him. After falling into sin, "...Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden". When found, Adam said "...I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Gen. 3:8,10).

The time will come when the wrath of God will be visited upon the earth and the wicked will try to hide from God. They will say "...to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb:" (Rev. 6:16).

Trying to hide from God is futile. No man will be successful in doing so. David wrote "O God, thou knowest my foolishness; and my sins are not hid from thee" (Ps. 69:6). Jesus said "...for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known" (Mt. 10:26). Moses warned the children of Israel "...be sure your sin will find you out" (Nu. 32:23).

We have many choices to make. We can choose to try to serve self and to hide from God. If we make that choice we will suffer through all eternity. However, if we seek the Lord, and do His will, our sins can be forgiven. If we allow ourselves to be cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ, we "...shall be whiter than snow" (Ps. 51:7). Wise men still seek the Lord.

The Walk of a Believer

The walk of a believer is certainly different from the walk of an unbeliever. We can talk all we want about serving God, of worshipping Him, of being “on fire” for Christ, of being His child, etc. However, unless we actually walk the life of a believer, all of our talk is in vain.

Vain talk seems to be either of two basic patterns. There are those who are openly false teachers, “...unruly and vain talkers and deceivers... Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake” (Titus 1:10-11). Also, there are vain talkers who say they will do God’s will but they do not serve Him. Jesus told of a man who had two sons who were asked to go work in his vineyard. One said he would not go but later repented and went to work. The second son said “...I go, sir; and went not” (Mt. 21:30). The second son was willing to say the right words but he was not willing to do what he said.

What is the walk of a believer? We must recognize there is no neutral place between walking as a believer or as a non believer. If we are not walking in submission to God, we are walking as an unbeliever. The obvious first step in the walk of a believer is to do as Jesus taught. We must have a new life which is only attainable through repentance (Lk. 13:3), conversion (Mt. 18:3), spiritual rebirth (Jn. 3:3), abiding in the vine (Jn. 15:4), belief and baptism (Mk. 16:16). This beginning was summarized by Paul when he wrote “Therefore we are buried with him into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Ro. 6:4).

All of the above would be impossible without faith and the grace of God: “For we walk by faith, not by sight:” (II Cor. 5:7) and “...by grace are ye saved through faith...” (Eph. 2:8). In what does a believer place his faith? In the shed blood of Jesus Christ. “...the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (I Jn. 1:7). “But without faith it is impossible to please him (God): for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

The faith we have in the shed blood of Jesus Christ will cause us to love God for sending His Son to die for us. Our love cannot stop with simply claiming to love God. The first epistle general of John chapter 4 provides a thorough explanation of the need for complete love. Love is of God (vs. 7). If we do not love, we do not know God (vs. 8). God showed His love for us by sending His Son to pay for our sins (vs. 9-10). If God loved us, we ought to love one another (vs. 11) and by loving one another, God’s love is perfected in us (vs. 12). God is love (vs. 16). Our love is made perfect in God (vs. 17). There is no fear in love (vs. 18). We love God because He first loved us (vs. 19). If we say we love God and hate our brother, we are a liar (vs. 20). If we love God, we are commanded to love our brother (vs. 21).

How can we show our love for God? “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep His commandments” (I Jn. 5:2)

If we love God and walk as a believer we will be consistent from day to day. “I therefore ... beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called” (Eph. 4:1). James reminds us that we must “...be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (Ja. 1:4). If we waver (are inconsistent), we are like waves in the sea and shall receive nothing of the Lord. “A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways” (Ja. 1:8).

James also reminds us that if we are consistent in our walk with God, our faith will result in works. Although we know that it is still our faith that saves us, our works show our faith for “...faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone” (Ja. 2:17).

Consistency in our walk as a believer is possible only if we are very careful in what we do. “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time...” (Eph. 6:15-16).

The walk of a believer must be a Holy Spirit led walk. There are many spirits in the world and we are admonished to “...believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (I Jn. 4:1). How do we know which spirit to believe? The Holy Spirit will be in complete agreement with the Word of God and will confess “...that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh...” (I Jn. 4:2). If we feel led to do something that is not consistent with the Word of God, we can be sure it is not of the Holy Spirit.

The walk of a believer will also be a light for others to see. “...if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (I Jn. 1:7). Although we must let our light shine no matter where we are, we must be careful, as believers, that we do not unnecessarily expose ourselves to the spirit of darkness. If we walk with believers and let our light shine when we are near those who are unbelievers, we will be a bright and shining light.

A believer also walks in truth. “Teach me thy way, O Lord; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name” (Ps. 85:11). “I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth...” (II Jn. 4).

Perhaps the most obvious need of a believer’s walk is to walk Christlike and obey His commandments. The first of all commandments is: “...Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord! And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength:... And... Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself...” (Mk. 12:29-31). “He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked” (I Jn. 2:6). There are many scripture passages that encourage us to be Christlike. Jesus said “For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you” (Jn. 13:15). Paul reminded us “Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus” (Heb. 3:1). Also, Jesus said “... If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Mt. 16:24).

The walk of a believer is not difficult. It is a simple godly lifestyle that demonstrates contentment, commitment, faith and a desire to serve. To walk the walk of a believer we must be willing to separate ourselves from worldly activities, from immodest fashion, from vainglory and from those things that are contrary to God’s will. It is a privilege to walk with Jesus Christ and do His will.

For The Lord Hath Spoken It

One of the advantages human beings have over other creatures is that we have the ability to learn from the mistakes of others. If we are willing to do so, we could learn from their experiences and avoid much of the suffering previous generations have endured.

In no segment of our life is this privilege more important than in our relationship with God. We have many wonderful examples of godly men and women who have followed the Lord with diligence and their lot in life, and more importantly in eternity, was blessed. Unfortunately there are also many examples of individuals who refused to follow the Lord and their lot in eternity is one of unending grief (Lu. 16:19-31).

A man, only identified as a rich man, seemed to care only about his own comforts. An opportunity to serve God was laid at his gate - a poor man who only wanted crumbs was denied. The rich man apparently knew of God, of heaven and hell but chose to ignore what he knew until it was too late. In hell, all of his requests were denied.

One lesson we must heed carefully is the seriousness and certainty of the results that will follow when the Lord has spoken. From the first chapter in Genesis through the last chapter in Revelation, we can see the power of God's Word. "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly..." (Rev. 22:20).

Throughout the scripture, through His prophets, His Son and His followers, the Lord emphasized the importance of following His Word. "Thus saith the Lord" and "for the Lord God of Israel hath spoken it" occur many times in His Holy Word. In a short article, it is not possible to cite more than a small percentage of the times the Lord spoke, but a few examples should help us understand the seriousness of God's Word.

In warning of calamities to come to those who disobey God's teachings, He often told of the consequences that would follow. "...the mighty men of the children of Kedar, shall be diminished: for the Lord God of Israel hath spoken it" (Is. 21:17). "Thus shall mine anger be accomplished, and I will cause my fury to rest upon them, and I will be comforted: and they shall know that I the Lord have spoken it in my zeal..." (Ez. 5:13). Daniel warned Belshazzar of his impending doom because of his sin. "In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain" (Dan. 5:30).

Of course, not all of God's words are negative. "...Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Is. 7:14). "...the angel of the Lord appeared unto (Joseph) in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost ...then Joseph ...did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him..." (Mt. 1:20-24).

What does all of this have to do with us in the twenty-first century? There are many messages from God that have a direct bearing on our life. Just as the Lord spoke to His people in the past, He speaks to us today. "For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword ...and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). The power, and certainty of the Word of the Lord has not diminished since the beginning of time.

Through His Word, He has told us that the time will come when we will be judged according to the way we have lived. He has told us that we will either spend eternity with Him or be eternally separated from Him. The Bible outlines the plan of salvation that explains how we are to live.

Among the first words that Jesus spoke after He was baptized, had fasted in the wilderness, and had resisted the temptations that Satan brought upon Him were "...Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 4:17). Throughout the gospels, Jesus explained the plan whereby mankind can escape eternal damnation.

In addition to allowing us to read His Word, God also speaks to us through His servants. Most of us have the opportunity to sit under the sound of the Word of God every Sunday and at midweek services. We have the opportunity to be reminded that the Word of God is just as applicable to our everyday experiences today as it was when it was written.

Not only does the Lord speak to us through His written Word and through the spoken words of His children, but there are times when He speaks to us directly. When we pray for direction, we must be willing to listen. To make it possible to hear Him, we may need to remove ourselves from the confusion and the noise of the world. When Elijah was trying to discern the Lord's message to him, he went to the mount before the Lord. The Lord passed by Elijah but it was not in the strong wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire, "...and after the fire a still small voice" (I Ki. 19:12). When Elijah heard the still small voice, he went and stood in the entrance of the cave "...And, behold, there came a voice unto him,..." (I Ki. 19:13). It was only after Elijah was willing to listen to the voice of the Lord that He could be reassured that he was not alone. God reassured him there were seven thousand men that had neither bowed to Baal nor kissed him. Elijah then left the cave and found Elisha, who was to carry on the work of the Lord after Elijah was gone.

Perhaps we do not want to hear God's message. We may be quite content with our life as we serve self. God is not content to let us serve self. Fortunately, He is often patient with us and may speak to us many times before we answer Him. We must be careful that we do not ignore the voice of the Lord too long. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith..." (Rev. 3:22).

God will help us through the trials of life. He will help us overcome our weaknesses as we battle daily against Satan. His power has not diminished. When we are tried on every hand and fear that Satan may overcome us, we can take courage. "Be still, and know that I am God..." (Ps. 48:10). For many years God spoke to us by the prophets, but "Hath in these last days spoken to us by his Son..." (Heb. 1:2). When the Lord speaks, we would do well to listen as Samuel did when he said "Speak; for thy servant heareth" (I Sam. 3:10).

The Hand of the Lord Is Stretched Out Still

“Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded;” (Pr. 1:24). We read in the scripture many times that the children of Israel forsook the Lord and found themselves in difficult circumstances because of their sins. Even though they strayed from the truth, God never left them without a solution to their problem.

Because of God’s anger with the children of Israel when they had fallen into sin, He often pronounced a sentence against them. When they “...call(ed) evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Is. 5:20) However, “...For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still” (Is. 5:25). Is. 9:12 and 10:4 have nearly identical passages. His anger against the children of Israel was designed to get them to turn away from their wickedness and again serve the Lord: “...As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live...” (Ex. 33:11).

In Psalm 107 we read of a number of situations where the children of Israel rebelled against God, they found themselves in distress and “Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses ...Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men” (Ps. 107:28-31).

Surely we know God is not unreasonable. He wants what is best for His people. He often pleads with us to do what is best for us. “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Is. 1:18).

The Lord has many promises to those who serve Him, but there are consequences for those who refuse. “If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it” (Is. 1:19-20).

The outstretched arm of the Lord has continued even to our day. He has so much mercy for lost mankind that He was willing to take extreme measures on our behalf. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Jesus Christ gave his life so mankind would have the opportunity to repent, be converted and be redeemed by His shed blood.

There are those who abuse the love of God and live as though His mercy will save them from all of their distress regardless of how they live. In the message to the Church in Thyatira, Jesus warned those who sin and do not repent, that He “...will give unto every one of you according to your works” (Rev. 2:23). This rejection by Jesus Christ will also include those who simply drift away from God. “So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth” (Rev. 3:16). But thankfully, Jesus also told of the reward for those who are faithful unto death: “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty,...be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Rev. 2:9-10). God’s outstretched arm is especially visible in the lives of those who come to Him in repentance. This applies to those who have strayed deeply into sin and to those who have tried to live a good life but were not repentant. When the realization of the need for the redeeming power of the blood of Jesus Christ is finally allowed to work in our lives, the compassion of God’s mercy and grace is apparent.

We come to recognize that only by the mercy and grace of God is it possible for anyone to have faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ and to be redeemed of their sins. We also recognize that we must

follow the teachings of Jesus Christ by applying His instructions to our lives. The love of God reaches out to us, but we must be receptive to His call.

As we listen to the testimonies of converts, we hear over and over that they want to escape the wrath of God that awaits the unrepentant. Many times we also hear they tried for some time to do it their way. Fortunately, by the grace of God, the convert realized their way would not work. When they were finally willing to surrender to the call of God, they were able to recognize that God was waiting, and calling for them with His outstretched arms.

It is vital that we remember it is not enough for God to be willing to reach out to us. We must be willing to be submissive to the call of God. There are numerous examples in the scripture where souls wanted to serve God on their own terms. The rich, young ruler came to Christ to see what he needed to do to have eternal life. Christ reminded him that he must keep the commandments. It appears that he had been quite successful in keeping most of the commandments. Jesus did not dispute his claim to have kept them from his youth. However, Jesus recognized that the young man had an idol which had to be removed from his life. He needed to give up his material goods, give them to the poor and follow Jesus. He was unwilling to give up his wealth and follow Jesus (Mt.19:16-26). We must not allow anything to be more important than serving our Master.

At another time, as Jesus was instructing His disciples, He told them they must eat His flesh and drink His blood (Jn. 6:56-57). To some, this was such a hard thing to do that they left Him and did not walk with Him anymore. Jesus then asked His twelve closest disciples if they would go away also. Peter recognized there was no other way to eternal life. He said, "...Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68).

We do not know if any of those disciples ever came back to Jesus. We do know Christ's love for them did not change. He continued to preach the coming of God's kingdom and the need to become children of God. This did not stop until His death. Even as His life slowly drained away while He was hanging on the cross, He prayed for those who rejected Him. "...Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do..." (Lk. 23:34). With His arms stretched toward heaven, He died for all who would come and be saved.

Afflictions

“Afflictions, tho’ they seem severe, In mercy oft are sent; They stopp’d the prodigal’s career, And caused him to repent.” (The Prodigal’s Return, Hymns of Zion #22).

It is apparent from the Word of God that His people will suffer affliction. Sometimes it will be light and sometimes it will be heavy. David often suffered affliction and sought help from the Lord. “Look upon mine affliction and my pain; and forgive all my sins” (Ps. 25:18). Sometimes people are nearly overcome by affliction: Elijah was so distressed that “...he ...went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers” (I Ki. 19:4). Some choose affliction over a life of ease that would lead to wickedness. “By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season,” (Heb. 11:24-25).

What is affliction? Why do we suffer affliction? How can affliction help or hurt us? How do we respond when we “suffer affliction”?

Affliction is a state of suffering pain or distress of the body or mind.

There are, of course, a variety of reasons why we suffer afflictions. We can bring affliction on ourselves because of inappropriate behavior. The children of Israel often suffered affliction because of their lifestyle. Many of their kings led them into idolatry and many other sins. Psalm 107 is a powerful description of what happened to the children of Israel when they followed their selfish will rather than following God’s will. “They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way...” (v. 4); “...they rebelled against the words of God,...” (v. 11); they were “Fools, because of their transgression,...” (v. 17); “They reel to and frolike a drunken man, and are at their wit’s end” (v. 27). In each case they cried unto the Lord and He brought them out of their distresses. The Psalmist recognized that it would not have had to be that way. “Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men” (v. 8,15,21,31)! Bad choices caused them to suffer. The prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) clearly brought his affliction on himself because of inappropriate choices.

Not all afflictions are brought on by bad choices. Some are tests from God. Job suffered incredible heartbreak, but “In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly” (Job 1:22). The New Testament gives us many examples of individuals who suffered for their service to the Lord. Peter and others, when called to appear before the Sanhedrin refused to yield to their demands. Instead, “...they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41). Paul, Steven and others willingly gave their lives for the cross of Christ.

The scripture describes many benefits of affliction. Job recognized that affliction can purify us. “But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). When we suffer hardships, it can keep us from going astray. “Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word” (Ps. 119:67). Paul reminded us that we can come to a peace as a result of our troubles. “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Heb. 12:11).

Not only do we have difficulties that God allows to come upon us as tests, Satan can also bring difficulties as a way of tempting us to sin. Temptations are afflictions from Satan designed to make us fail. Ever since man has been on the earth, Satan has tried to make him fail. In the Garden of Eden, Satan, in the form of a serpent caused Adam and Eve to fall into sin. Numerous times Satan has caused God’s

people to fail. “And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel” (I Ch. 21:1). After this sin, David was required to make a very difficult choice. Gad, David’s seer was instructed to tell David to choose one of three tribulations: three years famine, three months to be destroyed before his foes, or three days of the sword of the Lord. David was in a great affliction and chose to fall into the hand of the Lord.

Jesus was tempted also. After forty days of fasting and prayer, Satan was allowed to question Jesus whether He was the Son of God and to bring various other temptations. In each case, Jesus resisted Satan by using the Word of God (Mt. 4:1-10). Satan was then required to leave him “...and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him” (Mt. 4:11).

Paul recognized that the followers of Christ would be tempted so he urged us to be careful and to forgive “Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices” (II Cor. 2:11).

Our reactions to affliction no doubt vary from time to time and from situation to situation. We can be despondent, we can become angry or we can recognize that it is an opportunity to grow. Whatever our reaction, we are assured that there are promises from God to the afflicted.

We know the afflictions will not last forever. “For his anger endureth but a moment; ...but joy cometh in the morning” (Ps. 30:5). We are also promised that the Lord will deliver us from our afflictions: “Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all” (Ps. 34:19).

We know that sometimes God allows us to remain in troubling situations for some time, but during those times He will be with us: “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overthrow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee” (Is. 43:2).

The greatest promise of all, of course, is the promise of ultimate victory. Jesus said “Let not your heart be troubled: ... I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (Jn. 14:1-3).

Just as the father forgave the prodigal son and welcomed him home, we also have a Father who loves us, cares for us and will welcome His children home.

The Potter and the Clay

“Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way! Thou art the potter; I am the clay. Mold me and make me After Thy will. While I am waiting, Yielded and still.” (“Have Thine Own Way, Lord,” Hymns of Zion p. 113). It is so very easy to sing beautiful words in the hymns that we have, but the application of the words to our lives is often more difficult.

God revealed to Jeremiah that “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9). To help Jeremiah better understand that God was in control of his life, the Lord sent Jeremiah to the potter’s house to watch the potter work. When a vessel was marred, the potter felt free to make another vessel of the same clay - a vessel that would be better than the first one.

The Lord spoke to Jeremiah “O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel” (Jer. 18:6). The Lord then explained to Jeremiah that He could destroy a nation that was wicked but if the nation would repent, the scattered flock could be restored.

In addition, Jeremiah was instructed to teach the children of Israel not to complain so much. The children of Israel and some of the leadership had protested that the burden of the Lord was too heavy. They did not like what the Lord had done. The Lord reminded them that if they complained “...I, even I, will utterly forget you, and I will forsake you, ...and cast you out of my presence.” (Jer. 23:39). This led to a long period of difficulty. After this period the Lord said “...I will cause him (their governor) to draw near, and he shall approach unto me: for who is this that engaged his heart to approach unto me? saith the Lord. And ye shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Jer. 30:21-22).

The Lord also gave examples of making new vessels of clay of certain individuals in the Bible. When Saul was chosen to be King of Israel, he didn’t feel worthy to lead God’s people: “...Am not I a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? wherefore then speakest thou so to me?” (I Sam. 9:21). But God could take that ineffective lump of clay “And the Spirit of the Lord will come upon thee, and thou shalt prophesy with them, and shalt be turned into another man” and “...God gave him another heart...” (I Sam. 10:6&9). As long as Saul was willing to be molded by God, it went well with him; but when Saul tried to become his own vessel, his kingdom was doomed.

We could cite numerous other examples where God took a marred lump of clay and molded it into a vessel useful for the work of the Lord. Among them were Moses, with his speech problem; Isaiah, who felt he had unclean lips; Peter, who was far too bold and sure of his own strength; and Saul (Paul), who was an over zealous Pharisee.

What kind of a lump of clay are we? Do we think we are too incapable to serve God? Are we too sure of ourself? Do we simply not believe? Is our faith too weak that we feel we are not useful to God? “Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there anything too hard for me?” (Jer. 32:27). “...though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Is. 1:18).

We are promised much good “If ye be willing and obedient, ... But if ye refuse and rebel...” (Is. 1:19-20) it will not go well with us. The Old Testament prophets recognized God’s promises to those who served Him. But they saw this from afar and had faith, but in their lifetime they “...received not the promise” (Heb. 11:39). If all of these things could be understood without having observed the fulfillment

of the coming of the Saviour, how much more should we be able to see what God will do for us since we know Christ died for us?

We were all lumps of contaminated clay. We were vessels that contained sin. “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Ro. 3:23). How thankful we must be that even though “There is none righteous ... (we) are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Ro. 3:10-12). God did not give up on us. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16).

Jesus told us how we could become a moldable lump of clay. Among the first words that Jesus preached following His great temptation were “...Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt. 4:17). When we truly repent we become humble and submissive to God. He will give us the grace we need to serve Him. “But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God, Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:6-7).

We may think it is too hard to submit to God and to follow the teachings of Jesus - but we have the promise from the Word of God that this is not so. John wrote “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (I Jn. 5:3).

There will undoubtedly be times when serving the Lord will not be easy. Satan will see to it that we have troubles. “...In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33). Paul reminded us of this also. He encouraged those who were converted “...that we must with much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

Jesus offered much encouragement to His followers. “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls, For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:28-30).

The clay really has no choice about the type of vessel it becomes. It has no choice whether it will be pure or contaminated clay. It has no choice whether it will be a vessel of honor or dishonor. We, however, do have a choice. “...choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:15). If we choose to truly serve the Lord and submit to His commandments, we can be a vessel of honor to God regardless of the quality of our clay before we were converted by God.

Prosperity I

Although we know there are people in America who are poor, and we know "...ye have the poor always with you..." (Matt. 26:11), we are living in a time of unparalleled economic prosperity. The stock market continues to reach historical high points. Most of us hardly know what it is to lack anything that we really need. Most of us have food, clothing and shelter in abundance and luxuries beyond what a majority of the people in the world can even imagine. Is prosperity good for us or is it harmful? Do only the godly prosper or do the wicked also prosper? Sometimes we may even question God when we observe the prosperity of the wicked.

We define prosperity as gaining anything good or desirable. Most of the time we hear prosperity associated with material gain. We must also consider prosperity from a spiritual perspective.

In the Old Testament, many of the patriarchs were very wealthy and it seemed to be regarded as a good thing. Abraham and Lot were so wealthy that "...the land was not able to bear them ,...for their substance was so great, so they could not dwell together" (Gen. 13:6). When Jacob and Esau were reunited after years of bitter separation, it is apparent that both had large flocks and herds. Jacob offered Esau a large gift (Gen. 32:13-15) but Esau tried to refuse them because he said "...I have enough..." (Gen. 33:9).

After severe trials in which Job lost nearly everything, we find that in the end God blessed him "...more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses" (Job 42:12).

When Solomon became King of Israel God said "...Ask what I shall give thee" (I Kings 3:5), Solomon asked for wisdom to rule his people. God was pleased with his request, gave him an understanding heart, "And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing... I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches, and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days" (I Kings 3:11-13). His daily provision "...was thirty measures of fine flour, and threescore measures of meal, Ten fat oxen, and twenty oxen out of the pastures, and an hundred sheep, beside harts, and roebucks, and fallowdeer, and fatted fowl" (I Kings 4:22-23). Continued reading would reveal to us almost unbelievable wealth that Solomon accumulated.

Of course, not all of the faithful in the Old Testament were wealthy, but in a significant number of cases it seems God blessed the faithful in a material way. Uzziah, king of Judah, tried to do God's will "...and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper" (II Chron, 26:5). As long as Uzziah remained humbly submissive to God, it went well for him. When he became strong, he became proud and tried to do his will rather than God's will. God smote him with leprosy. Because of his sin he "...was a leper until the day of his death..." (II Chron. 26:21).

Material wealth was not limited to the godly. Job realized "The tabernacles of robbers prosper, and they that provoke God are secure; into whose hand God bringeth abundantly" (Job 12:6). David also recognized that the ungodly may prosper materially: "I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree" (Ps. 37:35) and he said "...I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Ps. 73:3).

David personally experienced the selfishness of a wicked man who had prospered. As David was trying to escape Saul's wrath, he and those who followed him were in great need. He heard of Nabal a wealthy ...man (who) was churlish and evil in his doings..." (I Sam. 25:3) and David asked Nabal for some provisions. Nabal refused to help David saying "Shall I then take my bread, and my water, and my

flesh that I have killed for my shearers, and give it unto men, whom I know not whence they be” (I Sam. 25:11)? Nabal’s selfish attitude cost him his life. After a drunken feast, “...the Lord smote Nabal, that he died” (I Sam. 25:38).

We sometimes wonder why the wicked prosper so much. Jeremiah also wondered about this. He did not question God’s righteousness but he had questions about some judgments. “Righteous art thou, O God, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously? Thou hast planted them, yea, they have taken root: they grow, yea, they bring forth fruit...” (Jer. 12:1-2).

The conversation between God and Jeremiah continues for sometime, God assured Jeremiah that in the end the lying prophets, the wicked people and those who are deceitful will perish. There would be a time when conditions were so bad that Jeremiah was not even to pray for them (Jer. 14:11). God would not hear their cries nor accept their fasts. It would be so bad that the Lord told Jeremiah “...Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my mind could not be toward this people: cast them out of my sight, and let them go...” (Jer. 15:1)

We could also refer to numerous examples in our lifetime where extremely wicked people prosper materially. As we struggle to understand this situation, we would do well to remember the words of Isaiah: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord” (Is. 55:8).

In the New Testament there seems to be significantly less emphasis on material wealth. Jesus made it very clear that material wealth was not to be our primary goal. After having emphasized the blessings of the poor and the hungry, He said “But woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation” (Lk. 6:24). He said “That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.” And “...It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Mt. 19:24). We are also reminded that too much emphasis on wealth can blind us to the truth. To the Laodiceans, Jesus told John to write “Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:17).

So what should a child of God do about materialism? What should we strive for? Are material items a blessing or a curse? Although we may not have a perfect understanding of the role that material goods should have in our life, we do have enough scriptural instruction about these riches that we can know much of what God wants us to think in this area of our life. We can also know what true prosperity is.

This topic will be continued in the next issue in “The Light From the Word”.

Prosperity II

In the previous article of "The Light From the Word", a brief review of material wealth was discussed from numerous Old and New Testament scriptures. In this article additional references are cited that encourage a child of God to be careful we are not deceived by material goods. This article will also briefly address true riches - the spiritual riches from God.

First of all, we must keep the desire for material goods in proper perspective. Many references in the Old and New Testament help us to understand the deceitfulness of riches. Solomon warned of the danger that over-emphasis on materialism (greed) could have on the stability of family life. "He that is greedy of gain troubleth his own house; but he that hateth gifts shall live" (Proverbs 15:27). Often we see parents who are so desirous to provide material blessings to their family that they neglect to provide stability and family structure children so desperately need.

He also wrote of the disappointment of too much emphasis on wealth. "He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity" (Ecc. 5:10). If we come to love the things of this world, we will find there is never quite enough material goods to really satisfy us. The foolishness of this was clearly pointed out when Jesus said, "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" (Mt. 16:26)

Jesus told of the rich man whose ground was so productive that he couldn't store it all. He pulled down his barns and built barns large enough to hold all of his fruits. He believed he was secure for years. However, God said "...Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee:..." (Lk. 12:20). His trust in material goods caused him much grief.

Paul warned of the spiritual danger of improper emphasis on wealth. "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (I Tim. 6:10). James reinforced this thought: "Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days" (Ja. 5:3). Finally, Jesus put it all in perspective for us when He said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt. 6:19-21).

We are instructed to work. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,..." (Gen. 3:19). Paul made it clear that we are to be willing to work, "...if any would not work, neither should he eat" (II Th. 3:11)). He was even more emphatic about the need to work to provide for our material needs as he instructed Timothy that "...if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (I Tim. 5:8).

From these examples we can see, while some material goods are necessary, if we trust in them we will miss the mark. We, therefore, need to understand what prosperity really means. Jesus explained clearly that materialism was less important than spiritual riches. "if therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?" (Lk. 16:11)

As unconverted people, there were many things about wealth we simply didn't understand. Solomon's statement "There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing" (Pr. 13:7) just didn't make sense. How could anyone who was very poor think of himself as rich, or how could anyone who is wealthy have nothing?

Additional evidence that we did not understand the meaning of true riches was our thoughts about repentance. Perhaps we realize the need to repent and perhaps we had a desire to repent; however, many of us in our unconverted state did not regard repentance as evidence of spiritual riches nor of God's goodness. Paul made it abundantly clear how valuable repentance really is: "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" (Ro. 2:4)

Not only did we misunderstand the blessings of spiritual riches in our unconverted life, we did not understand the deceitfulness of worldly riches. "But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition" (I Tim. 6:9).

Serving God faithfully and humbly will bring us these true riches. "But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Ph. 4:19). By trusting God to supply all our needs, we can grow in grace and favor with God. "And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus" (I Tim. 1:14).

Spiritual riches are more durable than the riches of this life. Solomon, with all his wealth, understood this as he wrote "Riches and honor are with me, yea, durable riches and righteousness" (Prov. 8:18). Sometimes it is hard for mankind to really grasp the value of spiritual riches relative to material good. We can see, feel and use material goods but we can't always understand the value of intangible spiritual riches. Moses understood it well for he esteemed "...the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt:..." (Heb. 11:26).

No doubt for many of us, the older we get, the more clearly we see the value of spiritual riches. David wrote "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread" (Ps. 37:25). There is no promise that we will always have abundance, but we do know "...God shall supply all your need..." (Phil. 4:19).

As we think of prosperity and the emphasis of accumulating the wealth of this world, let us remember the encouragement we received when Paul put it in perspective for us: "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ" (Ph. 3:8).

God's Divine Deliverance

"I saw a way worn trav'ler in tatter'd garments clad, And struggling up the mountain, It seem'd that he was sad; His back was laden heavy, His strength was almost gone, Yet he shouted as he journeyed, Deliverance will come." "Deliverance Will Come" (Gospel Hymns, #225, verse 1).

Satan's goal for all of mankind is to deliver souls to destruction. "...your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:" (I Peter 5:8). From the garden of Eden through the end of time, Satan has spread his evil message: "...Ye shall not surely die ...ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5).

Mankind has struggled throughout the ages of time to deal with Satan's deceit. God has promised His help. If we will serve Him, He will help us to overcome all that Satan can bring to us. The Word of God contains many descriptions of Satan's work and many promises of God's willingness to help us be victorious.

Psalms 107 contains a very clear description of Satan's temporary successes and of God's willingness to fulfill His promises to deliver us from evil: The descriptions in this Psalm of God's people when they left serving God are heartrending. "They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way;...their soul fainted in them" (v. 4-5). "Because they rebelled against the words of God, ...Therefore he brought down their heart with labor; they fell down, and there was none to help" (v. 11-12). "Fools, because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities,...they draw near unto the gates of death" (v. 17-18), "...they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end" (v. 26-27).

In each of these cases, "Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses" (v. 6, 13, 19, 28). When they were willing to totally surrender to God's will, they found deliverance. The account of their deliverance is as beautiful as the description of their trouble is heartrending. "...he led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation" (v. 7). "He brought them out of darkness, and the shadow of death, and brake their bands in sunder" (v. 14). "He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction" (v. 20). "He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still...he bringeth them unto their desired haven" (v. 29-30). "He blesseth them also, so that they are multiplied greatly; and suffereth not their cattle to decrease" (v. 38). "Yet setteth he the poor on high from affliction...The righteous shall see it, and rejoice: and all iniquity shall stop her mouth. Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the loving-kindness of the Lord" (v. 41-43).

Many examples of a very specific nature could be cited. Noah and his family were delivered from the flood because he walked with God (Gen. 6:9). In a last moment reprieve, Abraham was not required to offer his son as a sacrifice "...for now I know that thou fearest God..." (Gen. 22:12). Joseph, because of his refusal to yield to temptation, had to suffer for a time as "brought...hastily out of the dungeon:...and (was) made ruler over all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 41:14 & 44). Moses was delivered from the death sentence of Pharaoh so he could deliver the children of Israel out of Egypt.

How does all of this apply to us today? Just as God sent His Word to save the children of Israel (Ps. 107:20), He also sent His Word to save us. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn. 1:1). We understand that the "Word" refers to Jesus Christ who was sent to earth to save us from our sins. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (Jn. 3:16-17). Jesus not

only was willing to come, but He recognized the need of sinful man to be delivered from Satan. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus prayed that God would "...lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:..." (Mt. 6:13).

We know that this prayer was not just for those who were on the mountain at that time, but is for us today. As Jesus was praying for His disciples before His crucifixion, He prayed that they could be sanctified and He said "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them which shall believe on me through their word" (Jn. 17:20). This prayer includes us in the twenty-first century because the Word of God was passed from the disciples through each generation until our time.

Those of us who have lived after the death and resurrection have a special advantage over those who preceded Christ did not have. The sacrifices of animals were only a temporary atonement for sin. Grace to overcome temptation did not seem to be readily available prior to Christ having shed His blood as the complete and perfect atonement for sin. The gift of the Holy Spirit as our guide did not seem as readily available to them either. They would sin and make an atoning sacrifice — and sin again. This pattern was repeated over and over.

However, since Christ's blood was shed, since He gave His life on Calvary's cross, and since He rose from the dead, we can be delivered from yielding to Satan's evil work. We are no longer under the law, but under grace. However, living under grace rather than under the law does not allow us to sin. "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Ro. 6:1-2).

Jesus Christ overcame the world (Jn. 16:33). He delivered us from the bondage of the world. "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (Jn. 8:36). He sent His comforter and when "...he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth..." (Jn. 16:13).

We need not wait until we are at our wit's end to seek God's deliverance. By humbling ourselves and submitting to His call to repentance and conversion, "...by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Ep. 2:8).

"Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men" (Ps. 107:8)!

"I heard the song of triumph, They sang upon that shore, Saying, Jesus has redeemed us To suffer nevermore: Then casting his eyes backward On the race which he had run. He shouted loud, Hosanna, Deliverance has come!" "Deliverance will Come" (Gospel Hymns, #225, v. 6).

The Final Separation

Someone will enter the pearly gate By and by, by and by,
Taste of the glories that there await, Shall you? shall I?
Someone will travel the streets of gold, Beautiful visions will there behold,
Feast on the pleasures so long foretold; Shall you, shall I?
Someone will knock when the door is shut, By and by, by and by
Hear a voice saying, "I know you not", Shall you, shall I?
Someone will call and shall not be heard, Vainly will strive when the door is barred,
Someone will fail of the saints reward, Shall you, shall I?
(“Shall You, Shall I”, Gospel Hymns #309, Verses 1 & 3)

These two verses of a beautiful hymn serve as a very clear reminder that since the beginning of time God saw that order and disorder, right and wrong, sin and holiness could not abide together. “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good...” (Gen. 1:2 & 31).

God created the Garden of Eden to perfectly provide everything that Adam and Eve needed, apparently even giving them access to the tree of life as long as they served Him. But Adam and Eve sinned and as a result “...the Lord God sent him (Adam) forth from the Garden of Eden...” (Gen. 3:23).

God and His Son “...hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity;...” (Heb. 1:9). He wants to protect His people from sin and has many times instructed us to separate ourselves from sin. In the Garden of Eden the instructions for separation were so clear that God told Adam and Eve that they should “...not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die” (Gen. 3:3).

God also knew that through evil associations, His people would be contaminated by the sins of those who were around them. Moses, in leading the children of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land, understood the importance of separation from evil influence. In a discussion with God, Moses said “...So shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth” (Ex. 33:16). Among the instructions and warnings that God gave to His people concerning the importance of separation from evil He said “And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the Lord am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine” (Lev. 20:26).

The need for separation from evil was also made very clear in the New Testament. Paul wrote “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (Ep. 5:11). The need for separation was even extended beyond separation from the heathen. We are commanded to separate ourselves from a brother who is disorderly. “Now we command you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us” (II Th. 3:6).

The separations discussed thus far are separations on this earth. They are temporary and are designed to keep us holy. Often the separation on earth is painful. When it is necessary for a family or a church to make a separation from a loved one for a time because of a problem, we feel distressed and wish that it didn't have to be. There is, however a separation coming that is much more serious and will last through all eternity. This is the final separation that will come when God judges our eternal destination.

The Word of God clearly spells out the eternal results of situations brought on by a life of sin. Numerous accounts in the Bible tell us there will be an eternal separation and we cannot hide our sins from God.

There are those who believe they can get away with a sinful life. Many times they seem to prosper. They console themselves with their temporal blessings and believe that all will be well. In the parable of the tares, good seed was contaminated when the enemy sowed tares with the wheat. The tares were permitted to grow with the wheat until harvest "...and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn" (Mt. 13:30). The tares were ultimately destroyed. Luke reminds us that people will likewise be divided in the end. "I tell you, in that night there shall be two men in one bed; the one shall be taken, and the other shall be left" (Lk. 17:34).

Unfortunately, not all of those lost are easy to identify. There are those who try to defend themselves because they think they are doing quite well. Jesus told of those who were not willing to share their blessings with those who were less fortunate. They did not feed, clothe nor comfort those who were hurting. "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal" (Mt. 25:46).

Some will actually believe they were doing God's work. "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils?...And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Mt.7:22-23). How could they be so deceived? It appears (v. 21) that they were doing their own will rather than the will of God.

Other passages of scripture make it profoundly clear that the separation is final. "So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever (cut off) the wicked from among the just" (Mt. 13:49). "And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats" (Mt. 25:32).

The account of the rich man and Lazarus confirms that the judgment is final. The rich man pleaded that Lazarus could dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue. He neither asked for a cup of water nor for Lazarus to wet his entire finger. All he wanted was what would stay on the tip of Lazarus' finger, and it was not granted to him. Abraham told the rich man "...between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence" (Lk. 16:26).

The final separation will either bring "...wailing and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 13:50) or it will bring eternal bliss.

Someone will sing the triumphant song, Join in the praise with the blood-bought throng,
Someone will greet on the golden shore, Loved ones of earth who have gone before,
Safe in the glory for ever more: Shall you? Shall I?
(Shall You? Shall I?, Gospel Hymns p. 309, v. 4)

Parents, Children and Technology I

“...many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased” (Dan. 12:4). Our older brethren who have lived many years have seen the pace of life increase almost unbelievably and have observed an increase in knowledge at a phenomenal rate. During their lifetime we have spanned from the horse and buggy to travel to the moon. They have experienced a change in technology from paper and pencil to computers, word processing and other high tech equipment that can be overwhelming.

It is nearly impossible to accurately quantify the “amount” of knowledge that exists. Scientists who work on such a concept have made general statements that are very sobering and leave us with at least some concern about how we will deal with the rapid increase in the amount of information that confronts us, and how we will set priorities in an era of high pressure choices.

We are told that the “amount” of information in the world doubled from the beginning of written history until the time of Christ - a period of approximately 4,000 years. It doubled again by about 1750 A.D. The next doubling took about 150 years - by about 1900. The pace increased even more significantly, doubling again by 1950 and then again by 1960. Since then, it is estimated that the amount of information doubles about every two years. Of course, since the “base” of information that doubles is so much larger, we almost lose sense of the “size” of the increase.

How does this impact the “average” citizen? What impact does this have on parents of young people? A few more “bits” of information may bring the concept of rapid change to items that are a little closer to our lives:

- It took a little over 65 years from the invention of the telephone until 75% of American households had a phone.
- It took a little over 50 years for 75% of households to have an automobile.
- It took only about seven years until 75% of households had a TV.
- Cell phones, computers and the internet have come into our households at an even faster rate.

Not only have new devices come into our homes much more rapidly, but also the power, speed and diversity of the devices have increased almost beyond our capacity to understand. Early personal computers had only limited storage capacity. Information beyond that capacity had to be stored on separate disks, a situation that would now be regarded as a very inconvenient and slow process. Current personal computers can easily store many thousands of pages.

The cell phone has, in reality, become a “mini-computer”. In addition to being a phone, it can also be used as a camera, a device for sending and receiving e-mail, voice mail, text/instant messaging, the internet, and other technological advances. The technology is in place and soon will be available for a majority of households to use a hand held device probably no larger than a cell phone for satellite TV/radio, advertising/commercials, movies, Internet, e-mail, digital images and many other things. Change and expansion are so rapid that it is almost certain by the time this article is printed many more “advances” will be made.

Change is not new to our generation, and we know there have always been temptations (Gen. 3:4-6). Although we clearly understand that not all knowledge is bad, there has long been the understanding that not all knowledge is comforting: “...he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow” (Ecc. 1:18).

It is not possible, nor is it desirable, to stop the increase in knowledge or the advances in technology. Many of the improvements in technology have made our lives more comfortable. However, it is necessary for us to recognize that there are many dangers associated with the advances in technology.

Parents need to make a concerted effort to know what their children are involved in and the dangers that our young people face as a result of easy access to technology. Young people are much more adept at using these powerful tools and can be involved in spiritually dangerous activities without their parents having any idea what is going on.

Those of us who are older may wish that technology would just go away. We could take the attitude that we have no interest in it so we will just ignore it. Ignoring the advances in technology might be compared to ignoring a serious illness. Just because we do not like it doesn't make it unreal. Does that mean parents must become technological wizards? No, it doesn't. What it does mean is that parents need to do what parents have always needed to do: talk to your children, listen to your children, spend time with them, and be an important part of their lives.

The topic of technology might even be a good opportunity to open the doors of communication with your child. Have them teach you about some of the possibilities that the advances in technology have brought to our lives. This can give parents a chance to impart "what ifs" to your child as you learn from them. It would provide an opportunity to guide them to understanding the dangers that they may face. If we can see where our children are coming from, it might also allow us to help them see our point of view and to help them recognize the dangers they may face.

It is very easy to justify the use of new technology. Cell phones are valuable for convenience, security, and in some ways economy. The internet is valuable for school work, personal research, business and many other tasks that require gathering information. Medical advances and conveniences of a wide variety have improved our lives. The list of "good" results would take many pages to complete.

It is neither the purpose of this article to make a complete nor even a long list of the changes, nor is it the purpose of this article to be critical or supportive of any specific area of technology. The purpose is to help us understand that all of us, especially parents, need to be aware of the spiritual dangers that can come into our lives and the lives of our loved ones in the name of "technological improvements".

This topic will be continued in the next "Light From the Word" article.

Parents, Children and Technology II

In part I of this topic, some background and a brief historical perspective on the development and growth of technology and its impact on our lives were presented. Some specific examples were briefly discussed. Part II will point out some concerns and try to focus, on additional specific devices that our children have access to that parents need to at least be aware of.

Perhaps most of the issues of concern about technology focus on morality, accountability and spiritual safety. There is no agency that is in charge of the internet nor is anyone in charge of the information that is dispensed on the internet. Much of the information on the internet is presented as fact without any accurate way to verify its validity. The individual who presents the information may or may not be well informed about the topic. Opinion can easily be presented as fact. With books, magazines, etc. there is at least a publisher who has a degree of accountability or at least may be able to provide some information on the source of the article. On the internet there is very little accountability.

This complete lack of regulation means that accountability becomes the responsibility of the individual and the family. We must realize that even though we may think we can use the technology or the information without accountability to anyone, clearly we are all accountable for our behavior: “For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Ecc. 12:14). Even though we may think we are not accountable for what we do when not being “watched” by another person, Jesus said “For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed: neither hid, that shall not be known” (Lk. 12:2) and “...whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops” (Lk. 12:3). Ultimately, we are accountable to God.

A major concern for parents should be that so many of these devices can be used by young people without parents having any idea that they are using them. Since young people can secretly contact others by the use of many devices, parents must be aware that their children can come under the influence of a total stranger without parental knowledge. This has the potential to cause serious problems for our children. Some examples are:

- cell phones can be used from virtually anyplace. The old phones attached to the wall helped maintain accountability. Parents could know their children were on the phone, and usually knew who they were talking to.
- movies can be watched on DVD players in most computers. It is no longer necessary to go to the theater - or even to use a TV. If children have access to a computer in a private setting, they can watch unwholesome entertainment totally unsupervised.
- the old record or tape player, which required records, tapes, etc. has been replaced by MP3 players, iPods, etc, which enable an individual to download their own music library, with no filtering device or any other control of what is listened to. Often, only the user knows what is being heard and parents know nothing about what the children are listening to.
- Old-fashioned “social networking” such as letter writing, phone calls on the family phone (located in a visible place in the home), family gatherings and even newspapers and magazines are being replaced by personal information sites such as Myspace, Xanga, Facebook, Bebo, YouTube, PBase, etc. Many young people use these to share information that may be very personal or contains gossip, threats, lies, rumors, etc. Information or images can go from coast to coast almost instantly, with no accountability to the person concerning the validity or wholesomeness of the message.

The old-fashioned ways of making friends are being replaced with ways that may be a very shallow, impersonal, digital “conversation”. Some cyber space sites allow the “author” to pick and choose

who can enter the site. While this certainly has important security advantages, it also allows a cyber version of excluding or secluding those who are unpopular at school, making some children even more lonely.

This article is not an attempt to be alarmist. Rather it is an attempt at awareness. An extension of social networking is a site called Second Life - a name that certainly has spiritual implications. This allows the user to create a likeness of himself (or any variation desired) to become the main character in a "self created" world. Essentially they can live out every fantasy they can imagine in a digital world. The self created digital "characters" can interact with other digital characters in cyber space. To do this requires a great deal of time and, therefore, becomes a great time waster as well as a concern for emotional stability.

These new "social networking" versions are growing in popularity, partly because of loneliness and seclusion in a very cold and impersonal world. We can hardly imagine the anxiety of an adolescent who in the depths of despair with the feelings that there is no one else to turn to but a fake world of digital images and faceless voices in a very unstable, desperate world. Even more heartrending is, for some, this is their idea of a second life - which in reality is no life at all.

- Many games are readily available that can promote violence and other inappropriate activity or language. Many of these are done in solitude and are addictive in nature resulting in a tremendous waste of time. The addiction to immorality can destroy lives of those who become addicted and cause great distress in their families.
- It is no longer necessary to go to a store or to use a mail order catalogue to purchase many items. With the internet, a credit card and a few minutes, purchases can be made from home and shipped to your door. This is a wonderful convenience for those who are unable to get out. However, for those who have financial problems, it can cause an increase in unnecessary spending and increases the potential for financial trouble.

With all of the possibilities available, we could easily feel overwhelmed with the task ahead of us. It is not necessary to be fearful. Very few of us can fully explain how a telephone works, yet we have been using the telephone for generations and we appreciate most of what it does for us.

This article will continue in next month's "Light From the Word".

Parents, Children and Technology III

The two previous articles on this topic gave a brief historical background on the development of technology and pointed out some of the devices that parents need to be aware of and some of the issues of concern.

In this article the focus of attention will be on encouragement for parents and some sources of help for parents who may be facing these issues with their children.

So much of this topic - teens and technology - goes back to good parenting. If we use good parenting principles, we do not need to know everything that is happening in the world of technology. We do need to know what our children are doing. We need to know where they are. We need to know who (or what) they spend their time with. Just as we would not allow our children to spend time with total strangers in a completely unsupervised manner, neither should we release our children to strange devices in an unsupervised setting.

It is very important that if we have computers in our home, that they be located in an area that makes regular supervision possible. We should have consistent, strict rules about its use with reasonable time limitations and uncompromising prohibition of involvement with strangers on the internet for other than legitimate business or education use.

If we allow our children to have cell phones, we should limit the features that the phone has. We should be aware of how much time is spent on the phone and who they talk to. We also need to be aware of the time of day our children are using these devices. Frequent, lengthy use of computers, cell phones, etc. late at night are often a signal that parents need to find out what is going on and who they are involved with.

There are numerous resources for parents as they try to provide responsible guidance for their children. Some references are:

- * "Guidance on Internet Use" - made available through the church in March, 2006. This article can be obtained from your elder, one of the ministers or on the Apostolic Christian Counseling and Family Services website. It provides more information on technology, additional reasons for concern and additional help for parents as they work with their children in this sometimes very trying area of our lives.
- * Two previous articles in "The Light from the Word" - Technology and the Internet I & II. Although these were originally published in the Silver Lining in July and August 1998, the cautions are still relevant.
- * Deuteronomy 6:7-8 instructs us that we "...shalt teach them (God's commandments) diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest in the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes."

To a world that is used to instant results or gratification, this may seem like a very difficult task. However, when we consider the persistent, eye-catching appeal to the baser instincts of the human mind, persistent teaching of the Word of God in a loving clear manner is vital to combat the evil that is confronting our children.

In a world of rapid changes, instability and unwholesome fantasy, our children need more than ever the stability of the Truth of the Word from an unchanging God. Although it may be difficult to establish a close relationship with a child who has withdrawn from family and values contained in the Bible, as parents, we must reach out to our children and try to draw them close. We must live our lives in a way that demonstrates love, joy, peace with God, and with a contentment that will help our children see what God has for us.

- * Proverbs 4 reminds us that God has given us good doctrine. We are encouraged to retain His words in our hearts, keep His commandments, and live. We are to get wisdom and understanding. “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding” (vs.7).

High speed technology will certainly help us get knowledge, but it will hardly give us wisdom. It will provide us with vast resources, but it may not do much to help us get understanding. Much of ch. 4 in Proverbs warns us to stay away from evil. We are instructed to “Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established. Turn not to the right hand nor to the left: remove thy foot from evil” (v. 26-27).

- * St. Luke 11:11-13 instructs us to give our children good food (bread, fish, eggs) rather than evil gifts (stone, serpent, scorpion). Technology has much to offer that can be good and much to offer that is very evil. We try to teach our children to avoid harmful food and physical danger. We must also teach them to learn the difference between good and evil knowledge.
- * Another valuable resource for parents as they try to help their children learn responsible use of modern technology is brothers, sisters, or friends who work frequently with technology. Just as we cannot know everything possible about nutrition, health or other topics of importance as they relate to our children, we likely will not understand everything we need to know to help our children learn to use technology in a responsible manner. We should not be afraid to ask for help from those who are well informed in this area.
- * There have been Conference topics, Memorandum topics and other presentations that can provide help in dealing with the vast array of challenges we face as we deal with the ever expanding opportunities that are presented by advances in technology.
- * Our children’s school teachers may also be a valuable resource. We could visit with them about the involvement of our children in technology in their classes. If we know our children’s teacher better, we will likely be in a better position to fulfill our parental responsibilities.

Children are most likely more advanced in the use of technology, and far more comfortable in using it than their parents are. This can be a source of concern for parents, or it can be an opportunity to get to know our children better and to help them. Satan’s goal has not changed. He still wants to destroy God’s people. If he can separate parents from their children, he will have gained a great advantage.

God has not changed. He still wants His people to serve Him and to be eternally saved. Technology does not have to allow Satan to win this battle. “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might” (Eph. 6:10).

Balanced Four-Pillar Mission of the Church

The Bible states that God created mankind “in His own image” for the purpose of bringing pleasure to God and glorifying His worthy name (Gen. 1:27; Rev. 4:11). The four-pillar mission of the church expresses our commitment to the accomplishment of this divine purpose not only as a church but also as individual members of the Body of Christ (Rom. 12:5).

The mission or purpose of the church exemplifies the love of Christ in our hearts that we “might be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19). The church accomplishes its four-part mission by looking to Christ as its Head and pattern for living (Col. 1:18).

The first pillar is to present to the lost the Gospel message of salvation based on faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ and a true repentance and conversion. If a church is to reflect the true gospel of Christ, its doctrines and teachings must be based on the Word, and its members must be truly converted individuals (Matt. 18:3, Acts 3:19, 1 John 5:4). We are called to a consistent Christian example resulting from living a sanctified life. Christ said: “the same works that I do bear witness of me” (John 5:36) and “by their fruits ye shall know them” (Matt. 7:20).

Christ gave a compelling command to the Church when He said “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20).

Not all of us will be called to travel to “all nations” as indicated by the account of the Gadarene man cleansed from the legion of devils. Denied his request to accompany Jesus as He was leaving his country, this man was instead told to “Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee.” He obeyed Christ, and “all men did marvel” (Mark 5:18-20).

Although our gifts and callings will vary (1 Corinthians 12), we all have the responsibility to pray for the lost and for those who bring forth the gospel message of salvation. Being prepared every day to speak of our hope and salvation to others is something every believer can do (Psa. 71:15; 1 Pet. 3:15). This can be as simple as inviting an acquaintance to church.

Church-sanctioned missionary efforts include the opening of many new churches in the United States, Japan, Mexico and Canada, together with preaching and teaching sessions among church brethren on university campuses. Church mission work is also active in the Philippines and India.

The second pillar is to teach and nurture believers toward a sanctified life and to faithfulness by God’s grace and through His Word. This part of the church mission can be likened to providing spiritual maintenance and growth for all believers after their conversion. The intent is to build up a strong, enduring relationship with Christ that reveals true faith, grace, Christ-like love and Holy Spirit-enabled obedience and good works, along with overcoming of temptation and proper discipling of others (Phil. 1:9-11; Heb. 3:13; 2 Tim 2:1-2).

Consistent and faithful church attendance provides the believer with the opportunity to hear humble preaching based on the Word of God and by the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit (1 Pet. 5:2; Eph. 4:11-13; Col. 1:28).

Fellowship within the church is a special blessing to those who are united in the love of Christ. “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of

Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7). Every brother and sister gives and receives in this very special relationship. “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Cor. 12:26).

Loving admonition and discipline are also essential to the maintenance of a purified and spiritually healthy body of believers. Each one of us needs others who love us so much they will tell us when we are in error and will help apply the spiritual remedies needed to remove the stain of sin from the Brotherhood. “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1).

The third pillar is to preserve sound doctrine and “earnestly contend for the faith” (Jude 3). In this context, contending means to strive against the opposition of Satan. He was not ashamed to tempt our Lord, and there is no doubt that the devil as “an angel of light” is seeking to deceive the church in these latter times (2 Cor. 11:14). The preservation of sound doctrine depends on our unified efforts against a common enemy. Every believer and the entire Brotherhood needs to “stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27).

Our doctrine consists of teachings and principles taken directly from the Holy Scripture which is “given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). Our long established practice of earnestly seeking to teach and obey “all the counsel of God” as the literal and absolute truth continues to be another tremendous safeguard (Acts 20:27).

The fourth pillar is to offer loving, humble deeds of service to fellow believers and all mankind in the name of Christ. Jesus gave us the perfect example in giving; not only of His life and blood in payment for our sins, but in service to His fellow man: “the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached” (Luke 7:22). Christ gave freely of His time. He and the disciples were often so much in demand “they could not so much as eat bread” (Mark 3:20; 6:31). As His followers, we also are instructed to “do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). World Relief activities including self-help, material aid and work projects throughout the U.S. and abroad offer numerous opportunities.

In summary, we as individuals will vary in gifts and emphasis on one or more parts of the Church mission (1 Cor. 12). However, all of the brothers and sisters should support their congregation’s efforts to seek a balanced focus on all four pillars of the Church mission “that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God” (Col. 4:12).

Addressing Threats to Unity

Since its earliest days the true church has faced many threats, including persecution as well as Satan's attempts to mislead and deceive. His efforts to destroy the church from within consist of two main areas of doctrinal error (Gal 1:6-7; Heb 13:9). The first is a return to man-centered "friendship with the world" (Jam. 4:4; 1 Cor 3:1-4). Jesus prayed that although the believer would dwell in the world, he should not be a part of the world (John 17:15). The second major internal threat is a man-centered focus on the form of religion rather than on Christ and His Word (Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42; Phil. 3:8-11). Paul warned of the danger of worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator (Rom 1:25). When any true church is pulled in these erroneous directions by strong, diverse opinions and behaviors, a condition of discord or polarization develops. Polarization consists of differences which drive people apart, including unscriptural doctrine, behaviors and reactions which cause discord in relationships and in the church.

The vast majority of the beliefs and practices of our church are broadly supported and are clearly based on the Word. There are also areas where the Word does not give specific direction. These instances require discernment in the spirit of Philippians 1:9-11: to apply biblical principles, to consider our church heritage and to address the special needs of our times. In order for unity of the Spirit to be achieved, there must be Christ-like love, forbearance and submission, putting biblical principles and the welfare and peace of the Brotherhood above personal preference or opinion.

Let's take a look at contrasting views and reactions regarding an example of application of scriptural principles to illustrate how polarization occurs. We embrace the King James Version of the Bible. Some may interpret this as being an absolute rule and would view use of any other version as a step toward worldliness and deception. Others view this as more of a guideline and may freely use many versions, seemingly without concern for significant differences in word usage and meaning. The intent of our church's position is to promote unity, peace and edification in our worship and teaching activities (Rom. 14:19; Rev. 22:18-19), to foster church-wide Scripture retention over time (Ps. 119:11) and to avoid confusion and respect good order (1 Cor. 14:33, 40). The desired application involves keeping the KJV as the primary translation for our reading, study and teaching, and, as long practiced, only prayerfully and cautiously consulting additional respected versions along with other sound resources in seeking further understanding of a particular text or phrase.

In some instances the reactions to variations in application are of greater harm than the issue itself. Let's consider some examples of polarizing reactions. Some brethren may profess forbearance with widely differing views, yet strongly criticize what they perceive as rigidity in others (Jam. 3:9-10). Others may react so strongly to faults or perceived liberties that their behavior becomes harsh or implacable, thereby becoming disobedient to the Word by that very reaction (Rom. 1:31; Eph. 4:31). A Christ-like, reasonable response would be to convey heart-felt love toward all of the brethren and to set an example of using thoughtful discernment and respect in application of a particular teaching, focusing on the spirit (intent) rather than the letter (2 Cor. 3:6).

When numerous instances of differing views and strong reactions accumulate, contention develops, and the Lord's work is hindered. Satan plants thoughts of mistrust among the brethren and the welcoming atmosphere of love and nurturing within the church is disrupted, hindering the church's example to the lost (John 13:35).

We must remember that contending (or being contentious) with each other is not contending for the faith. When the spiritual objective of a particular teaching is lost in an atmosphere of discord, this results in loss of respect for the value of the warning (thus, increasing the risk of worldly influence) and

over-spiritualizing the letter or form of the practice itself (thus, increasing the risk of self-righteousness). In this polarized environment, brothers and sisters see their own views as superior and fail to recognize the many Scriptures being violated when we discredit our brother who differs with us. Proverbs 13:10 teaches that “only by pride cometh contention.” Proverbs 21:2 says that “every way of man is right in his own eyes.....” The Apostle Paul gave wise instructions to believers with regard to dealing with differences. “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves” (Phil 2:3). When the entire counsel of God’s Word is followed (Acts 20:27), and the welfare of the Body is lovingly placed above personal preference (1 John 3:16), God is glorified, and there is “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

The Scriptures also teach that it can be expected that brethren will differ somewhat in their persuasions and choices in various areas where the Word expects us to use personal discernment and judgment (Rom. 14:5-6; Heb. 5:14). However, this flexibility does not apply to the well established basic doctrinal teachings of the Bible. As stated at the Bluffton Conference, compromise of God’s Word is poison to true unity, but so are harsh words and implacable behaviors. May we never use our liberty in Christ for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another (Gal. 5:13).

The church leadership has acknowledged responsibility for its role in polarization and discord. They have unanimously resolved to address with humility, brotherly love and commitment the needed efforts to increase trust. A plan has been approved for addressing the issues causing polarization. It consists of three areas of focus: 1) Strengthen our stewardship as elders (Acts 20:28), 2) Nurture and engage the Brotherhood to a walk of growing faith and sanctification (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Pet. 3:18) and 3) Decrease discord/polarization and increase trust, unity and hope within the Brotherhood (2 Cor. 7:16; Eph. 4:13).

The first step in this effort is a thorough, Spirit-led self-examination by every elder. As part of this effort, a series of small group elder meetings are being held with the goal of building trust, nurturing open, direct communication and seeking God’s direction for coming closer to the pattern of Christ and the Scriptures in all leadership efforts. The intent is to set an example of applying the entire counsel of the Word of God in motive, thought, behavior and lifestyle (Jer. 23:4; 1 Pet. 5:3).

A good beginning has been made in this endeavor. This will be a long term, and persistent effort, and there is every reason to be hopeful and encouraged. Many brethren have asked, “How can we help?” Please pray for God’s grace and direction: to love all the brethren as Christ loves us (John 13:34), to join in sincere self-examination (Ps. 139:23-24), and to make personal adjustments to humbly align more closely to the Word (John 17:17; 2 Cor. 3:5). The ultimate goal is to come closer to being a church that will glorify God in all that we do and faithfully fulfill our mission in accord with His Word.

Self-examination

Most of us perform self-examination every day when we look in the mirror and make sure we have our hair combed or arrange some other detail of our appearance. If we didn't, it is likely that we would go out looking unkempt. Even after looking in the mirror, we will sometimes ask someone close to us, "How do I look? Is everything in place?" We understand the need to examine ourselves physically. The spiritual need for self-examination is even greater. God has given us His Word as a mirror in which to examine ourselves spiritually and brethren to double-check us and see what we may have missed (Jam. 1:23-24).

When we look in the mirror, we are comparing what we see with the mental image we have of ourselves. If we hope to make improvement in our spirit, we look in the mirror of God's Word and compare ourselves to the ideal image of Jesus Christ. "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18). This principle pertains not only to an individual, but also to congregations. In the letters to the seven churches, they are encouraged to "Watch . . . and strengthen those things which remain," and again to, "anoint thine eyes with eyesalve that thou mayest see" (Rev. 3:2, 18). Jesus exhorted the churches to examine themselves and correct that which was not sound. As a body of believers in Jesus Christ, we will prosper if we examine ourselves and make appropriate changes that bring us closer to the Word.

We also have an occasional need for more thorough examination. Some people undergo an annual physical. Others wait until symptoms of a disease become evident. Some, out of fear of what they may find, refuse to see a doctor, even when symptoms are serious. The Apostle Paul was a spiritual doctor to many of the early churches. He corrected errors, evaluated practices, and settled disputes. As individuals, we practice this deeper self-examination prior to partaking of Holy Communion. If we take this examination to heart, it inevitably leads to change. If it doesn't result in changes, we have either achieved perfection, or we are like the man mentioned by James who, "beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was" (Jam. 1:24). Change resulting in a walk of life closer to God's Word is growth and is necessary in our walk with Christ.

As a Body, we have always had a desire for the Spirit of the Lord to examine and purify us. As a result, in recent years we have acknowledged that we have not been fulfilling the God-inspired mandate to draw closer together in the unity of the Spirit as well as we should. Like a patient receiving a diagnosis of disease from his doctor, this is neither reason to panic, nor is it a symptom that we can afford to ignore in the hope that it will go away. It is vital that we understand that as long as we remain human, the entire Body of Christ is subject to imperfection and needs to respond positively to self-examination in order to remain healthy and in order. As members of the Body of Christ, we each have complementing abilities to aid in this self-examination (1 Cor. 12). Just as we use our various capabilities to assess our physical condition: reviewing with the eye, checking for lumps with the hand, or taking our temperature with a thermometer, we are called to use our God-given abilities and tools to examine ourselves as the Body of Christ.

In order to fulfill our Spirit-directed mandate to be an example to the flock, the Elder Body has begun a thorough self-examination in light of God's Word (Jer. 23:4; 1 Pet. 5:3). In addition to the mirror of His Word, God has given us various resources to perform this spiritual self-examination. Just as the apostles delegated certain duties to the seven deacons (Acts 6:3), the Elder Planning Committee has been given the responsibility to lead this effort. These brothers, with the Elder Body, have prayerfully considered how to accurately and honestly assess our condition, and to implement steps for needed biblical change. The Elder Body has participated in small group meetings to enable discussion with a

level of participation and depth that is not possible when all of us are together. Such discussion permits all of us to help each other see more clearly what may be out of place or need correcting.

Another resource that is available to help in this process is a survey designed to help our elders and ministers take our own temperature. This tool, like a thermometer, allows us to hear the voice of the flock and gives valuable information about our labors. In utilizing this tool, or perhaps other effective feedback methods, we, like the Apostle Paul, are attempting to submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit speaking through the Body of Christ: “we ... have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). It is a clear biblical principle dating back to the first century church, that we as under-shepherds are accountable to the flock, and that the “report” of the congregation is imperative if we are to be accountable to one another and to God. In John’s third letter he comments about brothers who apparently were in positions of leadership, noting that Diotrephes desired to have preeminence, but that, “Demetrius hath good report of all men, and of the truth itself...”(3 John 1:12). Even Jesus, as He walked along the road with his disciples desired feedback, asking, “Whom do men say that I am?” (Mark 8:27). Feedback is critical if we, as servants of the church, are to hope for an accurate diagnosis. Accountability is necessary in every portion of the Body if we hope to be healthy.

We are grateful to our Father that He has given us His Word and Spirit, as well as brethren to faithfully watch for one another’s souls. If we ignore the diagnosis, we are at risk of deterioration that leads to death. If we as a Body are willing to honestly examine ourselves, acknowledge the facts without fear, and take appropriate steps toward improvement, we will be a strong and vital witness to a sin-sick world. “Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

Loving As God Loves Us

We often speak of love, but many of us might struggle to define it. God's Word both defines and demonstrates love, but before considering how, let's consider the nature of the word itself.

I Corinthians 13:4-8 lists thirteen attributes of love, and each of these is an action. People often treat love primarily as a feeling and then question its virtue when the feeling is gone. The Bible, however, describes love as an action – a commitment – enduring forever regardless of circumstances. To understand this contrast, consider the marriage relationship. If a man and woman marry based only on having “fallen in love,” they have no foundation in those inevitable moments when they don't feel love for each other. However, if they enter marriage with faith that God has led them together, they choose to love with total commitment. When in stressful moments they don't feel love toward each other, they remember God's will for their union, and based on that understanding, they recommit themselves to loving each other. From this commitment and by God's grace, flows the true feeling of love in all its beauty and wonder. In any relationship, Christ-like love is an action before it is a feeling. (Luke 12:34).

By definition, “God is love” (1 Jn. 4:16). His Word is the story of His enduring love for mankind. In creating the universe, He expressed His love. In creating our immortal souls, He expressed His love. Even the existence of evil is evidence of God's love, for He chose to give us free will, without which love could not be expressed. His plan of salvation embodies His love, for having rejected Him, we don't deserve the redemption He mercifully offers us. Even secular society recognizes love by the “golden rule” – Christ's commandment to “love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matt. 22:37-40).

The Bible is full of instruction and wisdom, but Paul summarizes it all in one word: love. “...he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law... and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:8-10). Since God is love, we must first love Him, submitting unconditionally to His will, which is to love and serve our fellow man. In doing so, we fulfill the law of God.

Our best earthly example of love is Jesus Christ, who said, “As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you. Continue ye in my love... This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you” (Jn. 15:9, 12). We are to love all men, and the Word teaches us how to love both our brothers and our enemies.

To understand how to love our brother, consider the following verses sequentially: “...love one another with a pure heart fervently” (1 Pet. 1:22). “But take heed lest by any means this liberty of your's become a stumblingblock to them that are weak...but when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ” (1 Cor. 8:9, 12). “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another” (Rom. 14:19). “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word or our epistle” (2 Thes. 2:15).

Love “doth not behave itself unseemly and seeketh not her own” (I Cor. 13:5) and desires the best for the beloved. Within the church, we share practical applications of the Word designed to remove potential “stumbling blocks” from our Christian walk. While these applications are not means of salvation, when done in the right spirit, they are very important and intended to help us apply Titus 2:11-14. They also are in keeping with the higher calling of love. The Apostle Paul entreats us to consider the needs and spiritual well-being of others before our own (Rom. 12:3, Phil. 2:3). Sometimes, this willing submission requires actions we might otherwise deem unnecessary. Other times, it provides the

discipline to examine our own shortfalls before accusing a brother (Math. 7:3-5). Again, love is God's law, and "Great peace have they which love thy law, and nothing shall offend them" (Ps. 119:165).

To love our enemies, we must rely on God's grace to rise above the carnal nature. "But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). Even when we don't feel love toward someone, we are called to love him anyway, remembering that love is an action before a feeling. We often find that choosing to love an enemy and praying for him is followed by the good feelings of love.

We have no more powerful example of love than God sending His only Son to die for our sins on the cross. "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (I Jn. 4:7-10).

Reviewing the various facets of love in 1 Corinthians 13, one finds that Christ's supreme sacrifice reflects each of these attributes. Our charge, therefore, is given in 1 John 3:16: "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."

"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecc. 12:13). Jesus and Paul taught that love fulfills all of God's commandments, so we can conclude that love itself is the "whole duty of man." (Matt. 22:36-39) Are you fulfilling your duty to love God and one another as Christ has loved us? This kind of love calls us to obedience: "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous" (1 John 5:3). In loving God and one another, and in keeping His commandments, you will fulfill His purpose for your life.

Developing Trust

The Word of God gives clear examples of the trust and confidence placed in individuals whose hearts and lives are dedicated to serving Him. The following is said of the virtuous woman described in Proverbs 31:10-31: “The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil” (v. 11). Although numerous attributes and good works of this godly woman are subsequently recounted, the foundation for this trust lies in her most important virtue, which is described in verse 30: “but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.”

The virtues of integrity and reliability were exemplified powerfully in the life of Christ, and this generated trust in His hearers (Matt. 12:18-21). He taught His disciples these same characteristics, such as when he commended the “faithful and wise steward” who could be depended upon and entrusted with much responsibility (Luke 12:42-44).

The Apostle Paul received a good report regarding the Corinthian believers from Titus and was able to declare: “I rejoice therefore that I have confidence in you in all things” (2 Cor. 7:16). We can be sure that this expression of trust did not mean that everything in their lives was in perfect order. Like all of us, they were learning and growing under the patient and merciful hand of God. The confidence Paul expressed in them must have been a great encouragement to these brethren, motivating them to press on in their spiritual journey.

Lack of mutual trust among brethren has been identified as one of the significant factors causing disharmony in the church. Faith and trust in our brother is an indication of our faith and trust in Christ, who has created our brother and who dwells in his heart in the form of the Holy Spirit. “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments (1 John 5:1-2). We can all do better in trusting the intentions of our brothers and sisters, believing the Holy Spirit is working in their hearts and ultimately commending them to God’s grace (Acts 20:32).

Developing trust requires a purity of intent in our heart. Paul was able to say without question that he was put in trust of the gospel because his heart was pure and open before God (1 Thes. 2:3-4). Before we can grow in trust of our brothers and sisters, we must first examine our motives honestly in light of the Word, for God “desirest truth in the inward parts” (Psa. 51:6). Because we cannot see into our brother’s heart, we are to give the benefit of the doubt in trusting his intentions, and we should extend mercy, which we all so deeply need. Jesus taught, “Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt. 5:7).

We are called in humility to esteem our brother better than ourselves (Phil. 2:3). This is not based on his ability to meet our own standards, his personal worthiness or anything we may gain in return for placing loving trust in our brother. Christ taught that we are to “love one another; as I have loved you” (John 13:34). What merit is there in any of us that deserves this kind of love from Christ? This acceptance of us by Christ does not mean that He approves of those things in our lives which need to be corrected. Likewise, godly parents have an intrinsic love for and acceptance of their children which endures all the struggles and disappointments which are often experienced. We do not doubt Christ’s continued love for us, even though we disappoint Him at times. We need to have that kind of unconditional love for all of the brethren. Christ-like love extends mercy and also upholds the standards of truth and righteousness (Mark 10:21). All of us need this from each other.

Loving trust in our brothers and sisters will be evidenced by the way we treat one another. We will listen with empathy and respectful attention to the thoughts and concerns of others and be slow to speak and careful not to react critically or to discredit each other when we differ (Jam. 1:19). It has been said that we must first seek to understand before we can be understood. We will also avoid categorizing others based on perceptions and being too confident in our own opinions. Paul warned: “Be not wise in your own conceits” (Rom. 12:16), because this places ourselves above others and we no longer have the humility to value them.

Self-examination in light of the mirror of God’s Word is essential for each child of God. However, this is often insufficient because we are unable to see our own faults (Jam. 1:24). We need the benefit of accountability to others, which includes loving admonition and encouragement in an atmosphere of trust and kindness (Rom. 15:14). In a relationship built on mutual trust we are able to candidly “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) and with grace and discretion (Col. 4:6). We can experience the great benefits of openly sharing thoughts and experiences which encourage each of us to grow spiritually, to come closer to the likeness of Christ and to work together in fulfilling the mission of the church. Trust is increased when we are transparent with each other, which enables us to experience one of the great blessings of true Christian friendship: “Iron sharpeneth iron: so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend” (Prov. 27:17).

May each of us think back to the sincerity of our “first love” at the beginning of our walk with Christ: when we were willing to do anything needful out of love for Him and gratitude for His deliverance. We will manifest this love with integrity and contribute to godly unity, if we willingly lay aside self, our inappropriate personal liberties and harsh reactions and all of the things of this world which distract us from our focus on Christ. “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:16). May we be able to state honestly the words of David: “Judge me, O Lord: for I have walked in mine integrity: I have trusted also in the Lord...and I have walked in thy truth” (Psa. 26:1, 3).

Mutual Esteem

February's "Light From The Word" identified two specific threats with which Satan hopes to destroy the church from within: a return to man-centered "friendship with the world" (Jam. 4:4) and a man-centered focus on religion rather than Christ and His Word (Mat. 23:23). Both threats stem from a self-centered outlook, which Paul calls carnality. "They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh, but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace" (Rom. 8: 5-6). "Carnal" literally means "fleshly," and further study of Scripture's use of the word leads to an inescapable conclusion: in everything we do, we either serve self or God.

The most practical way to serve God is to serve others. Understanding the meaning of "carnal" reveals why. In serving others, we don't serve ourselves, which, by definition, means we avoid carnality and draw near to God. Christ vividly illustrates this in Matthew 25:40: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." Paul also decries carnality in delivering the same instruction: "...use not liberty as an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13). Christ exemplified this at the Last Supper when he washed the disciples' feet (John 13:5).

In seeking to show Christ's love to all men, we should particularly serve our brothers and sisters in Christ. "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). We cannot wholeheartedly follow this instruction unless we mutually esteem one another.

To esteem one another is obedience to biblical instruction and reflects understanding of biblical truth. We "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), so no one has the right to place himself above another. Furthermore, as Christians, we are "members one of another" as one body of Christ (Rom. 12:5). "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Therefore, we must not think of ourselves "more highly than [we] ought to think" (Rom. 12:3), for we are all created equally in God's image for the purpose of bringing praise unto Him (Isa. 43:21, Rev. 4:11).

This understanding engenders a characteristic prerequisite to mutual esteem, which is humility. Philippians 2:3-8 identifies the essence (what is it?), practice (how do we demonstrate it?), and source of humility.

The essence of humility is esteeming others – both God and man – better than oneself. "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves" (Phil. 2:3). We practice humility by placing others' needs above our own priorities and desires. "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (Phil. 2:4). This is contrary to our carnal nature, which always seeks to please itself and which, without Christ, we are powerless to overcome. Paul lamented this struggle, writing, "For the good that I would I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I do...O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:19, 24).

Our Deliverer and the only source of true humility is the One who defeated death and sin, Jesus Christ. Philippians 2:5-8 reads: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation and took upon him the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

As one with God, Christ was equal with God and the only man justified in exalting himself above his brethren, yet he chose to humble himself before his Father and his fellow man in obedience and love. This is the ultimate demonstration of mutual esteem, and only with the mind of Christ are we able to emulate it.

Humility and mutual esteem are both heart conditions resulting from and demonstrated by submission. The Greek word for submission is hypotasso, which literally means to rank under. Among those to whom the Bible instructs us to submit are church leaders (Heb. 13:17), elders (I Pet. 5:5), wives to husbands (Eph. 5:22), husbands to wives (1 Pet. 3:7), and of course, God (Jas 4:7, I Pet. 5:6).

In addition, the Bible repeatedly instructs us to submit to each other (Gal. 5:13, Eph. 5:21, 1 Cor. 16:16). This is also against our carnal nature and only possible with the mind of Christ. In Romans 14, Paul essentially instructs us to take responsibility for choices impacting each other's spiritual walk, submitting to the needs of a weaker brother and sacrificing our personal liberties to avoid putting "a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in [our] brother's way" (Rom. 14:13). This is mutual esteem in action, exercising our obligation to "follow after the things which make for peace and things wherewith one may edify another" (Rom. 14:19).

Forgiveness is one of the highest forms of mutual esteem. "Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4: 32). Remember that we, who are least worthy of forgiveness, have been forgiven by He who is least obligated to forgive. We must do likewise. "If any man have a quarrel against any, even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye" (Col. 3:13).

We will always have some differences in areas where the Word does not give specific direction (Rom. 14), but we serve the same God and have salvation in the same Christ. It is this common faith in Christ and the entire counsel of His Word that unifies us (Acts 20:27; 1 Cor. 12:4-6). As said at the Bluffton conference, contending with each other is not contending for the faith. Let us, therefore, choose to "forbear one another in love" (Eph 4:2) and "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27).

Doctrinal Integrity

The terms “success,” “prosperous” and “profitable” usually evoke thoughts of material gain. They are used in the Word of God to describe the spiritual gain to be obtained from understanding and applying doctrinal truth (Josh. 1:8; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Doctrine refers to that which is taught directly in the Bible. The first article of our Statement of Faith presents the core belief that “the New Testament serves as the foundation of the doctrine of the Apostolic Christian Church.”

Integrity means “uncorrupted, sound and complete.” This article focuses on “doctrinal integrity,” something we should all aspire to in establishing the basis for our beliefs. Doctrinal integrity is essential so that the mission of the church to spread the Gospel, nurture the believer, preserve sound doctrine and serve others may be fulfilled. The Word itself confirms the significance of doctrinal integrity and gives directions for how it can bless the heart and life of every sincere child of God.

We are instructed to teach sound doctrine by our words and our walk of life. Regarding our “words,” Titus 2:1 says, “But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine.” Regarding our “walk,” we are taught that believers should live in such a way that “they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things” (Tit. 2:10). Sound doctrine is truth revealed through Jesus Christ: “grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). It is written in the Scriptures, “thy word is truth” (John 17:17) and brought to our minds by the Holy Spirit, who “will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13).

Embracing sound doctrine is essential to avoid deception, so that we are not “carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men” (Eph. 4:14). Further, it is important that sound doctrine be taught and practiced so that the believer is prepared for the time of which we are warned when men “shall turn their ears from the truth, and shall be turned to fables” (2 Tim. 4:4).

In order to maintain integrity (be complete in our understanding), we must apply “all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). We have the assurance that “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). Availing ourselves of the whole counsel of God will help avoid either over-emphasizing or under-emphasizing teachings, whereby we might allow our individual preferences or feelings to affect our thinking.

It is commanded in the Word that those who have teaching and ministry responsibilities be diligent in promoting sound, complete doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16; 1 Tim. 5:17; Tit. 2:1). Already in the Old Testament God stated clearly the kind of shepherds and spiritual teachers he wished to give to his people: “And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jer. 3:15). The Apostle Paul specifically instructed Timothy to be diligent in learning the Scriptures and interpreting them accurately: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). All believers are directed to diligently search the Scriptures to confirm that what they are being taught represents doctrinal integrity. Paul and Silas were diligent in teaching the Word to the Bereans. These hearers were then commended because they sought to confirm the soundness of the teachings by searching the Scriptures. “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Shortly before Jesus ascended to the Father, he charged Peter to nurture the believers in sound doctrine. After asking Peter three times if he loved Him, He responded to Peter’s assurance of his love with the statements: “Feed my lambs, feed my sheep (and) feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17). It is instructive to consider the Greek roots of the word “feed” as used in this teaching. In the first and third

instances the root word bosko refers to “direct feeding.” This same approach is reflected in Peter’s teachings: “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby” (1 Pet. 2:2). In the second instance, the root word poimaino refers to “tending” or helping the sheep learn to find good pasture upon which they can feed themselves and be nourished. This describes the very critical ability of more mature believers to “discern the Scriptures,” which is further explained in Hebrews as follows: “For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Heb. 5:13-14). The Holy Spirit guides us into all truth (John 16:13), and it is this doctrinal truth as revealed in God’s Word that we are called upon to obey from the heart (Rom. 6:17).

Assuring the maintenance of doctrinal integrity by “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15) requires that we approach all biblical teaching and learning with humility, recognizing we do not have all of the answers (2 Pet. 1:20). Whenever we open the Word, we should first pray, trusting that our Heavenly Father hears us and that the Holy Spirit will lead us. This will give us an opportunity to examine ourselves and, by God’s grace, remove anything from our lives that might hinder the Spirit’s leading. We must be careful to consider all passages of Scripture relevant to the topic being considered, as well as the historical context of each passage. We should have esteem for the thoughts of others who have also sought the guidance of the Spirit to give them understanding, for “in a multitude of counselors there is safety” (Prov. 24:6). Thus, we can learn from the experiences of early church leaders and Apostolic Christian forefathers. We can also benefit by careful discernment of reference materials such as Bible dictionaries, concordances and other appropriate, sound resources to aid in understanding of words and phrases. Finally, we must have confidence in God’s Word as our final authority; adding or taking nothing away from the Word (Rev. 22:18-19). We must not be wise above what is written.

Sound doctrine, taught and practiced with integrity, will bring the blessings of unity in the Brotherhood and edification of the church, and will give glory and honor to God.

Attributes of Our Church

In Revelation 2 and 3 we read of the attributes of seven churches that existed in the time of the Apostle John. Each one was unique, with various merits as well as shortcomings. It was beneficial for those churches to be examined in light of the unchanging standard of God's Word, and this is beneficial for the Apostolic Christian Church today as well.

The foundation of our church is Jesus Christ, and the basis of our teaching is the unadulterated and unerring Word of God, which we believe is the singular and complete foundation of our understanding of God and His will for man. God's Word is the authority of all truth, and provides direction for all aspects of life. We are exhorted to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) and to share the Gospel message with all mankind.

Our church places a strong emphasis on the conversion of souls and on living a sanctified life. The starting point of our spiritual re-birth is "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). Through a genuine conversion, by God's grace, there is a turning away from the world and wholly following Christ under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Each one of us is to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18), being sanctified by His Word (John 17:17) and persevering until the end with care and diligence (Matt. 10:22).

Based on God's Word, our church teaches that we are saved by grace through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8-10) and that there is a need to integrate both faith and works in our lives. Faithful discipleship is not a means to grace, but it is our response to God's grace, knowing that faith without works is dead (Jam. 2:26). Our daily walk should reflect a loving response to what our Lord has done for us (1 John 4:19). We believe in living a life faithful to Christ's teaching and patterned after His image; not to obey in order to be blessed, but to obey because we have been blessed abundantly through Christ's work on the cross.

The church is a brotherhood of love in which the fullness of the Christian life is experienced in a loving, supportive fellowship. The dynamic character of the first century church included a commitment to simplicity of worship, and of mutual accountability within a caring and loving church community, which remains our model. We have been called to hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering (Heb. 10:23). Our profession of faith reflects submission and love for one another, as well as a servant attitude, esteeming others better than ourselves.

The Apostolic Christian Church is built on the foundation of the teachings of Christ and the Apostles. We seek the inspiration of the Spirit for our preaching and teaching, and not the enticing words of man's wisdom (1 Cor. 2:4). As part of the body of Christ we strive for the preservation of true faith. We do not take part in modern trends such as ecumenism with its de-emphasis on distinctiveness in doctrine and practice, which ultimately leads to a watering down to the lowest common denominator of standards of belief.

It is the will of God that the Christian not be conformed to the worldly influences of the times, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2). In every area of our human experience where a moral principle is involved, our walk must be distinctive when compared to the life of an unbeliever. This extends to our applications in modest living. We do not seek to glorify or lift up man, but that our lives, our behavior, our speech, our possessions, and our appearance would be a reflection of our desire to glorify God. Brothers are called to humbly portray spiritual headship in the home and sisters signify their submission to God's order of creation by covering their heads in times of prayer and worship.

We have a goodly heritage, exemplified by the love of Christ being manifested in many generations of loyal Christian families. In an age when family life has deteriorated badly, divorce rates are high, and sins of the flesh are rampant, we must continue to build the family structure upon unchanging biblical truth.

We should never be so naïve as to think that our church does not have shortcomings. In order to have an honest assessment of the attributes of our church, it behooves us to acknowledge areas that we can improve. The Lord was very frank with the churches listed in Revelation when He said “Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee...” (Rev. 2:20). May we always be open to God’s correction.

In our relatively small brotherhood we need to be careful that isolationism does not develop, because Jesus taught that we are to be in the world but not of the world (John 17:15-16). However, we must not get too close to the world and take on prideful attitudes, materialism, unwholesome entertainments as well as immodesty and fashion in appearance and other worldly attributes (Matt. 6:19-21; 1 John 2:15). We also should not let interpersonal conflicts, complacency, harsh reactions, implacability and self-righteousness get in the way of God’s work. All of these carnal things contribute to disunity and polarization (Matt. 12:25).

We can do better in spreading the Gospel message of salvation (Matt. 28:19-20), in being peacemakers and in nurturing personal holiness in all aspects of our lives (Heb. 12:14) and in supporting edifying approaches for effective Bible teaching and learning to promote understanding and application of the Scriptures (Josh. 1:8; 2 Tim. 3:15-17). We need to make full use of the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) and be careful in our discerning of the spirits and of the times.

Perhaps one of the root causes of disunity and polarization is what Paul warns against in 2 Corinthians 10:12: “but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.” Instead our focus should be on comparing spiritual things with spiritual and putting on the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5). A church divided against itself cannot stand (Matt. 12:25).

In an era of instability and lack of commitment, the attributes of any church can change very quickly. When sincere effort to rightly divide (correctly interpret and apply) the Word of God is sustained, ill-advised changes which appeal to human desires will be readily recognized and avoided. Maintaining sound doctrine and reaching commonality in appropriate areas of application require the grace of God and humble, submissive hearts. We desire that our church remains firmly built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, faithful and true to the end.

Biblical Principles of Effective Communication

In basic terms, communication is the exchange of information between people. However, effective communication goes far deeper. It is also a means to convey our feelings or thoughts and enables us to understand one another. When guided by biblical principles, our communication will leave a favorable impression on others. We will build bridges and not walls between one another and create harmony instead of contention within the church.

The Apostle Peter was a successful communicator when the Jews contended with him after he preached to the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius. Peter patiently *“rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them”* (Acts 11:4). His reasonable and carefully considered response prevented an argument and instead brought about agreement. The Jews then realized that God had extended the gift of salvation to the Gentiles: *“God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life”* (Acts 11:18).

By contrast, the Corinthian members created polarity and contention within the church when various individuals stated, *“I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ”* (1 Cor. 1:12). When the Apostle Paul learned of this situation, he reminded them that though they consisted of many members and possessed a diversity of spiritual gifts, they were to be united as one body in Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). In addition he exhorted them to *“all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you”* (1 Cor. 1:10).

Gossip or tale bearing is an evil form of communication that often carries severe consequences. The Bible tells us, *“He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends”* (Prov. 17:9). The wounds caused by gossip are both deep and slow to heal, *“The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly”* (Prov. 18:8). Unless we seek God’s help through prayer, our tongue will be an uncontrolled fire (Jam. 3:6-9). The Psalmist David’s prayer was, *“Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips”* (Psa. 141:3).

Numerous biblical principles offer instruction regarding effective communication: *“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear”* (1 Pet. 3:15). In addition, our expressions should be *“words of truth and soberness”* (Acts 26:25). Other Scriptures teach us to *“let thy words be few”* (Ecc. 5:2), to refrain from uttering *“words to no profit”* (2 Tim. 2:14) and to avoid *“malicious words”* (3 John 10). Speaking often on spiritual matters is pleasing to the Lord. *“Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name”* (Mal. 3:16). The Apostle Paul summed it up beautifully, *“Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers”* (Eph. 4:29). Inevitably, we will disagree with someone, but we should avoid arguing or raising our voice: *“A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger”* (Prov. 15:1).

Making a conscious effort to listen is essential to communication. If we ask, the Lord will teach us to balance our speaking with productive listening. Isaiah said, *“The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary,”* and further, *“he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned”* (Is. 50:4). We perform a very important service to others when we listen with the sincere intent to identify with and understand their feelings or difficulties.

There is a variety of other ways to communicate with loved ones. Writing a note, making a phone call, or sending a card or email to someone who needs encouragement are all very effective modes of communication. Our actions are also a form of communication. As followers of Christ, we are instructed to *“do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith”* (Gal. 6:10).

This can be as simple as a smile, pat on the back or an appropriate hug. A donation or being available when someone needs a friend is a charitable act that sends a powerful, loving message.

One of the most important types of communication is to be friendly with everyone. *“A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly...”* (Prov. 18:24). This applies not only to those with whom we feel comfortable, but also to others with whom we are less familiar. Though this may require some effort on our part, experience teaches us that doing so will result in increased trust, and over time will draw us closer to one another.

If there are certain people whom we purposely avoid and consequently we fail to communicate with them, we are fostering division and are conducting ourselves in an unscriptural way. Jesus taught, *“For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?”* (Matt. 5:46-47). When we assemble in our churches, we should make sincere effort to greet as many brethren and friends as possible and to exchange kindnesses in the true spirit of Christ.

Our communication will have an impact on others--either good or bad. Many times, we may not recall exactly what someone said to us, but we can easily remember how we felt at the time. This occurs because a person's motive and the sincerity of his or her love will often come through in body language and tone of voice, which make up a significant part of communication.

Effective communication is crucial to preserving unity within the church as well as in our marriages and families. To be effective, communication requires that we maintain a Christ-like love and esteem for one another. We should always remember that the enemy of our soul tries to build walls and create resentments among believers, but we should pray fervently for the grace to communicate in ways that will bring glory to God and will edify one another. *“Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.”* (Col. 4:6).

Theme verse: *“Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.”* (Col. 4:6).

Biblical Stewardship

A steward is one who protects, defends, or watches over something. Biblical stewardship can be defined as the duty to share the messages of the gospel, to preach its doctrine, and to administer its ordinances in a way that will reflect the truth of God's Word. In this article we will consider biblical stewardship in the light of four aspects: that of a shepherd, a watchman, a leader and a servant. In each of these areas, the example of Jesus Christ is profoundly instructive.

Jesus said *"I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep"* and I *"know my sheep and am known of mine"* (John 10:11-14). Any account of the Good Shepherd would be incomplete without reference to Psalm 23. This beautiful description of the Good Shepherd offers instruction to all who are given the responsibility to shepherd a flock. Jesus Christ is our Chief Shepherd and He has placed men in the role of elders with responsibilities clearly explained in the Bible. This involves caring for, guarding, feeding and leading the flock with a shepherd's heart. It also includes strengthening the diseased, binding up the broken, bringing again that which was driven away and seeking the lost (Ezek. 34). It requires awareness of the condition of the church: *"Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, and look well to thy herds"* (Prov. 27:23), which underscores the importance of good, open, constructive communication between the church and the elder (Gal. 6:6).

Peter described beautifully the heart of a true shepherd. *"Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples of the flock"* (1 Pet. 5:2-3). It is God's desire that His flock receive sound nurturing and protection. *"And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith the Lord"* (Jer. 23:4). The consequences of not caring for the sheep are grave, as the Lord has said to unfaithful shepherds, *"I will require my flock at their hand..."* (Ezek. 34:10).

Biblical stewardship also requires us to be watchmen. *"I have set watchmen upon the wall, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night. Ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence"* (Isa. 62:6). An important part of being a watchman is to teach and to warn. Jesus, the master teacher, *"...opened his mouth and taught them..."* (Matt. 5:2). Paul exhorted that representing Christ involves *"warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom"* (Col. 1:28), and he spoke of doing this untiringly with tears (Acts 20:31).

Part of teaching is sounding a warning which instructs and prepares people to deal with various dangers. Ezekiel wrote that the watchman must sound the alarm (Ezek. 33:2-6). If the watchman sees the sword come and he sounds the alarm, it is the duty of the people to listen. If they choose not to listen and the sword comes, they bear the responsibility for their loss. However, if the watchman does not sound the alarm clearly, the watchman will bear a measure of responsibility for those who are lost. In order to be effective watchmen, we must have *"understanding of the times"* as those in Israel's time who were able to help give proper direction to the people (1 Chron. 12:32). Understanding the impact which cultural change is having on us will help us discern the spirits and remain firmly grounded on the truths of God's Word.

Paul emphasized the need for clarity of the warning. He reminded us that there are many voices of significance. Therefore, *"...except (the watchman) give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?"* (1 Cor. 14:7-8).

Jesus emphasized that all believers are to watch and pray. As He taught the people about the confusion of the world and the uncertainty of the times, He told them that they should not be found sleeping. *“And what I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch”* (Mark 13:37).

Leadership is part of biblical stewardship. True leadership requires being a good example (1 Tim. 4:12). The Good Shepherd exemplified a high standard and He led his sheep by still waters and in the paths of righteousness (Psa. 23:2-3). Jesus chastised the scribes and Pharisees because of their hypocritical example. *“For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers”* (Matt. 23:4).

It is understandable that we are deeply disappointed when leaders set poor examples and seem to lack personal integrity and responsibility. The Bible teaches us that *“...unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more”* (Luke 12:48).

Biblical stewardship also requires being a humble servant, one who willingly does for others. *“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends”* (John 15:13). Jesus clearly taught that serving others is more important than being served, even though the one who is served is often regarded as being greater than the one who serves. *“For whither is greater, he that sitteth at meat or he that serveth? Is not he that sitteth at meat? but I am among you as one that serveth”* (Luke 22:27). The humble servant nature of Jesus was further demonstrated when He *“...took a towel, and girded himself...and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded”* (John 13:4-5).

We have many opportunities to serve our families, our churches, and our communities. We also have numerous ways to serve others throughout our nation and in many parts of the world by supporting various World Relief projects. We need to willingly perform even small deeds of service (such as the widow’s two mites, or a cup of cold water), not just those efforts that appear to be more glorious. If we wait for an “important” occasion to arise before we serve, we may find that we will have missed many opportunities.

Biblical stewardship is both a responsibility and a privilege. We are motivated by love for Christ to fulfill *“...all the counsel of God”* (Acts 20:27), which includes being a good steward. This will be reflected in faithful shepherding, diligent watching, humble leading and charitable serving.

Theme verse: “Moreover it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2).

Trust in God's Faithfulness

"With my mouth will I make known thy faithfulness to all generations" (Psa. 89:1). When David exclaimed that he would speak of God's faithfulness to all generations and show forth His faithfulness every night (Psa. 92:2), he knew that this attribute was something very special for a follower of God. In this article we want to take a look at what God's faithfulness means, and then consider what this signifies in a believer's life.

Faithfulness implies unchangeableness, constancy, and trustworthiness. Jeremiah proclaimed, "Great is thy faithfulness" after stating: "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not." He introduced this teaching on God's faithfulness by saying, "This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope" (Lam. 3:21-23). Whenever we think about God's faithfulness, it should bring a calming sense of hope to our heart that "all will be well," since God is in control. The Apostle Paul asked, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

God's faithfulness is not dependent on what we do or what we think about Him, for we read in 2 Timothy 2:13, "If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself." We note that this attribute is also ascribed to Christ in the New Testament. Jesus is called the faithful high priest (Heb. 2:17), the faithful witness (Rev. 1:5) and the Faithful and True (Rev. 19:11).

So what does God's faithfulness signify in our everyday lives? And what does it mean to trust in God's faithfulness in practical, personal terms?

The next time we are tempted to sin, let us go back to the verse in 1 Corinthians 10:13 where we read that because God is faithful, He "will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." Here we can find assurance that God has given us a way to escape sin, and strength to endure, and that He will do it, because He promised it, and He is to be trusted.

Perhaps there are times in our lives when we are faced with doubts about our faith, doubts about our salvation, or doubts about the future. At these times let us also go back to Hebrews 10:23 where we read: "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised)." And this faithful God has promised us His salvation and eternal life as well as His peace and assurance as long as we keep our trust and faith in Him. He is the One who holds the future in His hands.

It is undeniable that we Christians must deal with the weights and sins which so easily beset us (Heb. 12:1), and at times Satan would try to get the upper hand in discouraging us in our walk of faith because we have yielded to temptation (1 John 2:1-2). We may feel unable to overcome evil, and unable to do good. In 1 John 1:9 we read: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." A confession means a giving up of all pleas of self-righteousness and acknowledging guilt without excuse. We are also taught to turn away from sin. "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Prov. 28:13). Because of God's faithfulness and the mercy which is available through Christ's sacrifice, we can be assured of His forgiveness when we continue in faith, confess our sins and apply the scriptural remedy.

Perhaps you feel that you are not growing in your spiritual walk. Take courage, for we read in 2 Thessalonians 3:3, “*But the Lord is faithful, who shall stablish you, and keep you from evil.*” Again, because of God’s faithfulness in working patiently with us, we will become established, by His grace. The word “stablish” means to strengthen, set fast, and turn resolutely in the right direction.

Trusting in God’s faithfulness means to have a confidence in Him as our Creator and Lord and Master. We can be assured that He holds the future. We can have assurance to know that all things work together for good to them that love God (Rom. 8:28). He alone is worthy of our love and confidence, who has promised us His blessings, His help in persecution and afflictions, and direction in difficulties, enabling us to endure and ultimately to bring us into glory.

At the same time, let us give a note of warning that just as the Lord promised the resurrection of life to those that believe, He also promised eternal damnation to those who die in their sinful state (John 5:29, 8:24). His faithfulness also means that He will surely fulfill these warnings just as He said.

David declared in Psalms 36:5 that “*Thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds.*” He experienced God’s continual help in his life. And so he said in Psalms 31:1, “*In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust; let me never be ashamed: deliver me in thy righteousness.*” God’s faithfulness became a basis for David’s confidence and hope of deliverance. In the same way it became a basis for the confidence of Paul in preaching the gospel of Christ (2 Cor. 1:18-20), knowing that what he was preaching was true, and there was no wavering in believing in the promises of God.

The New Testament states several times that “*God is faithful*” (as in 1 Cor. 1:9), and each time it uses the Greek word *Pistos*. In other passages of the KJV Bible this Greek word is also translated as “to be trusted,” “reliable,” “sure” and “true.” These passages make it clear that God is dependable, loyal, and very stable in His relationship with us. When He makes a promise, He will never break His word. Because He promises to never leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5), we can be assured that He will always be there. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). There is a complete constancy in God, and His very attributes are exactly the same as when He first created the heavens and the earth.

God’s faithfulness is closely tied to our salvation as well as our spiritual walk. Our hope is built upon the faithfulness of our Lord from the time we believed. “*Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it*” (1 Thes. 5:24). By trusting in His faithfulness we can have victory over the temptations of Satan, and are given assurance, hope, and confidence to help us in our spiritual journey. “*Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast*” (Heb. 6:19).

Theme verse: “Great is thy faithfulness.”

Courage

“O love the Lord, all ye his saints... Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord” (Psa. 31:23-24).

Are you fearful, worried or discouraged? Perhaps the possible consequences of difficult decisions make the future seem frightening? Maybe the risks associated with changes in your life bring doubts? Are there seemingly insurmountable obstacles in your life? All of us experience fears, and whether they are rational or irrational, they can be debilitating. The Word of God teaches us to overcome our fears. In the case of irrational fears, overcoming requires faith. In the case of rational fears, it also requires courage.

Courage is the ability to face real or perceived danger, change, or risk **in spite of our fears**, trusting God and abandoning ourselves to Him. *“Though he slay me, yet will I trust in Him”* (Job 13:15).

Let’s consider some examples of courage from the Bible. *“And Moses called unto Joshua, and said unto him in the sight of all Israel, Be strong and of a good courage: for thou must go with this people unto the land which the LORD hath sworn unto their fathers to give them; and thou shalt cause them to inherit it. And the LORD, he it is that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed”* (Deut. 31:7-8).

Moses was full of years when he spoke these words. He wasn’t speaking about theories. Moses knew what it meant to be strong and of good courage--he had learned the hard way. God called Moses to do a task that he felt ill-equipped to handle. He was afraid, and based on his experience his fears may have been justified. Nevertheless, at the commandment of God, Moses took courage and returned to Egypt, confronted Pharaoh, and led the children of Israel through the Red Sea, and on to the Promised Land. He did not go in his own strength or understanding. God was with him. Through obedience, Moses learned that God is faithful.

Soon after the death of Moses, God spoke directly to Joshua and repeated the exhortation that Moses had given. *“There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I sware unto their fathers to give them. Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper withersoever thou goest”* (Josh. 1:5-7).

Joshua obeyed the Word of the Lord. He promptly began to prepare the people to cross over Jordan. He instructed them to follow the priests into the swollen Jordan River. It took both faith and courage to tell the people that the Lord would stand the waters up in a heap. Joshua trusted God and went forward in spite of his fears.

It took courage for the priests to step into the flooded waters of the Jordan River. It is very rational to fear walking into a rushing river in flood stage. In spite of their fears, the priests obeyed the word of the Lord and stepped into the water. In much the same way, we may feel justified in maintaining certain fears in our life. Our human experience teaches us caution in many aspects of life, and our concerns may be rational. However, when God speaks, we must go forward in spite of even our most rational fears. This requires faith and courage.

If our fears are irrational, and this prevents us from doing as we should, we must understand that this can lead to decisions and behaviors which are sinful. Irrational fears may be directly related to a lack of faith. "...*whatsoever is not of faith is sin*" (Rom. 14:23). They may also be related to a lack of understanding of the nature of God and what He expects of us. Unfounded fears are really a result of doubting God, so they must be addressed. God gives us several ways to address doubt. It may be sufficient to confess it and ask God to strengthen our faith, or we may need to seek counsel to better understand God. It can also be very helpful to understand how our emotions or thinking lead us to doubt.

Courage is the mobilization of our faith. It is the conscious decision to obey God in spite of our fears--even when those fears are reasonable.

For Queen Esther, it was forbidden to enter into the presence of the King. However, her spiritual father, Mordecai, challenged her to understand the position God had placed her in--and to take action in spite of her fears. "*Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer, Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish*" (Est. 4:13-14).

Esther's response was to first seek God and then ask others to join her in prayer and fasting. Then trusting in God she could say, "If I perish, I perish." This is courage--fulfilling the calling of God without regard to the consequences, even if the consequences mean the risk of our life.

With both Joshua and Esther, there was a call to courage by their mentors. Moses and Mordecai had experienced the faithfulness of God. Their encouragement to Joshua and Esther had credibility. Because they had been courageous themselves, they were able to encourage the following generation to fulfill the will of God. Age and experience often bring a fuller understanding of the faithfulness of God. Have you experienced God's faithfulness in your life? Perhaps you have the ability to motivate others to be strong and of good courage, helping them to lay fear aside and trust in God.

Theme verse: "*Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom*" (Luke 12:32).

Call to Accountability

“Our lot is found in pleasant places, A goodly heritage is ours” (ZH # 145).

We are blessed to enjoy a church which has a rich heritage of beliefs and practices based on biblical principles and characterized by a pattern of carefulness and stability in our walk of faith. Our spiritual unity is strengthened greatly by individual brethren having the mind of Christ. *“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5).*

The mind of Christ reflects many unifying godly principles including: 1) a oneness of emphasis on glorifying God in all aspects of our walk of life: *“And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:22);* 2) a common spirit of concern for the salvation of lost souls: *“Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest...” (Matt. 9:38);* 3) recognition that only charity creates a perfect bond of unity in Christ: *“And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness” (Col. 3:14);* and 4) being joined together against a world of sin: *“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world” (1 John 2:15).*

Sincere self-examination has been one of the hallmarks of the effort to strengthen biblical unity during these past two years, beginning with the leadership and extending to every brother and sister who is a part of this blessed heritage. Many have acknowledged areas in their lives where the mind of Christ has not been in control. True spiritual unity can only come when there is true obedience to God’s Word. Where deficiencies are found we must repent and make amends and implement the necessary changes to align ourselves with the mind of Christ, by His grace. This is the “call to accountability.” It does not consist of looking upon the deficiencies of others, but truly examining ourselves in the mirror of God’s Word (Jam. 1:23-25).

We must strengthen our resolve to abide in Christ’s love and allow Him to have control of all aspects of our life (John 15:8-12). Because love is the supreme characteristic of a believer, we must nurture Christ-like love for all of our brethren. *“A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another” (John 13:34).* We are to walk a sanctified life grounded in faith and grace, which is committed to honesty, mutual respect, submission to authority, modesty in appearance, a forgiving spirit, forbearance and all other biblical virtues. It renounces emulation, sedition, implacableness, talebearing, covetousness, pride, lust (including competition) and all other vices. When we have the pure mind of Christ, there is no compromising of these biblical truths.

We are committed to continuing to address the many threats to biblical unity and to seek the guidance of the Spirit in helping each other promote the mind of Christ throughout our Brotherhood. Some of the evident fruits of this effort include: increased accountability on the part of the elders, greater understanding and forbearance of each other, a deepening of relationships enabling more effective cooperation in addressing issues and a much more open communication in elder forum and conference discussions allowing the Word to be the focal point for decisions.

Whenever a major effort toward improvement is undertaken it is understandable that there will be gentle skepticism on the part of some brethren. A submissive spirit, along with recognition of evidence of good fruits allows this to be overcome with time. We are deeply grateful that there have been reports of this encouraging process occurring in the hearts of many brothers and sisters across the land.

A misguided prejudgment of such efforts leads to a closing of the mind and a resistance to acknowledgment of good fruits as well as potential for God’s blessing. There are many warnings in the Scriptures against giving personal opinions a place of undue authority in our minds. One of the most

direct of these is in Romans 12:16: *“Be not wise in your own conceits.”* David acknowledged his need for humility in recognizing that there were things he did not fully understand and thus should not prejudge. *“Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me”* (Psa. 131:1).

The mind of Christ is reflected in a meek spirit. Jesus said of himself, *“I am meek and lowly in heart”* (Matt. 11:29). Meekness can be defined as wisdom, strength and self-assurance kept under control vs. bold or harsh judgment and confrontation. *“Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? Let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom”* (Jam. 3:13).

Lack of respect and callous disregard for authority are serious violations of God’s Word and do not reflect the mind of Christ. When Jesus was tested by the Pharisees on this principle he answered their crafty question by saying, *“Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s”* (Matt. 22:20). When the church leadership after much prayer and seeking of the guidance of the Holy Spirit calls upon the Brotherhood to give their support and cooperation to a biblically sound effort, it is not to be taken lightly. This “call to accountability” was again put forth as a clear sounding trumpet at the recent Princeville Conference. It was a call to engagement—to join the ranks and be prayerful and supportive of the ongoing efforts to encourage all of us to put on the mind of Christ, put self aside and become diligent laborers in the vineyard of the Lord. We must have faith that the many important issues which are of concern will be addressed in due time and according to God’s plan as outlined in the Word, not by our own timetable or preference.

Every brother and sister can make a difference, beginning now. This requires humbling ourselves and taking to heart the consistent exhortations which are being communicated through individual elder presentations to their respective churches, conference teachings, approved Elder Body documents and articles such as this. We should not delay doing what is right, as the Word teaches us to *“number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom”* (Psa. 90:12). We can also each make a difference by the words we speak to one another regarding the strengthening of our blessed heritage: *“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name”* (Mal. 3:16).

Key Verse: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5)

Spiritual Gifts

Spiritual gifts are given by God to every believer. They strengthen the Body of Christ and assist in carrying out His work here on earth. The Word teaches that we are to be knowledgeable (not ignorant) about spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:1). The purpose of this editorial is to help us grow in our knowledge and understanding of God's plan regarding spiritual gifts, so that we can become more useful vessels in the Lord's kingdom.

Key points to be considered regarding this subject include: 1) all members have useful gifts, 2) humility is essential, 3) there are many different gifts and roles and each member is needed, 4) there is to be no comparing, competition or division within the Body, 5) application of gifts has no value without charity and 6) utilization of gifts must be to the glory of God and for the edification of the Church.

Every member of the Body is given gifts and is placed in a position where he or she can be useful. *"But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal"* (1 Cor. 12:7). *"But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him"* (1 Cor. 12:18). God has a wonderful plan whereby we can exercise faithful stewardship of His gifts, as those who will someday give an account (Matt. 25:14-30; 1 Cor. 4:2).

Humility is a prerequisite for grace, without which no good thing can be accomplished. *"...God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble"* (1 Pet. 5:5). Humility helps us remember that our gifts come from God and any results are for His glory. True humility does not allow us to elevate ourselves (1 Cor. 12:3) or put ourselves down (Psa. 139:14). A false humility can cause us to draw back and fail to use the gifts which have been given to us. Failing to use our talents and gifts is not humility but irresponsibility. We should not say, *"I cannot..., for I am a child"* (Jer. 1:6) as Jeremiah did when he was called to serve. God does not call the "qualified." He first desires a willing mind (2 Cor. 8:12), and then He qualifies those He calls through Spirit-endowed gifts and grace.

Our motive for service should never be to seek glory for ourselves as the Pharisees who sounded a trumpet when they gave alms (Matt. 6:2). Sometimes there is criticism of the fact that we give honest, factual reports of the useful contributions made when God-given gifts are applied in the many outreach activities of our church (World Relief, Missions, Home for the Handicapped and Gateway Woods websites, Silver Lining articles and informational presentations, etc.). If the motive were to elevate self or glorify man, this would be in error. Rather, the purpose is to glorify God, to provide information regarding opportunities and to encourage others to offer themselves for humble deeds of service, which is in accord with God's Word. *"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven"* (Matt. 5:16). *"And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works"* (Heb. 10:24).

The Holy Spirit bestows a wide diversity of gifts and roles in order for the Body to be complete and fulfill all of its functions. These functions are also known as the four-pillar mission of the church. We are often reminded of the importance of giving balanced emphasis to each of these pillars (sharing the Gospel with the lost, nurturing the believer, preserving sound doctrine and serving others). No individual is gifted equally in all of these areas; thus all members are needed and must work together in harmony in order for all of the various functions to be carried out effectively. *"And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you"* (1 Cor. 12:21). Our diversities of gifts, personalities and backgrounds can be directed by God for the furtherance of His work on earth, if we submit to Him, live obedient lives and sincerely love and esteem one another (Eph. 4:16). These diversities are not intended to be used for selfish purposes or to justify independent interpretations and applications of the Word (2 Pet. 1:20).

We are warned many times in God's Word that there is to be no comparing, competition or division within the Body of Christ. We are in error when we give more or less esteem to another member based on our own judgments or preferences. God is the Master who is over all. The Apostle Paul asked, "*Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth, Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand*" (Rom. 14:4). James further condemned this error by stating "*But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors*" (Jam. 2:9). God is the one who brings us together with our diversity and tempers us so that we can contribute to, rather than detract from the functions of the Body. "*...God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked*" (1 Cor. 12:24). Being "tempered" involves a moderating, intentional process by which one is made suitable to contribute to a larger purpose. We sometimes become so "*wise in (our) own conceits*" (Rom. 12:16), that we resist the "tempering" of our God to allow us to be cooperative and useful in the Body. Such behavior is divisive, and Paul writes: "*... there should be no schism in the body*" (1 Cor. 12:25).

Following Paul's concluding exhortation in 1 Corinthians 12 to diligently seek spiritual gifts, he points us to the most important condition for useful service: "*... and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way*" (1 Cor. 12:31). The more excellent way is charity (Christ-like love). Without charity as our motivation for service, it will be of no profit or eternal value (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Love for Christ is what constrains us to labor together in harmony within the Church (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 5:14).

Finally, we must always keep in mind the ultimate goal of glorifying God in all of our endeavors: "*... whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God*" (1 Cor. 10:31). We must remember that Christ is the Head of the Body, and everything must focus upon Him. We are also taught: "*Let all things be done unto edifying*" (1 Cor. 14:26). When we all work together and strive to obey the whole counsel of God, our church will thrive and its mission will be fulfilled.

Key Verse: "Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church." (1 Cor. 14:12)

Progress Toward Biblical Unity

“Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand...” (Matthew 12:25). Jesus understood the danger of God’s people not being united. To truly be united we must know the Father and put on the mind of Christ. To do this we must know His Word.

In 2006 the Elder Body resolved to address with humility, brotherly love and commitment the needed efforts to address harmful differences and to increase trust and biblical unity within our Brotherhood. This will require long term commitment and diligent effort to reverse the inroads that Satan has made. Isaiah said many centuries ago, “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as white as wool” (Is. 1:18).

The purposes of this editorial are to highlight the goals we have adopted to strengthen biblical unity, to report progress in steps taken to fulfill them and to emphasize the need for perseverance and diligence in this effort.

Elder Body concerns and plans to address them were presented at the 2007 General Conference, asking for prayerful support to work toward resolution of harmful differences. At the 2008 Elder/Minister meeting a special plea was made to all ministers to give prayerful support and commitment to the effort to achieve godly unity in our Apostolic Christian Brotherhood. Via the 2008 General Conference and Memorandum we are entreating the entire Brotherhood to prayerfully walk with us and to be instruments of truth and peace in this work of faith.

The first goal of the biblical unity effort is a commitment to conduct a candid examination of the spiritual health of the church. “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock...” (Acts 20:28). This began as a thorough self-examination by each elder. Church surveys, personal interviews, and other means are being used to help each elder examine his heart concerning his stewardship. Obtaining the counsel of our congregations to see how we could better serve our flocks (Ezek. 34) is a very humbling and beneficial experience. This self-examination process is an ongoing effort.

Goal two is to clarify our calling as elders to feed and lead the church (Jer. 23:4; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). We are seeking to focus on biblical principles of leadership, to hold each other accountable to fulfill our responsibilities and to better support and nurture new elders. We are required as stewards to be accountable to God, to each other and to the brethren, and it is our sincere desire that we may be found faithful (1 Cor. 4:1-2).

Our third major goal is to nurture unified elder/minister understanding and commitment to preach and teach the whole counsel of God (John 8:31-32; 2 Tim. 2:15). Our ministers have been encouraged to eliminate personal agendas from their sermons so we do not quench the Spirit in bringing sound and complete biblical truth to our flocks. By focusing our preaching and teaching on the entire Word, our messages will support the four pillars of our church mission. “Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee (1 Tim. 4:16).

We are also seeking to inspire and teach growing faith and sanctification within the Brotherhood (Heb. 6:9), which is goal four. Each elder is concerned about the encroachment of the world into the lives of believers. We must all focus sincere efforts toward living a sanctified life and resisting the impact of unwholesome worldly influences, by the grace of God. (Tit. 2:11-15). True spiritual unity comes with

obedience to God's Word. We are thankful that progress is being made in working toward a kinder, more reasonable and loving spirit as we work through our differences.

Changes in the culture in America are also having a powerful impact on our church. A booklet has been prepared which summarizes some special efforts we have made which has helped us grasp the significance of some of these changes. We must retain our core doctrine regardless of the changes in culture. "As we treasure these assets and grapple with cultural context, we have no intention of altering our doctrine or core beliefs to accommodate culture. Indeed, evidence suggests that the culture needs these core values like never before!" (Culture Change, p.10).

The Elder Body has clarified our church position on Bible Studies to encourage sound spiritual growth. "The Apostolic Christian Church supports Bible Studies which are structured in accord with biblical principles, for the purpose of increased understanding and application of God's Word, the edification of participants and the church, and are to the glory of God."

Goal five is to teach effective communication and delegation. Improved delegation of responsibilities within our church will result in better use of gifts and talents as well as more effective fulfillment of the church mission. (Acts 6:3). A greater effort is being made to encourage assistance with, and participation in, national world relief and mission projects and to identify local opportunities to provide loving deeds of kindness.

The sixth goal is to utilize elder forums to increase trust and open communication within the Elder Body. We have had three series of meetings in which we randomly chose different groups of elders for participation in each session. We are thankful to report that this smaller group approach has fostered greater interaction, a more open expression of our individual thinking, and a clearer understanding of our strengths and weaknesses.

We believe that progress has been made in the overall biblical unity effort, and we are committed to building on this foundation with diligence and persistence. The work to decrease harmful differences and increase unity based upon the Word of God will not be quickly or easily completed. The task cannot be accomplished by the elders working alone, and it must include our ministers and the entire Brotherhood. This begins with setting an example which reflects the life and love of Christ in all aspects of our lives.

We should willingly demonstrate cooperation and brotherly love as we serve our great God together. Satan has caused disruption and discord among God's people for many generations. Only by a humble attitude of submission to God and His Word, and by trusting in His grace to help us serve Him faithfully will we succeed. The core values of our Brotherhood are precious. We must not let them slip through compromise of the truth, by carelessness, or because of fear. We must live by faith and hope. Jesus said, "...upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

Key verse: "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord..." (Isaiah 1:18).

Preaching and Teaching

Preaching and teaching are both respected yet distinct methods of communicating scriptural truths in the Apostolic Christian Church. Matthew records Jesus using both methods: “...when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and to preach in their cities” (Matt. 11:1). The Apostles followed His example: “And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ” (Acts 5:42).

A general definition of preaching is to proclaim the Gospel or give a talk on a religious or moral subject. Selection of the subject and amount of preparation of the message varies with the individual and with the traditions of the particular denomination or group. Teaching is giving planned instruction for the learning of the listeners or guiding the study of a particular subject.

When preaching a typical sermon in the Apostolic Christian Church, the minister prayerfully opens the Bible without pre-selecting a particular chapter or topic. He then speaks on the passage of Scripture that falls open without premeditation or the use of notes. The congregation prays sincerely for God’s blessing upon the Word and for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit upon the speaker. The message should not be “...with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor. 2:4), “for the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword...” (Heb. 4:12). Exceptions to random selection of Scriptures are made at funerals, weddings, special religious holidays and other appropriate circumstances when the minister chooses a particular text and topic pertinent to the occasion.

Only brothers serve as ministers in the Apostolic Christian Church. This practice follows the scriptural directive given by the Apostle Paul regarding church leadership and pulpit ministry: “I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (1 Tim. 2:12). The Word instructs ministers to speak with power and conviction given by the Holy Spirit. They are to “...reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim. 4:2) based on study and sound interpretation of the Word (2 Tim. 2:15), always “speaking the truth in love...” (Eph. 4:15). We uphold this longstanding method of unpremeditated preaching for our regular church ministry.

Teaching, as done in our church, is similar to preaching, but often the speaker studies and researches a particular topic of his choosing or one assigned to him. The speaker often uses notes during delivery of the message. Examples are Bible classes, topical presentations and other Bible studies as well as elder exhortations during our General Conference. Teaching on a spiritual topic, as well as preaching are gifts from God. “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching” (Rom. 12:6-7). The knowledge required to teach a particular subject comes by way of the Holy Spirit: “For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:8). Understanding for both preaching and teaching come from reading and studying the inspired Word of God: “Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:4). We often hear or use the term “speaking by the inspiration of the Spirit” when referring to preaching in our church; however, it also applies to teaching, when prepared instruction is approached in a spirit of humility. The Spirit inspires teaching that includes research, study and other preparation, if the minister or assigned teaching brother prayerfully seeks the direction of the Spirit in these endeavors. It also affords the opportunity to address special needs of the church by selecting relevant and timely topics. It can foster a deeper understanding and enhanced application of scriptural principles by allowing a thorough coverage of the whole counsel of God on a particular issue.

Effective preaching and teaching require participation from both the speaker and the listeners. The speaker must humbly acknowledge that his own thoughts or wisdom are completely inadequate, “for the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God...” (1 Cor. 3:19) and that we are not “...sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God” (2 Cor. 3:5). He must

approach this sacred work in faith, seeking to glorify God and edify the hearers, putting aside any personal agenda. God alone knows the hearts of men “...for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). Thus, He can provide for the many needs of the congregation, “...for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him” (Matt. 6:8). Without His blessing, all of our labors would be in vain. A primary duty of listeners is to come with a “...hunger and thirst after righteousness...” (Matt. 5:6) and to pray for their ministers (2 Thes. 3:1).

The Bible warns the Brotherhood against creating disunity by preferring one minister above another. “For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?” (1 Cor. 3:3-4). On the other hand, by submitting to the Holy Spirit, the minister avoids trying to please certain groups within the congregation. “But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts. For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloke of covetousness; God is witness” (1 Thes. 2:4-5).

Ministers and listeners must discern between those thoughts or ideas coming from the Spirit of God and those coming from the spirit of the world: “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God” (Acts 17:11; 1 Cor. 2:12). When a church unites in love, humility and obedience to God’s Word, a full measure of the Holy Spirit inspires both its preaching and teaching. The lost will hear the Gospel message of salvation: “How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?...” (Rom. 10:14-15); the believers will be nurtured in the ways of righteousness and truth; and God’s name will be glorified as the various pillars of the mission of the church are being fulfilled.

Key Verse: “And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.” (Acts 5:42)

Cultural Impact – Understanding the Times

Throughout history, the culture in which men live has shaped their approach to life and death in many ways. Almost every aspect of life is influenced by the culture in which we live. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the way we earn our living, and even the way we worship is influenced by culture. It is essential to understand how the culture we live in impacts our life if we expect to discern the times. In times of rapid change, an awareness of how the changes may affect the church becomes even more important. Being aware does not mean that we advocate for change, but rather, that we understand the world around us in order to better apply the Scriptures to life. Evidence suggests that our culture needs core values based on the Bible like never before.

1 Chronicles 12:32 *“And of the children of Issachar, which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do ...”*

As elders and servants of the church, it is not only our intent, but also our responsibility to understand the times we live in and, by God’s grace safely guide the Church until Jesus returns. In order to accomplish this goal we have searched the Word, reviewed our church history, shared personal experiences, sought out relevant research and together asked the Holy Spirit to provide godly wisdom to know how to humbly lead and feed God’s children.

Jeremiah 3:15 *“And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.”*

Understanding the times often means that we need to understand our roots. Many of our customs and traditions have been shaped by our cultural roots. The hymns in our Zion’s Harp are largely derived from classical music from the Baroque period with strong influence from the Germanic cultures. Our custom of wearing neckties dates back to a trend begun by King Louis XIV of France. Our custom of holding two worship services on Sunday, separated by a lunch hour, dates back to the days of travel by horse and buggy. The way we practice some of these customs varies significantly from how our forefathers lived. For example, just one hundred years ago, many of the Zion’s Harp songs had no musical staff printed with the words and in most of the Apostolic Christian churches in America, hymns and sermons were heard in the German language. An awareness of history helps shape an accurate view of the present. If we are prudent, we will not only be aware of our history, but also will anticipate how cultural change will impact the church and each member of the Body of Christ today and in the future.

Proverbs 22:3-4 *“A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished. By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, and honour, and life.”*

Cultural changes typically proceed at a slow pace and are assimilated over generations, often with little awareness of the roots of the custom. Probably the most stressful cultural changes are those that take place rapidly, giving men little opportunity to adjust. Historically, rapid change was often the result of conquest. However, several other major “revolutions” have also prompted rapid cultural shifts. The invention of the printing press, the Industrial Revolution, and the inventions of telephone, radio, television and the current digital age have all provoked revolutionary shifts in cultural patterns of behavior. Some of these radical changes in culture have had a negative effect on the church, and some have been positive.

One example of a positive major cultural change began in 1604 in England. Amidst substantial controversy and pressure from Calvinist leaders (the Puritans), a group of 54 men was formed by King James 1 of England. Unbeknown to them, these men were about to ignite a cultural revolution. The

Roman church had restricted access to the Word of God for centuries, keeping millions in darkness, even executing men who dared translate the Scriptures into everyday language. The King James scholars were divided into six small working groups, each group translating a portion of the Bible. Each one utilized his knowledge and training to compare and revise various existing translations with the original. They worked separately on the same passages. Once done, they came together as a committee to discuss their work, eventually coming to an understanding on the best wording. The result was the Authorized or King James Version of the Bible. Their work has impacted the English-speaking world for nearly 400 years. It is the foundation of our legal system, has shaped our patterns of language and thought, is the basis of the ideals of freedom and democracy, created a demand for literacy and education, and most importantly – brought the Gospel to millions.

Understanding the impact of a changing culture is very relevant to a believer who desires to obey Christ's decree to share his faith. For example, in order to communicate the Gospel, one must speak the language and understand the local culture. Jesus prayed, *"I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil"* (John 17:15). Perhaps for this reason Jesus chose apostles from many walks of life ...fishermen, tax collectors, lawyers, tentmakers, doctors, and businessmen to name a few that are mentioned in the Bible. No doubt their varied experiences enabled them to relate to the people around them. The Apostle Paul demonstrated his awareness of culture as he communicated to the Greeks on Mars' Hill by quoting some of their literary works. In a world that is changing radically, we too must be aware of the dramatic impact that culture has on the church, and look to our Heavenly Father to provide the wisdom we need to navigate the narrow way.

The fact is that cultural trends are affecting our brotherhood, and impact our relationships and activities. Information overload, increasing pressures on marriage and family, a growing desire to find meaning in life, and isolation from community are all powerful trends in our culture today that need to have the light of truth shone upon them. Resting on the truth of the Word of God, we can minister to our changing culture without compromising biblical standards. In reality, a church built on the rock solid foundation of Jesus Christ is *uniquely suited* to fill the voids created by a radically changed culture. The Word of God is the only unchanging and enduring truth in this world. This is not a time to fear, but rather a time to follow Jesus' example and *"...preach good tidings unto the meek, ...bind up the broken-hearted (and) proclaim liberty to the captives..."* (Is. 61:1).

Theme verse: Proverbs 22:3 *"A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished."*

Salvation, Repentance, Conversion

We are blessed beyond measure through God's love in that "*he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16). We must believe that Jesus died on the Cross and paid the price for our sins in order to be saved. The Bible teaches that we ourselves cannot atone for our sin. It is only by God's grace through faith that we are saved and inherit such a wonderful salvation (Eph. 2:8-10). This atonement was accomplished by Christ on the Cross, taking upon Himself the sins of the world, and giving His life in place of ours. It is His shed blood that can cleanse us of our sins if we come to Him in sincere faith and repentance (Rev. 1:5). When we answer God's call and come to Him in repentance with a broken and contrite heart, we receive grace to turn away from our old way of living and turn in faith toward God, praising Him for His mercy and forgiveness found in the shed blood of Jesus (Acts 20:21). This most important decision allows fulfillment of His purpose for our life. "*But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name*" (John 1:12).

Ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, all mankind has been born in sin and separated from a proper relationship with God. God has pronounced His judgment on sin: "*The wages of sin is death...*" (Rom. 6:23). However, our loving, merciful Lord has prepared a way by which we can be saved from His wrath: "*...but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord*" (Rom. 6:23). The gift of grace to a humble heart will lead to fruitful repentance and conversion. Repentance would be ineffective without God's grace and power to convert the heart. A true conversion means we have been spiritually born again (John 3:3, 1 Pet. 1:23). This miracle of becoming a new creature in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) is evidenced by a new walk of life, restoration of peace with God and man and bearing of the fruit of the Spirit, by His grace.

Before repentance we followed our own degenerate thinking and were blinded by Satan's deceptions. All have sinned and fallen short of God's standards as spelled out in His Word (Rom. 3:23). Before we are able to repent it is necessary for us to recognize our lost condition and need for a Saviour. Sorrow for sin, confession and restitution are some of the fruits of repentance (Matt. 3:6, 8). "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9). As we seek God's forgiveness, we also must be willing to forgive others (Matt. 6:14). God also asks that we openly acknowledge Jesus as the only Saviour. "*If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved*" (Rom. 10:9). Justification by faith restores us to peace with God and allows open communion with Him. (Romans 5:1-2)

The Word directs us to make amends to anyone we have offended (Matt. 5:23-24). When Zacchaeus repented, he told Jesus that he would repay everyone whom he had wronged (Luke 19:8). The Word instructs us: "*as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men*" (Rom. 12:18), and "*Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love*" (Rom. 12:10). Following these principles nurtures peace in our relationships with people (Rom. 14:19). We are called to be a Christ-like example, a light of the world and salt of the earth. (Matt. 5:13-14)

God promises a helper and comforter to all who believe (John 14:16). He is called the Holy Spirit. "*...in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of His glory*" (Eph. 1:13-14). This Spirit directs and teaches us; and by His work in our hearts, our actions and thoughts reflect the fruit of the Spirit, which "*is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance... And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit*" (Gal. 5:22-25). This will be reflected in a walk

of life which includes separation from evil and unrighteousness. There is a turning away from those unwholesome things which once brought pleasure. This is a fulfillment of the biblical instruction to: *“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him”* (1 John 2:15).

Repentance is followed by baptism (Acts 2:38) in which there is a symbolic burial of the old nature which has been crucified with Christ and a coming forth in newness of life in the likeness of the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:4-6). Just prior to baptism a covenant is made to be true and faithful to God as long as we live—which is made possible only by His grace.

When God converts us, he also adopts us as children. His relationship to us is not only Lord, but also as a loving Heavenly Father. We become bound to Him in love. Jesus told His disciples before He left the earth, *“If ye love me, keep my commandments”* (John 14:15). Motivated by love for Christ, our greatest desire is to *“serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear”* (Heb. 12:28). John writes, *“And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments”* (1 John 2:3).

Thus it is clear that the believer is expected to live an overcoming life. God promises to be faithful, not allowing the believer to be tempted beyond what he is able to bear, providing a way of escape from temptation (1 Cor. 10:13). The Word teaches we should not sin, but that if we sin we are given a remedy, if we sincerely seek forgiveness, in that we have an advocate in our merciful Saviour (1 John 1:9; 2:1-2). We are exhorted to *“come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need”* (Heb. 4:16). We are blessed with a lively hope of being with our Lord eternally, if we are faithful to Him. *“Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast...”* (Heb. 6:19).

Key Verse: “...repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Acts 20:21)

Principles of Bible Study

“Bible Study” in our Church is for purposeful spiritual growth through teaching, learning, understanding and application of God’s Word. Personal devotions, topical Bible exhortations, focused meetings with specific groups by elders and ministers, small group interactive discussions, and conference exhortations all describe some of the ways that we practice Bible study in our churches.

Before attempting to study the Bible, we need to know what it is and where it comes from. We believe the Bible, God’s Word, has been one with Him from the very beginning *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”* (John 1:1). The Word was given by inspiration of His Holy Spirit. The doctrine and practices of our beloved Church rest upon its fundamental precepts. *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works”* (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Any form of Bible study should begin by offering sincere prayer, beseeching God to reveal His truth as a *“plain path”* (Psa. 27:11), and then following in humble obedience. Jesus instructs us to *“Search the scriptures”* (John 5:39). This should be done daily in our personal devotions (Acts 17:11) so that we can be mature, godly men and women of understanding (1 Cor. 14:20). Spiritual maturity requires exercising our senses (constant training of our minds and practice) which involves diligent study and application of God’s Word, so that we are able to *“discern both good and evil”* (Heb. 5:14) by *“rightly dividing”* (accurately interpreting) the Bible (2 Tim. 2:15). True spiritual knowledge is a desirable trait that comes from reading and studying the inspired Word of God: *“Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ”* (Eph. 3:4). God has promised to give grace to those who approach His Word with a humble, reverent spirit (Is. 66:2; Jam. 4:6). It is the Holy Spirit who *“guides us into all truth”* (John 16:13). Biblical knowledge is an important step in the sequence that leads from faith to fruitfulness: *“...add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance ... if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful...”* (2 Pet. 1:5-8). When we know and understand God’s Word we are able, by God’s grace, to *“observe to do according to all that is written therein”* (Joshua 1:8) and consequently avoid sinning against God (Psa. 119:9, 11).

God also gives us guidance and warning on the application and study of His divine Word. We have no right to add to or to take anything away from it (Rev. 22:18-19). We are not to wrest (distort the true meaning of) any of its sacred writings *“...they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction”* (2 Pet. 3:16). Gaining knowledge as an end in itself leads to pride (1 Cor. 8:1). Combining love with increased spiritual knowledge leads to a deeper obedience to Christ *“If ye love me, keep my commandments”* (John 14:15). Wisdom and humility give us the ability to apply knowledge properly. James writes, *“Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom”* (Jam. 3:13). We exhort our brethren to avoid interdenominational Bible studies with those of differing doctrines (Heb. 13:9). For the same reason, there is a need to be careful and discerning when consulting Bible commentaries and other outside resources. The believer should place utmost reliance on the Scriptures themselves.

The purpose of Bible study is to help us walk on the narrow way which leads to life (Matt. 7:14). It should serve to inspire us to godly living, and to be less carnally minded and less conformed to the things of this world (Rom. 8:6; 12:2). It should not be solely to obtain biblical knowledge, but to gather spiritual resources, putting on the *“whole armor of God”* (Eph. 6:13-17) to combat our Enemy. An essential test for all forms of Bible study is to determine if it is strengthening to the overall spiritual

welfare of the church. The Corinthian church was zealous and had many ideas on how to praise God and interpret His teachings. Paul cautioned them that all must be done in order (1 Cor. 14:40), and he shared the critically important exhortation: *“Let all things be done unto edifying”* (1 Cor. 14:26). Finally, we must always examine our hearts and determine that we are constrained (driven) by the *“love of Christ”* (2 Cor. 5:14); for unless there is *“charity out of a pure heart”* (1 Tim. 1:5) in all of these endeavors, no matter how much we may know and speak and do, *“without charity it profiteth me nothing”* (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

The Elder body has developed the following statement of position regarding group Bible studies: “The Apostolic Christian Church supports Bible Studies which are structured in accord with biblical principles, for the purpose of increased understanding and application of God’s Word, the edification of participants and the church and are to the glory of God”.

The following general guidelines support and amplify this statement of position:

Bible study activity should be under the general oversight of the church (1 Pet. 5:2). Oversight includes responsibility (directly or by delegation) for adherence to relevant biblical principles, provision for faithful leadership, selection of acceptable, sound materials, coordination of scheduling with church functions and maintenance of overall accountability for each activity (1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 2:2).

An atmosphere should be maintained which edifies the church, and does not condone self-exaltation or strife, introduction of false doctrine, undermining of the church or diminishing of participation in or support for other church functions (Eph. 4:12-15; Phil. 2:3).

Approaches may be used to meet the special needs within the church (friends, singles, married, men, women, etc.) (Jer. 3:15; 1 Pet. 5:2).

The King James Version should be used for English speaking Bible studies, and sound versions for other languages i.e. Japanese, Spanish, etc. (1 Cor. 14:26; 2 Tim. 1:13).

Specific guidelines in accord with this position and the above broad guidelines may be established by each church.

It is the sincere desire and intent of the church leadership to promote sound, edifying Bible study in the Apostolic Christian Church, so that these biblical principles are supported for the strengthening of the Brotherhood and the glory of God.

Our church leadership is committed to utilizing the guidelines to establish good order in our Bible study activities and to responding to sincere requests for Bible study by providing appropriate opportunities.

Key verse: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needed not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Tim. 2:15)

Practicing Biblical Brotherly Admonition

“Be ye holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16). In these words, God imparts his fundamental purpose for us. We are created in God’s image and commissioned to continue His work in the world to glorify Him (Gen. 1:26-28). The Word also exposes our failure to fulfill this purpose. *“He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone,”* said Christ to those who condemned the adulterous woman (John 8:7). No man qualifies (Rom. 3:23). Since that fateful day when Adam and Eve chose their own will over God’s, we are all born sinners in a fallen world, and have all likewise sinned (Is. 53:6).

We can be thankful that God has mercifully provided a way of redemption. He came to earth to *“bear witness unto the truth”* (John 18:37) so man could repent of his sin. When He overturned the moneychangers’ tables (Matt. 21:12-13), when He charged that the chief priests were further from God than harlots (Matt. 21:31) and when He rebuked Peter, saying, *“Get thee behind me, Satan”* (Matt. 16:23): in each case, He was pointing people to the truth (Matt. 16:23).

Although the truth is humbling, we must honestly pursue it for the sake of our eternal souls (Prov. 4:13; Heb. 12:11). We don’t want to justify ourselves; we want to see ourselves in the mirror of God’s Word, trusting Him to admonish us when we stray (2 Cor. 13:5). His Word is *“quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword...a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart”* (Heb. 4:12). It cuts to the core of our hearts, exposing our transgression before our Maker.

Biblical admonition may be painful, but it is good. Paul writes that all Scripture *“is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”* (2 Tim. 3:16). Doctrine confronts us with the reality of our condition, reproof convicts us of sin and prompts repentance, correction restores us to the proper path, and instruction guides us along that path. We must seek biblical admonishment in all honesty and humility.

Sometimes, God admonishes us through the words of godly men, and we should welcome being exhorted and warned by someone who loves us enough to do this in a biblical manner (1 Thes. 5:14). Christ has given us the example of the shepherd who loses a sheep. *“Doth he not leave the ninety and nine and goeth into the mountains and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep than of the ninety and nine which went not astray”* (Matt. 18:12-13). This is the heart of the Father – to restore that which was lost. He employs us His children in this work, so we should thank God for each other.

In addition to humbly receiving biblical admonition, we must be faithful when God calls us to convey it to others. When we observe what we believe is sin, trespass or fault (all three are used interchangeably in the Word) in a brother, we must first prayerfully examine ourselves for any “beam” that might be in our eye (Matt. 7:1-5). Only after this is removed should we proceed further. Christ explains the rest of our responsibility in this process in Matt. 18:15-20. We are to talk to our brother about the matter *“alone”* lest we fall into the sin of gossip ourselves. This ensures that we act in God’s interest, not self interest, with the purpose of restoring one to truth – to *“gain our brother.”* We are to warn him lovingly, not shame him (1 Cor. 4:14). Our desire should be to restore him *“in the spirit of meekness”* (Gal. 6:1), for it is not our authority, but the authority of God’s Word that enables us to do this (Rom. 15:14), and only by His grace.

We should also be guided by a sense of humility and a realization that what we have perceived may in fact be different from the reality of what has occurred. We should approach

our brother with a spirit that seeks to gain understanding and acknowledges our limited perspective.

Christ's instruction also implies that our admonition should not be anonymous. We are to "go" to our brother, not hide behind a veil of secrecy. God has always dealt with sin directly, and proper brotherly admonition is done at His direction and with the authority of His Word. If we are unwilling to identify ourselves, we should (a) re-examine our scriptural responsibility and motives in the matter and/or (b) ask God to direct someone else in this work and let the matter rest. Previous discussion of anonymous admonition in a Light from the Word article (1998) describes this as being clearly in conflict with the Word.

If our brother does not hear us, we are to return to him with two or three witnesses – *not* the whole church. To involve more than a few is inappropriate at this stage, as it may lead to gossip and further stain the church with sin. It is the purity of the church that we are seeking to restore by confronting the sin of a brother.

If the trespasser still refuses to acknowledge his sin, then – and *only* then – should we take the matter before the church. We are not to take it to the world. God has charged the church with this work, and it is only His Word that will convict, correct, and instruct. The world cannot redeem such a man, so if he rebuffs a loving church functioning under the authority of God-ordained leadership, he has nowhere else to go. He is to be unto us "as a heathen man" (Matt. 18:17).

This may seem harsh, but it is what Christ has instructed us to do. He gave himself for the church "*that he might present it to himself a glorious church...that it should be holy and without blemish*" (Eph. 5:27). If a brother refuses to submit to Him when confronted with His Word, he commits the same error as the Original Sin of choosing his own will over God's, thus separating himself from the holiness of God and from the fellowship of God's people.

Although the church does not judge his eternal destination, when it restores a man to fellowship, it parallels his restoration in heaven (Matt. 18:18). When the church rejects an unrepentant sinner, it parallels his rejection in heaven. Christ directs us to pray that His "*will be done on earth, as it is in heaven*" (Matt. 6:10).

What a solemn responsibility for God's people both in giving and receiving biblical admonition. Let us continually humble ourselves before Him and our brethren as we strive to obey His will and conform to His image of holiness.

"...ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness..." (Gal. 6:1).

Sharing the Gospel

“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Pet. 3:15). Do you have the hope of eternal life in you? Has Jesus transformed your life? Have you been washed in the blood of the Lamb, and by faith and the Holy Spirit been born again (John 3:3-7)? Have all things been made new by God’s grace through repentance and conversion, and are you enjoying the peace of God that results from a sanctified life of obedience? If you have, is it possible to keep it to yourself and not share this great hope?

Jesus teaches us that we have freely received the gift of life and freely we should give. (Matt. 10:8) Jesus sent His disciples to preach the good news of the Kingdom of God. He sent them by two’s and told them to take nothing extra for their journey. He gave them authority over unclean spirits and diseases and commanded them to heal the sick. (Luke 9:1-6) While He was on earth, Jesus limited His preaching to the lost sheep of the house of Israel with just a few notable exceptions. However, just before He ascended to heaven, He gave His disciples their final instructions. Beginning at Jerusalem (Luke 24:47), they were commanded to teach all nations, preaching repentance and remission of sins. They were also commanded to baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all His commandments. (Matt. 28:18-20) Jesus clearly instructs that salvation is for all people.

“...For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified...” (1 Cor. 1:21-25). In those early years, it seems that preaching, or telling men about the Kingdom of Heaven, was not limited to just a few. Apparently many of the believers were so grateful for their salvation and so moved by the Holy Spirit, that they preached wherever they went. (Acts 11:18-20) When the Spirit separated Saul and Barnabas to go to the gentiles, they went preaching. First in the synagogue and then in private homes and schools, they preached the Gospel of salvation. It was not a matter of eloquence or great convincing arguments. In fact, Paul writes of the struggle that it was for him to preach. *“And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God”* (1 Cor. 2:3-5).

We ought not to say that we are incapable of sharing the gospel, but rather be willing to demonstrate the power of the Spirit as Paul did – recognizing that Paul’s preaching was based on a solid foundation of understanding. (He knew the Scriptures well.) However, we also need to be aware that knowledge by itself “puffeth up,” and is fruitless if not mixed with love and the wisdom of God. In this spirit of meekness, we are exhorted to be always ready and willing to preach the Word--not our own word, or even our own opinions about the Word of God, but the pure, simple, truth from God. *“Preach the word. Be instant, in season, out of season ...”* (2 Tim. 4:2).

”Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). In addition to preaching, we

are exhorted to be examples, even as Jesus is an example to us. Paul was so bold as to tell the believers in Corinth to follow his example, even as Paul followed Christ's. If we are walking in the Spirit and not in the flesh, we will be an example to all men – both in the church and to those who are yet without faith. However, if our deeds do not bear witness to the truth, our words will be empty hypocrisy. *“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves”* (Matt. 23:15). On the other hand, if we are unwilling to use our mouth to bear witness to the reason for our deeds (Jesus), we risk taking credit to ourselves for the good that we do.

Have you ever thought that you aren't “called” to speak of your faith? Or that it should only be the duty of ministers to preach? It's easy to find reasons to be silent. By nature we prefer to blend in with the world around us. Paul told the Romans, *“So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth”* (Rom. 1:15-16). Jesus told His disciples that their life in Him should be obvious to all men. *“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven”* (Matt. 5:16). Jesus warned: *“Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed...”* (Mark 8:38).

Therefore said he unto them, “The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2). While the Bible is clear that we are all to be witnesses of hope to a lost world, it is also clear that at times the Holy Spirit separated men for the specific task of carrying the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. (Acts 13:2) Responding to such a call from the Holy Spirit may be difficult and requires much prayer and counsel. Leaving family and “roots” behind to share the Gospel may seem nearly unthinkable, but isn't the thought of souls spending eternity in Hell even more unthinkable? Although we should never run ahead of the Lord and go on our own thinking, being sent with the blessing of the church, in the name of the Lord, can bring good fruit. (Rom. 10:14-15)

Theme verse: Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He would send forth labourers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2)

God's Word as Our Authority

Who are you? Your answer likely starts with, "I am..." but unless that's followed by a description, *I am* means nothing. Unless, that is, God is speaking.

Exodus 3 records how God revealed Himself to Moses in a burning bush and asked him to return to Egypt to liberate the Israelites. Understandably nervous about this task, Moses asked God who he should say had sent him. "*They shall say to me, 'What is his name?'*" Moses said. "*What shall I say unto them?'*" "*And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM. Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.*" (Ex. 3:14)

I AM. Period. For God, nothing else needs to follow. As the uncreated Creator of the universe, He can't describe Himself relative to something else because without Him, there *is* nothing else. He just is. Notice how He emphasized this to Moses, "I am *that* I am." It's singular. There is no other I AM besides Him. He is the Maker of all that is (John. 1:3) and the ultimate Source of all truth (Col. 2:2-3). We learn truth by studying His nature. In fact, His revelation of Himself is at the core of who He is: revealed in the three persons of the Trinity.

Gen. 1:1 says, "*In the beginning, God...*" The next verse says, "*And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.*" We're only two verses into the Bible, and we've read of God the Father and God the Spirit.

Then, in a most spectacular moment, God expressed Himself. "*God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all*" (1 John. 1:5), so it makes sense that His first recorded words were, "*Let there be light!*" When He said this, there was light (Gen. 1:3). In a sudden flash of glory, the deep darkness of nothingness obeyed His command and became the bright light of "somethingness."

God's Word is more than just what He says; it is *Him*. "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*" (John. 1:1). No picture or image could ever capture His glory. We know Him by His Word, which was "*made flesh and dwelt among us*" (John. 1:14). Jesus Christ, the Son, is the self-expression of the Father, completing the Trinity. When God said, "Let there be light," it was Christ (His Word) who created the light. When God walked as a man, it was Christ. Even before Christ's birth, the Word which God revealed to the Old Testament prophets was Christ, so all men for all time who have placed their faith in God have been placing their faith in Christ. As you study and live God's Word, you are studying and living Christ. Truly, Christ "*is before all things, and by him all things consist*" (Col. 1:17). He is the root of all reality, and as one with the Father, He is given all authority (Mat. 28:18).

2 Timothy 3:16 tells us that "*all scripture is given by inspiration of God,*" which means that it is "God-breathed," the literal words of God. Exodus 32:16, Leviticus 1:1, Numbers 1:1, and Deuteronomy 31:24-26 all claim to be God-inspired. Genesis does not directly claim this, but it is included in the Book of Moses (2 Chron. 35:12; Neh. 13:1), which Christ confirmed as the Word of God.

The Old Testament prophets also claim divine inspiration. Phrases like "*thus saith the Lord*" (Jer. 11:11) and "*the Lord hath spoken*" (Is. 1:2) occur hundreds of times in the Old Testament. Jeremiah writes, "*...and the Lord said unto me, behold, I have put my words in thy mouth*" (Jer. 1:9).

Likewise, the New Testament books claim divine inspiration. Christ both confirmed the inspiration of the Old Testament and promised that the Holy Spirit would direct the apostles into "*all truth*" (John 16:13), who then wrote according to the inspiration they received. In summary, the entire Bible claims the authority of God's inspiration, and the external evidence overwhelmingly supports these claims.

God's Word is the standard of truth; the ultimate authority of right and wrong. According to 2 Timothy 3:16, it teaches us the reality of the world's condition, including our fallen state before God and what we must do to be restored to Him (doctrine); convicts us of sin and the judgment we deserve (reproof); offers God's plan of salvation, restoring us to our Creator (correction); and gives practical instruction for living according to God's perfect will (instruction in righteousness). He has given us everything we need (2 Pet. 1:3). His Word – the same Word that willed the universe into existence – defines our purpose, forms our opinions, and guides our decisions. It is our worldview. It is ours to obey.

A common criticism of the Bible is that it's too restrictive. People don't like commandments beginning with "thou shalt not" or claims of *only one* way. Man's sinful nature naturally resists the concession of control that these statements demand. Yet, what happens when man has control? On a global scale, we see death, destruction, grief, and pain. It's no different in the human heart, where thoughts are "*evil continually*" (Gen. 6:5).

In contrast, God's Word builds up. From Genesis 1 until today, it has brought order from chaos. The same God who *breathed* life into Adam (Gen. 2:7) has *breathed* His Word through the prophets, the Lord Jesus and the Apostles and preserved it for all time. His Word literally gives life, and His Law is for our preservation (Deut. 10:12-13; 6:24).

Why has God revealed Himself to us through His Word? Because we were created in His image for a relationship with Him. He wants to be our friend (Ex. 33:11), to protect and nurture us (Mat. 23:37), and to spend eternity with us (John 17:3). Yet, He gives us a choice: "*Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse. A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day. And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you...*" (Deut. 11:26-28).

We should not wrest the Scriptures to justify our own opinions (Rom. 12:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21; 3:16) nor should we over-emphasize or under-emphasize any of its teachings (Rev. 22:18-19). We are called upon to adhere to the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). God is the ultimate authority, and His Word alone defines what is perfect, good, right, and blessed (James 1:17). If we seek to rightly divide (interpret) His Word (2 Tim. 2:15) with prayer and in humility, His Spirit will guide us into all truth (John 16:13).

Key verse: "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth." (John 17:17)

Personal Devotions

Two important parts of a Christian's spiritual life are worshipping together with other believers, called corporate worship, and taking the time for personal devotions. You may or may not use the word "devotions," but by the phrase "personal devotions" we mean reading God's Word, meditating (thinking through what we have read), and spending time in prayer alone with God. The act of devotions is a form of communion with a very personal God. As the Holy Spirit guides and moves us, God speaks to us through His Word, and we speak to Him in prayer.

What is your reason for having devotions? The purpose is not to puff up spiritually, it is not "because I have to," and it is not "because I want to look good." It must be done out of a pure heart's desire to know and to love our God more fully, to humbly desire to learn from Him, to seek to become more like Him and to worship and adore Him.

One of the first encouragements converts may receive is to start and maintain devotions, that is, to read the Bible and to pray every day. This time is important for the growth of a Christian. Converts may struggle with finding the right way to accomplish this. Even mature believers may find it difficult at times to maintain a consistent time of devotions every day. Without understanding the importance of this quiet time (Ps. 46:10), it may end up being low on our priority list, and the cares and desires of this world may crowd out the time that should be spent communing with God.

Devotions is a time during which we can be reshaped and further molded into the likeness of our Lord. Through regular communion with God, our hearts are kept tender and soft. Quality devotional times will have a positive impact on our spiritual walk. However, it is not always easy to maintain consistency, or be in the right frame of mind for devotions. The quality of our personal devotional time can significantly shape the rest of our day. This requires much self-discipline, but the rewards are great. When we start and end our day communing with our Creator, as Moses spent time on Mt. Sinai with God (Ex. 34:30), it will impact our everyday lives in many ways. Our joy and peace will become richer, and our priorities will be more clearly defined and established (Prov. 4:26-27).

Our Lord Jesus Christ, though the Son of God, still found it necessary to spend much time in communion with the Father when He walked on this earth. Often He would spend long evenings alone with God (Mark 6:46; Luke 6:12). While we cannot usually get away to mountains like Jesus did, we should try to find a place that is quiet and with few interruptions and distractions (Matt. 6:6). We should endeavor to find time every morning and evening to talk with God (Josh. 1:8). "*But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night*" (Ps. 1:2), "*...to shew forth thy lovingkindness in the morning and thy faithfulness every night*" (Ps. 92:2).

While it does sometimes suffice to randomly open a portion of Scripture for reading and meditation, there is also benefit in taking a whole book in the Bible or a topic and carefully reading and studying it over a period of time. There are guides available for reading through the whole Bible in one year, but care must be taken that such an endeavor does not simply constrain us toward reaching the goal of having read the whole Bible, but rather it should serve as an assistant in disciplined reading of the whole counsel of God. Generally time spent in the New Testament should exceed the time spent in the Old Testament.

As we read the Scriptures, God's Spirit will speak to our hearts, teach us His principles, correct our faults, show us how to live a life of holiness (2 Tim. 3:16) and strengthen our faith (Rom. 10:17). When Bible reading is properly done, it should have a reflective side to it that is called meditation. This is carefully taking what we have read, thinking through the meaning of each verse and biblical principle,

and honestly considering how we can apply it to our lives. The more quality time we give the Holy Spirit, the more He will teach us the deep truths of the Word. Jesus said, "...*the Spirit...will guide you into all truth*" (John 16:13). When the Spirit convicts us of areas of deficiency or sin, we should pray for the grace to respond with appropriate confession, repentance, and correction--restoring our peace with God and man.

Our prayers in devotional time should reflect our response to what the Spirit has taught us. In addition, we are commanded to pray for the saints and the ministers of God's Word (1 Thes. 5:25; 2 Thes. 3:1) and to pray for each other (Jam. 5:16). Paul stated several times that he remembered the churches in his daily prayers (Rom. 1:9; Eph. 1:16; 1 Thes. 1:2; Philem. 4; Phil. 1:4). We are told to include thanksgiving (Col. 4:2; 1 Tim. 2:1) and prayers of petition for our leaders (1 Tim. 2:2). There can be benefit in maintaining a list of items to pray for every day. Prayer is two-way communion with God, and as we are sensitive to His Spirit, He will continue to guide our thoughts as we pray. Do not let your prayers become a ritual, but may they always be fresh and personal in expressing your heart's petition and praise to a loving and gracious God.

A hymn that aptly describes our time of devotions and what it should mean to us is found in Tabernacle Hymns #130 "In The Garden."

"I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses
And the voice I hear falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses.

He speaks, and the sound of His voice,
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known."

Let us delight daily in our devotions so that we can be as trees planted by the living water of God (Ps. 1:3). "*Thy testimonies also are my delight and my counsellors*" (Ps. 119:24). Make this a priority, and consistently spend ample quiet time with God. He will richly bless you.

Theme verse: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psa. 46:10)

A Meek and Lowly Attitude

Meekness is the noblest virtue,
Every Christian's honor bright;
It adorns the youthful member
And the aged with its might.
Though it does not stand in favor with those of a proud behavior
Yet 'tis more than precious gold,
More than fame and wealth untold.
Zion's Harp # 186, verse 1.

We sometimes hear meekness associated with one who is weak, one who will allow others to inappropriately dominate him, or one who is unable to stand for his convictions when faced with opposition. Among the varied definitions in the dictionary we find: patient, mild, not inclined to anger or resentment, easily imposed upon and too submissive. That is quite a mix of meanings--some positive and some negative.

The Bible uses meekness in a positive manner, as representing an appropriately submissive spirit. It is preceded by humility and it reflects a gentleness based on inner strength which is kept under control. Several examples of meek individuals and acts of meekness follow:

- *"Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth"* (Num. 12:3).
- King David, as he was cursed, told his soldiers to let Shimei alone because David believed that the Lord may have told Shimei to curse him. (2 Sam. 16:5-14)
- The prophet Jeremiah, when he was threatened with death because he delivered a message of God to King Jehoiakim said *"...do with me as seemeth good and meet unto you"* (Jer. 26:12-14).
- Jesus said *"Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls"* (Matt. 11:29). As He was dying on the cross He said *"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do"* (Luke 23:34).
- Stephen, as he was being stoned said, *"Lord, lay not this sin to their charge"* (Acts 7:60).

Certainly none of these individuals or deeds are examples of weakness. They all represent acts of courage and faith performed under threat of injury or death, yet these individuals stood firmly on their beliefs. Paul and Peter recognized the virtue of meekness. Paul listed meekness as a fruit of the spirit and went on to say that against such there is no law. (Gal. 5:22-23). In counseling women about outward adorning, Peter wrote *"But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek, and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price"* (1 Pet. 3:4).

As we attempt to apply the concept of meekness to our lives, a good place to start is with a thorough self-examination. How do we react when we face a variety of situations that are common in the lives of most of us? At work, at our place of business, within the Brotherhood, at home, or in our neighborhood, what is our reputation? Do our co-workers, our supervisors, or our employees know that we will respond to adversity in a calm, accepting manner? Are we known as one who will willingly, quietly face the challenges which come our way? Do we defer to the welfare of others and do *"...that which is just and equal"* (Col. 4:1)? Likewise, how do we react when someone takes advantage of us? Trusting God's divine providence and care allows us to face earthly challenges with meekness.

Satan's goal is to cause division, especially in the family and in the household of faith. As issues arise, in our local congregation, within the national Brotherhood, or at home, Satan will try to create

disturbance. If we have a meek and lowly attitude, we will do whatever we can to address controversial issues in a loving, peaceable manner, relieving the distress and making a constructive difference for others as well as ourselves. *“But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace”* (Psa. 37:11).

Jesus instructed us to remove the beam from our own eye before attempting to remove the mote from our brother’s eye. (Matt.7:3-5) Jesus also said if our brother trespasses against us we should go to him alone (Matt. 18:15-16). If we do this with a meek and lowly attitude, it is much more likely that he will hear us, and we will have gained our brother. If he does not hear us, we are to take one or two others with us, that every word may be established. Many problems have been made worse because the truth was not established in a respectful, loving manner, with both parties exercising meekness.

We can also help keep peace within the Brotherhood and our homes by responding in meekness to what we hear or see. Before we consider passing information to others via speech, e-mail or any other means, we must be sure that it is true and in the appropriate context, so what we pass on is not misunderstood by those who receive our message. Also, before we pass along information we must ask ourselves, “Why are we doing that?” Will spreading the information be a part of the solution or will it be a part of the problem? Not every bit of information that we receive needs to be shared. If we are of a meek and lowly attitude, we will never engage in gossip, whether written or spoken, whether true or untrue.

In our neighborhood are we known as humble servants of God? Is our home a refuge from the world? If we are of a meek and lowly attitude our conduct and our conversation will not reflect a harsh and bold demeanor. In the privacy of our homes we will not take liberties that will allow Satan to expose our families to evil influences. Our children will benefit spiritually if our attitude is such that it draws us closer to God and shuns evil. If we are content being humble servants of God, that contentment will be observed by our children and by our neighbors.

Are we able to relate with a meek and lowly attitude toward those who are in authority over us? How do we react when our elected officials do not do what we think they should do, or when we do not understand or agree with church leadership? A critical, self-asserting spirit does not reflect the meekness portrayed by our beloved Saviour. Prayer and constructive communication are much more fruitful.

We could reflect upon many more questions that might help us to assess whether we portray meekness in our attitude and behavior. Most importantly we should ask ourselves how God sees us on a daily basis. The Word teaches, *“For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth”* (2 Cor. 10:18).

Key verse: “The Lord lifteth up the meek: He casteth the wicked down to the ground.” (Psalm 147:6)

Discernment

“Rightly dividing” or interpreting the Bible requires discernment. (2 Tim. 2:15) Proving all things and determining what is good or evil requires discernment. (1 Thes. 5:21) We are living in a time when the amount of information and influence which impacts all of us is unprecedented. Individual believers, families as well as the church must depend more than ever upon the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised will “...*guide you into all truth*” (John 16:13). Let us examine what the Scriptures teach us about how this very critical matter of accurate discernment of biblical truth was accomplished in the early church.

Acts 15 tells us that there was no small dissension within the church regarding the Old Testament rite of circumcision. We must acknowledge that there have always been issues that caused differences among God’s people. One can go back into the 50’s and 60’s, into the 1800’s, the 1500’s, and 500 AD, and this has always been the case. There is no idealistic era when there was easy consensus found on critical issues, but always the need to “*search the Scriptures*” as the noble Bereans of old, to learn “*whether those things were so*” (Acts 17:11). Let us keep in mind that it doesn’t make any difference what you and I think, but it matters greatly what the Scripture says.

How the church should stand on circumcision was a big issue, and it was stirring up the believers, with many of them taking sides. Then and now, when there are issues of doctrine and practice that are weighty and affecting many lives, it is appropriate that they come to the church leadership, because that is the order which God has established. When the elders and apostles came together to seek direction, they too were of varied opinions. The first thing they did was demonstrate that they loved each other enough to openly declare the issue and then be free to express themselves with mutual respect. It is recorded that there was “*much disputing*” (Acts 15:7) as they began to address the issue. Disputing as used here means that in spite of many differing thoughts, there was a desire to understand what is right.

When we reason together and seek answers from the Holy Spirit, we must be humble and have the mind of Christ. Peter declared, “*And God, which knoweth the hearts,*” (knows the needs of His church, and of the lost)-- “*bare them (Gentiles) witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did to us*” (Acts 15:8). We must be quiet enough to hear the Holy Spirit (Psa. 46:10) and what He says on the issue, and then be willing to submit to Him. After Paul and Peter and others had spoken, James, the elder at Jerusalem, was inspired to draw upon Scriptures (the words of the prophets) which settled the matter. James was the leader of those who would have been most convinced that circumcision should be required. Yet, he did not depend upon his own intellect, nor was he moved by the pressure of man’s opinions—he rested his case on the Word of God.

It is very instructive to observe the conclusions which came forth from this meeting to be delivered to the churches. “*For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well*” (Acts 15:28-29). The most compelling issue addressed at this meeting was handled by a decision to “*trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God*” (Acts 15:19) by the ordinance of circumcision. This was left to the individual as a matter of conscience. In deference to the sensitivities of those of Jewish background, several of the long established dietary standards were retained, none of which should have been burdensome. Finally, a clear statement prohibiting the immoral practice of fornication was included in this communication to the churches. One could easily argue that either more or fewer details, specific examples or decrees (instruction) could have been given, but this is what was seen as right and good to the Holy Ghost and the assembled church leaders at that time. This order of ordained church leadership was established by God (Heb. 13:7, 17), and its counsel should not be taken

lightly. How wonderful that the message was received appreciatively by the multitude, who “*rejoiced for the consolation*” (Acts 15:31) that sound instruction was being given.

There is yet among us today a wide range of views as to how much detailed instruction should be given by church leadership. There are those who by nature or circumstances desire a great amount of direction with regard to the day to day issues of life. For those who are babes in Christ, it is important to teach them the basic precepts of the Word to help them face the challenges of a new walk of life, as new creatures in Christ. For all believers, the most important thing is that we live by a faith in Christ that transforms our hearts and minds (2 Cor. 3:19; Rom. 12:2) and enhances the spiritual growth needed for discernment. We are not to remain as babes in Christ. (Heb. 5:13)

Discernment is something which is learned over time, as we grow and mature in our walk with Christ. “*But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil*” (Heb. 5:14). Whatever our level of responsibility may be, we should have the humility of Solomon when he prayed, “*Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people*” (1 Kings 3:9). Parents, teachers, ministers, church leaders and all who have opportunity to influence others (essentially all believers) should pray for an understanding heart of spiritual discernment—a heart that listens to God and to faithful brethren and takes counsel: “*in the multitude of counselors there is safety*” (Prov. 24:6). We are instructed that “*him that is taught in the word (should) communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things*” (Gal. 6:6). It is good and healthy when we can reason together in a constructive way, with love and mutual respect. Coming to a place of peace and unity when there are differences requires submission to one another: “*Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God*” (Eph. 5:21), and above all, obedience to the whole counsel of God.

Key verse: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” (1 Thes. 5:21)

Our Eternal Goal

In a world that is full of sorrow, heartache, and oppression, it is a great blessing to live in nations that permit a measure of freedom. For example, in the United States, we enjoy the constitutionally-protected right to worship. We enjoy freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. The Declaration of Independence proclaims that we are “*endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable Rights... that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*” Kept in an eternal perspective, these rights are a blessing and provide us with great opportunity to serve God in a mighty way. Viewed from an earthly perspective, they can be deceptive and confusing.

What is Life? What brings Happiness, and how do we define it? What is Liberty? The popular notions of these things often sound attractive. “You only go around once in life ... go for the gusto!” “It’s a free country. As long as you aren’t hurting someone, do as you please.” “Money can’t buy happiness, but it sure helps!” The Bible has much to say about these grand concepts – often contrary to the popular perception. While a believer may not succumb to such blatantly false attitudes, it is easy to justify oneself, calling the pursuit of financial security, “prudent,” or glorifying an excessive desire to accumulate wealth, “a strong work ethic,” etc.

Jesus teaches us that money isn’t happiness, and that the anxious pursuit of success is fruitless and an indicator of a lack of faith. Perhaps His instruction to, “Take no thought for your life...” seems extreme. However, if our trust is in Him, we can first seek His Kingdom and trust Him to provide all our needs. “*Ye cannot serve God and mammon (greed). Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, ... saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles (unbelievers) seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself*” (Matt. 6:24-34).

Isaiah warns us that life is not about accumulating wealth and riches. “*Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!*” (Is. 5:8).

Again Jesus reminds us that it is of much more importance to be rich unto God. “*But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God*” (Luke 12:20-21).

Paul writes that liberty is not to be thought of as freedom to do as we please in this world, but rather as freedom from corruption. “*For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us ..., Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God*” (Rom. 8:18-21).

Peter teaches us that liberty should not be used as an excuse to mistreat others, or disobey laws. “*Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme;*

Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God” (1 Pet. 2:13-16).

The prophet Isaiah asks why we would settle for the deceptive false happiness of the world, thinking that somehow we can buy it. Years before Jesus came, Isaiah prophesied of the true bread from heaven, and the satisfaction that serving Jesus brings. *“Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not? Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David”* (Is. 55:1-3).

Are your thoughts, your time, your heart consumed with the pursuit of “happiness” on this earth? Have you convinced yourself that providing luxuries for your family is more important than serving Jesus? Have you confused “wants” with “needs?” Have you permitted the philosophy of this world to convince you that political activism is necessary to preserve liberty? Have you allowed your heart to become troubled by the events of our time and drawn into the rhetoric and bashing of governmental authorities flooding the media? Jesus said, *“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you, Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid”* (John 14:27).

Is your heart in the counterfeit freedoms and temporary happiness of this life ... or do you live as a pilgrim with no roots on this earth? Do you feel like a foreigner in your own country? *“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country...they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city”* (Heb. 11:13-16).

Let’s follow Jesus out of the camp of the popular culture, avoiding the political turmoil that only brings hope for this life, rejecting the pursuit of riches which mires us in many deceitful and foolish lusts, bearing His reproach - as we share joyfully the living hope and real treasures that we have within us because of His shed blood. *“Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come”* (Heb. 13:12-14).

Key verse: “For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (Heb. 13:14)

Discernment in the Use of Technology

“There is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us” (Ecc. 1:9-10). This familiar Scripture may seem a little dated when considering the technology of the computer age in which we live. However, when we consider that a Turkish engineer built the first programmable analog computer in 1206 A.D., we appreciate more fully the timeless wisdom of King Solomon’s observation.

Technological advancement fulfills some very worthwhile uses in our daily lives. For many generations our Brotherhood has taken a cautious approach in adopting such advancement slowly. If new devices can be used wisely as tools, then we have incorporated them into our lives with discernment and discretion. We know that God is sorely displeased with *“...inventors of evil things...Rom. 1:30)* and that Satan is able to transform himself into an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). We want to encourage all of us to seek the heart of Solomon when he prayed, *“Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart ... that I may discern between good and bad...”* (1 Kings 3:9). Discernment between good and bad means understanding the differences between them and applying sound judgment. This sometimes involves abstaining from some things even if they are readily available and convenient. Discernment also reveals that even if we have no need for these technologies, we should respect and not judge those who do.

This article addresses the dangers and warnings, as well as the means for discernment in using personal computers, Personal Digital Assistants (PDA’s), and cell phones or “smart” phones wisely. Each of these has its specific functions and may be used as a tool. They are all capable of accessing the Internet, and downloading and playing videos, movies and games along with other potentially harmful activities.

“Redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16). We might ask ourselves, “Does my time spent using these devices rob me of my time for personal devotions, family, jobs, or other responsibilities?” Software is available that will track details of our activities including our time spent on the cell phone, PDA, or computer. Spouses, parents, or accountability partners can monitor this information. Parents should encourage their young children to develop sound time-use habits (Ecc. 12:1).

“But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:13). The Internet, email and social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, or Twitter enable unscrupulous individuals to hide their identity with false names and outright lies. Danger signals are requests for personal information or arrangements for personal meetings. We do well to exercise utmost discretion when communicating with individuals we have met only through electronic media. No one is completely safe from deception, and we are especially vulnerable when alone. If we have the slightest conviction from the Holy Spirit that we are not using sound discernment, we need to seek the advice and help of someone we trust. *“He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered”* (Prov. 28:26).

“All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Cor. 6:12). We can find ourselves logging into Facebook, My Space, Twitter, personal blogs, etc., many times a day. This activity can easily become addictive. In addition, our messages on social networking sites may have a wider exposure than we are aware of --- instantly reaching thousands of other people, including advertisers, with no chance of recalling them. As believers, we need to use discernment with the type of comments and pictures that we post, since this is similar to putting them on a billboard: *“...be ye holy in all manner of conversation”* (1 Pet. 1:15).

“A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter” (Prov. 11:13). We could be guilty of gossip or tale bearing when we forward an email or other message that is not true or is hurtful to someone. If we cannot verify the account as fact, we should simply choose not to pass on the information.

“And then if any man shall say to you, Lo, here is Christ; or, lo, he is there; believe him not” (Mark 13:21). The Internet provides a vast amount of information about virtually any topic, including questionable interpretations of the Bible and false doctrine. The ecumenical spirit promotes close interaction with a wide range of “Christian” groups. We do not desire to judge any other church or group, but we must be circumspect. We must continually seek our direction based directly on the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). There is safety in the teaching of diligent application of biblical principles in our homes and churches, and we must sincerely seek to obey these timeless truths, by the grace of God. (1 Tim. 3:15)

“...Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like...” (Gal. 5:19-21). The works of the flesh are manifest in these technologies via the Internet or even within some games in the form of pornography, lewdness, gambling, violence, the occult, profanity, alternative life styles, jealous rivalries or substance abuse. The Word of God warns us that “having pleasure in them” through entertainment is sin even when we do not physically commit the evil acts described in the Scriptures (Rom. 1:32). God’s children are called to remain *“unspotted from the world”* (Jam. 1:27).

“...But be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). Husbands and fathers must show responsibility by their example to ensure safe use of these technologies in the home and elsewhere. Young children especially lack discernment and will readily mimic the misuse of technology if they observe that example. Today’s technologies do not intimidate most children, and they often know far more about them than we suspect. Parents need to know how and when their children are using these technologies and set up safeguards for them, including appropriate monitoring of their networking sites, cell phone use and Internet activities. Additional information on Internet filters, accountability software and other safeguards is available in a paper entitled “Guidance on Internet Use” available at www.accounseling.org.

Like all of our possessions, as well as our time, we are only stewards, not owners of technology. As such, we have the opportunity to be discerning in our use of these devices now, so that someday we can give account to God with joy rather than grief regarding their use in our lives (1 Cor. 4:2; Rom. 14:12).

Theme verse: *I Kings 3:9* “Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart ... that I may discern between good and bad...”

Godly Wisdom

“Who is a wise man and endowed with knowledge among you?” (Jam. 3:13). This question involves much more than simply asking us if we are wise. It and the following verses exhort us to examine our own hearts humbly on the topic of wisdom, because we have a tendency to think of our knowledge in a prideful way (1 Cor. 8:1). *“(God) has created all things, and for (His) pleasure they are and were created”* (Rev. 4:11). This includes all knowledge. When man distorts and misuses knowledge, it becomes the *“wisdom of this world”* which Paul contrasted with the *“wisdom of God”* (1 Cor. 1:20-21; 2:6-7). The difference is so great that Paul says the wisdom of this world is actually foolishness with God and will come to naught. The wisdom of God is hidden, but if we find it, it will bring us glory.

In James 3:13-17 we have a similar comparison between earthly wisdom and the *“wisdom that is from above.”* In this passage we can distinguish between the two kinds of wisdom, and can see the fruit of each. So then what is this godly wisdom? And how do we attain unto it?

The word “wisdom” is generally defined as the ability to judge correctly and to follow the best course of action based on knowledge and understanding. However, wisdom sought only through man’s intellect and with selfish motives produces envy, strife, confusion and deception. (Jam. 3:14-16)

A truly wise man may have much knowledge, but he will not exalt himself, because he recognizes that this is a gift from God. James’ first exhortation on this subject is that a wise man should show his works through a good conversation (meaning both words and conduct) and with meekness. If we are wise, it should be evident through the goodness of our conduct--not through harshness or pride or intimidation of others. Our words and actions will not only inform, but they will be conveyed with grace and with respect for others and in the spirit of meekness that Jesus demonstrated (Matt. 11:29; Eph. 4:15; Col.4:6). Surely the believer will have nothing to boast about regarding his wisdom, if his heart is in the right condition. *“Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life”* (Prov. 4:23). A spiritually healthy heart will bring forth love and peace and humility.

Just as we demonstrate our faith through our works (Jam. 2:26), we should likewise portray godly wisdom in all that we do. True wisdom is not simply some good and useful thoughts, but it entails the application of those thoughts in the spirit of meekness and temperance. This is in stark contrast to the man without wisdom described in Proverbs 14:16: *“The fool rageth, and is confident. He that is soon angry dealeth foolishly.”* True wisdom will temper our anger, and will cause us to be patient in hearing others out. When we are gentle and calm we are best able to reason together and communicate in an edifying manner. (Prov. 15:1; Eph. 4:29)

James defines so beautifully the characteristics of godly wisdom. *“But the wisdom which is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy”* (Jam. 3:17). Let us consider each facet of this essential attribute and examine our hearts for those areas which need improvement. God is faithful in providing grace to help us *“...be renewed in the spirit of your mind...”* (Eph. 4:23).

First of all, wisdom is pure. It is not very difficult to see purity in others’ words and actions. *“Even a child is known by his doings, whether his work be pure”* (Prov. 20:11). Godly wisdom is free from all hidden motives, self-exaltation and dishonesty. Secondly, godly wisdom is peaceable. *“(Wisdom’s) ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace”* (Prov. 3:17). We have the example of the wisdom of Isaac, who deliberately chose not to follow strife, but instead sacrificed his rights in order to make peace. (Gen. 26:17-22) Jesus taught: *“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God”* (Matt. 5:9). Such wisdom may seem like foolishness to the world,

but those who follow it will obtain the blessings of the Lord. True wisdom is also gentle and meek. It is not rude, harsh, nor overbearing. It doesn't demand its own way, but is easily entreated. David says in Psalm 25:9, "*The meek will (the Lord) guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way.*" By putting on meekness, we allow God to instruct us in His wisdom. Mercy and compassion are also reflected in wisdom that is from above. If we are merciful, we will receive mercy and will "*find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man*" (Prov. 3:3-4; Matt. 5:7). In making judgments, man's wisdom tends to say, "I know the facts, here is my rationale, this is my conclusion." God's wisdom extends grace, forbearance and mercy and is quick to forgive. Finally, true wisdom is without partiality and without hypocrisy. It does not pre-judge situations or people (Prov. 18:13), nor does it allow favoritism, but it acknowledges the universally applicable truths of God and the worthiness of all men of our love, our encouragement and our patience (1 Thess. 5:14). It is not hypocritical, but sincere, open and consistent. True wisdom applies the grace of God in its behavior toward all men (2 Cor. 1:12).

The books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes contain a wealth of teachings on the topic of wisdom. In both Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 9:10 we are taught that "*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*" In order for us to attain unto this true godly wisdom, we must humble ourselves before God in reverence and obedience. It does not come naturally and without any effort on our part. By seeking and attaining godly wisdom (Jam. 1:5), we learn discretion; it becomes an ornament of grace about our necks; our ways will be preserved; we will be better able to resist temptation; and God can better direct our paths. Thus Solomon pleads with us in Proverbs 4:7, "*Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting, get understanding.*" As we grow in godly wisdom and understanding, by the grace of God, we become better prepared for discernment of the many complex issues of daily life in our rapidly changing culture and times. We will not be tossed about by ungodly influences, but will be able to remain on the good path which leads to Heaven. "*Then shalt thou understand righteousness, and judgment, and equity; yea every good path*" (Prov. 2:9).

Theme verse: "Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you?" (James 3:13)

Judging

Judging means examining, discerning, passing sentence on, or punishing. Application of each of these aspects of judging can be done properly or improperly. Appropriate and inappropriate judging will be addressed in this article.

The Bible identifies at least four areas of authority or responsibility for making judgments: God, the church, governments and ourselves. First and above all is God's authority to judge mankind in this life and more importantly for all of eternity. The church was given the responsibility to bind and loose by Jesus (Matt. 16:19) and is instructed by the Apostle Paul to "*Purge out therefore the old leaven...*" (1 Cor. 5:7.). Romans 13:2-5 tells us that governments are given authority to maintain civil order. Finally, as individuals we face situations daily that require us to make judgments. We are instructed to examine and judge ourselves (1 Cor. 11:28 and 31) and to discern between good and evil (Heb. 5:14).

Thus, certain human judgment is appropriate and necessary, but it must be based upon God's Word. The Bible also warns against inappropriate judging. "*Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again*" (Matt. 7:1-2).

What constitutes inappropriate judging? Any judgment that is outside of our God given responsibilities is inappropriate. For example, any judgment that we would make concerning another person's inner spirit (heart) or their eternal destination is inappropriate. (1 Cor. 2:11) The Apostle Paul wrote: "*Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth*" (Rom. 8:33).

It may be more difficult for us to accept the fact that we may be inappropriately judging when we are critical of our governmental authorities. We know that we have a constitutional right to say almost anything we want about our officials. Do we have the same right based on what the Bible says? We are instructed: "*Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. The powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.*" (Rom. 13: 1-3). We may have a hard time understanding this, because there are many examples in history where evil people ruled in an ungodly manner.

We may disagree with a decision of government. That is not wrong. However, we must be sure that we are doing so in a godly manner. Even if we disagree, unless the government makes a decision that is contrary to the Word of God, we are instructed to obey. When the Pharisees tried to entangle Jesus regarding authority, He said "*Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's*" (Matt. 22:21).

Some may have difficulty accepting the authority that the church has in placing an individual under discipline. As individuals we have no right or authority to either usurp, or disregard, the judgment of the church with regard to discipline. We may think that an individual is in need of discipline because we feel that he or she is in violation of the Word as we understand it, and therefore feel justified to not greet (or set aside) that individual. We should recognize that we may be in error because we do not have all of the facts and, besides, this is not our decision (judgment) to make personally. On the other hand, we may think that the church has been too harsh, so we are not going to abide by its decision. This would undermine the God-ordained authority to carry out this responsibility and create discord. These very difficult decisions are made after prayerful consideration, searching of the Word of God and usually after seeking the counsel of others. "*Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors*

there is safety” (Prov. 11:14). If we undermine the discipline of an individual, we may very well deprive that soul of the spiritual benefit that could be gained from the discipline.

Perhaps the area where it is most difficult to make appropriate judgments relates to decisions we make about our own behavior or the behavior of others. The Scripture gives us ample instruction for this.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made it clear that we are to remove the beam from our own eye before we can remove a mote from our brother’s eye. (Matt. 7:3-6) If we do not follow the Lord’s advice, we are being hypocritical, and since our beam would make it impossible to see clearly, we would be ineffective in removing the mote from our brother’s eye. (v. 5). We know in the natural sense if we try to take something out of someone’s eye when we cannot see clearly, we could damage their eye. In the spiritual sense, it is even more dangerous to try to remove a minor fault from our brother when we have serious error in our life.

The Apostle Paul gives numerous examples of inappropriate judgment regarding various personal behaviors in Romans 2. A very sobering warning is that if we judge others for something that we are also doing, we condemn ourselves (v. 1) and will not escape the judgment of God (vs. 2-3). We need not take on the task of being the judge of others because “...*God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to (His) gospel*” (Rom. 2:16). The last part of this chapter instructs us about the hypocrisy of those who would teach against a variety of behaviors that they themselves are involved in: stealing, adultery, idolatry, blasphemy, outward adherence to the law while inwardly breaking the law and so forth.

We should also not fall into the trap of being unconcerned about our brother and using our own imperfection as an excuse to not be helpful. When someone appears to be headed toward spiritual shipwreck, we need to have enough love for him to be willing to examine ourselves, give prayerful consideration, and in true godly love go to him and kindly help him take any needed corrective action. We are our brother’s keeper, but we are not our brother’s judge. To be unwilling to help our brother is just as inappropriate as it is to be too critical.

Perhaps the most important form of judgment is of ourselves. We are to “*judge (with) righteous judgment*” (John 7:24), by looking honestly into the mirror of God’s Word (Jam. 1:23-25) and laying aside “*every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us*” (Heb. 12:1). We have the assurance that “*...whoso confesseth and forsaketh (his sin) shall have mercy*” (Prov. 28:13), and that by grace we can overcome (Jam. 4:5-6).

Theme verse: “Judge not according to appearance, but judge righteous judgement.” (John 7:2)

Self-Denial

“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself...” (Matt. 16:24). This teaching of Jesus does not sit well with our “Be yourself” culture that perceives any judgment of one’s personal conduct as an imposition. Man says, “Accept me for who I am.” God says, *“Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”* (John. 3:3). Man says, “If it feels good, it must be right.” God says, *“If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die”* (Rom. 8:13). Man says, “Let me do it my way.” God says, *“I am the way...no man cometh unto the Father but by me”* (John. 14:6). This represents the conflict between the spiritual mind and the carnal mind.

At the heart of this conflict is the question of who decides what is right and wrong. The truth, of course, is that God decides. *“It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves”* (Ps. 100:3). He is, always has been, and always will be our Sovereign God (Rev. 1:8). Who are we to question Him? *“Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?”* (Rom. 9:20).

Unfortunately the carnal mind has bought the lie that says, “I decide what is right and wrong.” Satan fathered this lie (John. 8:44) when he chose to put his own will before God’s will (Isa. 14:12-15). Cast out of heaven, he recruited Adam and Eve to his side. *“Hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?”* (Gen. 3:1), he asked Eve. Indeed, God had forbidden one tree (Gen. 2:17), but the deceiver successfully turned Eve’s focus from God’s perspective to her own. *“In the day ye eat thereof,”* he said, *“your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods”* (Gen. 3:5). In other words, you can decide what is right and wrong.

Eve believed Satan, and the rest is history. We are all born with sinful natures, and every sin is rooted in the lie: “I decide what is right and wrong.” Today’s moral relativism is nothing new; it’s just the modern manifestation of man’s innate desire to be his own god.

Paul had a word for this self-focus: “carnal,” which is defined as, “fleshly; of or pertaining to the body as the seat of desires and appetites.” Paul writes, *“For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh, but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. The carnal mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God...”* (Rom. 8:5, 7).

Carnality and spirituality are mutually exclusive, and the consequences of each could not be clearer: *“To be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace”* (Rom. 8:6). The inescapable conclusion is that in everything we do, we either serve self or we serve God. *“No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other”* (Matt. 6:24). To follow God’s will, we must deny our own.

From the moment of the fall, God has been calling us back to the side of truth. It began with a simple call to Adam (Gen. 3:9) and a promise of redemption (Gen. 3:15). It continues throughout His Word and even today. *“O that there were such an heart in them,”* He cries, *“that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children forever!”* (Deut. 5:29). Jesus pleads, *“Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me...”* (Matt. 11:28-

29). We learn that giving up our independence and being “yoked” with Jesus brings us back to His side of truth, and we find rest for our souls.

Christ reiterated this call to deny self in the Sermon on the Mount by establishing standards for human thought and behavior which exemplify His new commandment to love one another as He has loved us (John 13:34). God is blessed (Ps. 119:12, 1 Tim. 6:15), and we are promised an opportunity to be “*partakers of His divine nature*” (2 Pet. 1:4) – to be blessed ourselves. The Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12) show us how.

Yet there is something perplexing about these Beatitudes: blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the pure, those who hunger for righteousness, ...the persecuted. Man’s list would likely say: blessed are the rich, the happy, the strong, the righteous (in their own eyes), and the victorious. Christ’s idea of blessedness certainly shocked the Jews who were more concerned about Roman oppression than slavery to sin.

However, it is not our will, but God’s will that must reign in our hearts. Each Beatitude centers on self-denial as key to happiness. Do you want to follow Christ? “*If any man will come after me, let him deny himself...*” (Matt. 16:24). This is not just a message for the unconverted; it is directed to all of us.

So what shall we do? We can always look to Christ for the perfect example. As He agonized over His imminent crucifixion, He prayed, “*Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done*” (Luke 22:42). He acknowledged His own will, but deferred to the Father’s. God decides what is right. That is perfect self-denial.

Then Christ obeyed. He took up His cross and paid the penalty for sin that each of us rightfully owed. We must do the same in our hearts. It is not enough to simply acknowledge God’s will; we must act. We must put to death our carnal desires and “*put on the new man which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him*” (Col. 3:5-10). “*They that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts*” (Gal. 5:24).

Paul entreats us to present our bodies as “*a living sacrifice*” (Rom. 12:1). “*I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me...*” (Gal. 2:20). The imagery is vivid. Christ paid the ultimate penalty, but as we are conformed to His image, we, too, must die to self and live unto Him. “*And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God*” (Rom. 12:2).

Not our will. God’s will. *He* decides what is right and wrong. Let us by grace deny self and obey—with love and joy.

Theme verse: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24)

Submission

Last month's "Light from the Word" examined the topic of Self-Denial. We are called to crucify our own will (Gal. 5:24) and submit to the will of the Father (Jam. 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:6). He decides what is right and wrong, and true happiness is found in obedience to His Word.

Tightly interwoven with the concept of self-denial is the need for submission. Our sinful nature instinctively bristles at that word. We like to be in control, and the context of history has trained us to equate submission with oppression. However, the light of truth and experience reveal that it is when we take control that we find ourselves oppressed. Freedom is found in submission to God (2 Cor. 3:17). We are "*subject to vanity*," but in Christ, we "*shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God*" (Rom. 8:20-21). "*Submit yourselves therefore to God*" (Jas. 4:7).

Lest we resent God's call to submit to His authority, let's recognize that He is not asking us to do anything that Christ has not already done as our example. God is not merely one, but three in one (1 John. 5:7). In the Trinity, we find perfect unity, authority, and submission. The Father is the ultimate authority; Christ is subject to Him, and the Holy Spirit is subject to both (John 14:26). Any authority possessed by Christ is given to Him of the Father (John 5:19-27). "*I can of mine own self do nothing*," Christ said, "*...because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me*" (John 5:30).

So the call to submit is a call to conform to the image of Christ, to be "*partakers of His divine nature*" (2 Pet. 1:4). The Greek word for submission is *hypotasso*, which literally means to rank under. It says nothing about value, but everything about authority. The biblical structure of authority and submission is rooted in the very nature of God, who is the source of love (1 John 4:16-19). He provides the code for our interactions with the family, the church, the state, the workplace, and each other.

Ephesians 5:22 - 6:4 paints a beautiful picture of God's design for the family, where man, wife, and children reflect the perfect roles, authority, and submission of the Trinity. Just as the Holy Spirit is subject to Christ and both are subject to the Father, children are subject to their parents and both are subject to God. Within the family, God gives man the headship (1 Cor. 11:3), and it is by his loving authority that the wife manages the children and the home (Tit. 2:4-5). The father should not exert his own will, but the will of the Father, to whom he is subject. All earthly authority, properly executed, should move its subjects toward a willing submission to God (Eph. 6:4).

In God's design, even authority is submissive, for it is defined by service to its subjects. Christ said, "*Ye call me Master and Lord, and ye say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet*" (John 13:13-14). Once again, God is not asking us to do anything that He has not exemplified through Christ. Husbands are commanded to love their wives "*as Christ loved the church*" (Eph. 5:25). How did Christ love the church? He "*gave himself for it*." "*Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren*" (1 John 3:16). God gives the man familial authority, but the man should not oppress his wife; he should cleave to, nourish, and cherish her (Eph. 5:29-31).

This same Trinitarian authority structure is stamped on the church. Elders are appointed to oversee the church like shepherds tending to their flocks (Jer. 23:4; Acts 20:28; Tit. 1:5). The flock is therefore instructed to "*obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves for they watch for your souls as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief, for that is unprofitable for you*" (Heb. 13:17). Christ is the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4) to which both the shepherds and the flock are

accountable. Practically speaking, this means that we should willingly submit to our elders' instructions while holding them accountable to the Word.

These same principles apply to the state. God expects us to submit to the authority of the state (1 Pet. 2:13-17), and the governmental leaders are likewise expected to submit to God (Rom. 13:1-7). If they fail to do this and our submission to them conflicts with our submission to God, we are to ultimately submit to God. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, "*we ought to obey God rather than men*" (Acts 5:29).

In the workplace, as employees, we submit to our employers, who are commanded to submit to God. Following the same pattern we have already discussed, the employers are also instructed to serve their employees, mindful that their "*Master also is in heaven, neither is there respect of persons with him*" (Eph. 6:5-9).

Finally, the Bible repeatedly instructs us to submit to each other (Eph. 5:21, Gal. 5:13-14). This goes against our carnal nature and is only possible with the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:3-5). How do we exercise this submission to our fellow man? For one thing, we can assume responsibility for each other's spiritual safety, sacrificing our personal liberties to avoid creating a situation that might entice a weaker brother to fall (Rom. 14:13). We can also choose to trust the motivations of our Christian brethren rather than prejudging their intent and policing their actions. Perhaps one of the best demonstrations of submission involves forbearance and readiness to forgive. "*Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye*" (Col. 3:13). Of course, the most visible way to submit is to humbly serve one another's physical needs.

As we have already seen, Christ is the ultimate example of submission. He "*made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant...and humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name*" (Phil. 2:7-9).

Biblical submission is key to love, unity and peace. As we conform to Christ's image, let's each think about the roles to which God has called us and faithfully demonstrate the proper submission accorded to those roles. This is "well pleasing" to the Lord (Col. 3:20) and edifying to one another (Rom. 14:19).

Key Verse: "Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God" (Eph. 5:21)

Modesty and Moderation

Although the terms “modesty” and “moderation” each appear only once in the New Testament, they represent important principles endorsed by numerous Scriptures, and they should be manifested in many aspects of the life of a child of God. Both of these principles reflect a temperance and reasonableness of heart, which restrains the believer from boldness and indulgence in various aspects of life. Applications of these principles may vary somewhat by different individuals and groups over periods of time. However, faithful adherence to the many relevant Scriptures will shape our lives in the manner which God desires, and will strengthen the unity and peace of our Brotherhood.

Modesty is defined as attitudes and behaviors which reflect a sense of propriety in speech, dress and conduct; as well as decency, chastity and purity. It represents freedom from conceit and vanity. It is the opposite of boldness, arrogance, presumption and sensuality in deportment and appearance.

Modesty in its many expressions is taught in the Word in the context of holy living, and it should be manifested as a result of a new nature in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). The Apostle Paul used the term “modesty” in addressing the topic of the chaste appearance of godly women. *“In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array”* (1 Tim. 2:9). The old nature is fraught with areas of vulnerability in both men and women which are described in many scriptural teachings. Proverbs 31:30 states: *“Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.”* The “lust of the eyes” is easily enticed by that which is sensual (Prov. 27:20; 1 John 2:16). The new nature is represented by choices of apparel and behavior which reflect decency and purity of heart. It is also manifested by vigilance and self-discipline in maintaining a clean heart and mind by avoiding or quickly turning away from that which is sensual (Job. 31:1; Ps. 101:3). We have been blessed with many sound, biblically-based and reasonable examples of modesty in our Brotherhood, which we should respect and exemplify in our personal lives—all to the honor of God.

The principle of modesty is also represented by a humble self-awareness. *“For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith”* (Rom. 12:3). We run great risk of error when we become unduly confident and forward in any endeavor. *“The words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools”* (Ecc. 9:17). The Apostle John warned the church about a man named Diotrephes, *“who loveth to have the preeminence among them”* (3 John 9). Such behavior does not reflect modesty, and it creates discord among the brethren, which God hates (Prov. 6:19).

One of the most telling aspects of a man’s heart is his speech: *“...for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh”* (Luke 6:45). If we honestly examine ourselves in the light of God’s Word, we get a clearer picture of the condition of our inner man and how this is portrayed to others. Are we motivated by temperance and reasonableness in our hearts to a walk of modesty in speech, conduct and appearance?

Moderation is defined as sweet reasonableness, implying gentleness, forbearance and restraint. It is the opposite of indulgence, wantonness and unseemly behavior.

Moderation in its many applications is also taught in the Word in the context of holy living. The Apostle Paul exhorted the Philippians: *“Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand”* (Phil. 4:5). This attribute of a child of God should be evident to others and motivated by awareness of the watchful eye and guiding hand of the Lord in our lives. The scribes and Pharisees were well

known for carrying certain behaviors beyond moderation to the extreme. Jesus chastised the scribes when He said, “...for a show (you) make long prayers...” (Luke 20:47). The Pharisees sought attention and exclusiveness by “enlarge(ing) the border of their garments” (Matt. 23:5). These individuals demonstrated the hypocrisy of self-righteousness and reliance upon an outward form of holiness, while inwardly they fell prey to pride. They no longer had the humility to receive counsel or to esteem others. The old nature of man is subject to vanity, and our society is caught up in a frenzy of eye-appealing fashion trends which represent a significant departure from moderation. Both Paul and Peter warned against being adorned with “gold, or pearls, or costly array,” but rather with “the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit” (1 Tim. 2:9; 1 Pet. 3:3-4).

Jesus told a parable of a foolish rich man who said, “I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink and be merry” (Luke 12:19). James chided those caught up with riches: “Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton...” (Jam.5:5). We may ask ourselves, “How much is enough?” Is our primary influence the Word of God or the excesses of our society? The author of Proverbs asked to be “removed far from vanity.” He pleaded “give me neither poverty nor riches...lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord? Or lest I be poor, and steal and take the name of my God in vain” (Prov. 30: 8-9). Perhaps it would be wise for us to pray for a “moderate ambition.”

Many Scriptures encourage zeal in expressing love for God and others, sharing the Gospel, feeding on the Word, preserving sound doctrine, offering humble deeds of service and producing fruit of the Spirit. It is also noteworthy that the Apostle Paul was deeply disappointed with the behavior of certain zealous brethren when he wrote: “I bear them record, that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge” (Rom. 10:2-4). Thus, both zeal and moderation involve good judgment. Moderation is not simply aiming for something in the middle or being less extreme than someone else. Our behavior should be guided by wise application of scriptural principles and the influence of good counsel and examples from seasoned brethren. The Holy Spirit will help us discern and make sound judgments.

Two of the simplest, most profound teachings on how to live by the principles of modesty and moderation are found in the example of the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5) and Paul’s beautiful description of Christ-like love in action: “Charity...doth not behave itself unseemly...(and it) never faileth” (1 Cor. 13:5, 8).

Key verse: “Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.” (Phil. 4:5)

Identity in Christ

Who are you? This question is often asked and answered in our daily interactions with others. How do you answer?

We are complex creatures, shaped by myriad factors – both internal and external. We may identify ourselves by our name, by our occupation, family relationships, ethnicity, nationality, locality, school, political party, church membership, social group, citizenship, or possibly some other affiliation or accomplishment. However, the Bible teaches us that our hope is in Christ alone and therefore, our identity should be in Christ alone.

The Apostle Paul could have identified himself by ethnicity (stock of Israel), family name (tribe of Benjamin), nationality (Hebrew of the Hebrews), membership in a religious sect (Pharisee), school (taught at the feet of Gamaliel), locality (born in Tarsus), citizenship (Roman), or even by his zeal for God (persecuting the church of Christ). (Phil. 3:4-6)

Many of these identifying factors would have conferred status and position on Paul among his peers. However, contrary to human nature, Paul counted all these accomplishments and qualifications as if they were dung so that he could win Christ. *“But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ”* (Phil. 3:7-8).

How is this relevant to you and me? Few of us are Pharisees, citizens of Rome, or can claim lineage of the tribe of Benjamin. Not many can claim to be blameless according to the Law of Moses, and few can say we were schooled at the feet of a widely respected teacher of the Bible.

On the other hand, we may sincerely be able to say that we are free from breaking the laws of our land – which may give us the tendency to justify looking down on others who bend or break the law. Some of us may proudly claim American citizenship – inadvertently elevating ourselves over others who are citizens of another country. We may have graduated from a particular university, taking pride in our degree, and subtly despising those who have less education. We may identify ourselves by our ethnic heritage, separating ourselves from others of a different background and giving the impression that we think we are better. Without realizing what we are thinking, we may elevate such identifying factors to a place of undue importance in our mind – thinking ourselves to be something special when we are really no different than anyone else in God’s eyes. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes that we should not be desirous of vainglory and reminds us that if we think ourselves to be something when we are nothing, we deceive ourselves. (Gal. 6:3)

Our Lord Jesus Christ calls us to see ourselves as He sees us, and to see others as He sees them. The only way to do this is to count all our earthly qualifications, accomplishments, and identifications as insignificant, and to put on the nature of Christ. Indeed, if the Spirit of Christ lives in us, we will already have done this. If our identity is in Christ, our accomplishments, titles, and heritage fade to nothing. Although Jesus was one with God, He willingly submitted Himself to mistreatment at the hands of His own creation, and ultimately submitted Himself to the death of the cross. *“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross”* (Phil. 2:5-8).

Jesus Himself said, “*I can of mine own self do nothing...*” (John 5:30). And again, “*I am come in my Father’s name...*” (John 5:43). He encourages us to be so thoroughly identified with Him that we are like the branches of a vine--empty of life without Him. “*I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing*” (John 15:5).

If, by His grace we count all things as His: our reputation, accomplishments, family heritage, citizenship, even our very identity; then it will not be difficult to fulfill James’ admonition that we not be respecters of persons. We will rather esteem one another higher than ourselves. “*Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves*” (Phil. 2:3).

What does it really mean to have our identity in Christ? Can we ignore the poor if our identity is in Christ? Can we expect any different treatment than He received at the hands of the world? Can we honestly elevate ourselves above our brother if we count all our titles, heritage, nationality, and accomplishments as nothing? Can we do anything less than sacrifice our life in service to others--even for those who don’t appreciate it, if our identity is in Christ?

Perhaps a few of Paul’s words could be adapted to today’s realities. There is neither American nor Mexican, German nor Hungarian (or any other ethnic group), there is neither weak or strong, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. “*For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise*” (Gal. 3:26-29).

If our first and foremost self-identification is to gratefully declare and demonstrate that we are Christ’s, we can then flourish as a viable part of His sacred Body, the church. Then the church will prosper spiritually and our love for each other will truly “*cover the multitude of sins*” (1 Pet. 4:8). This does not mean that we should approve of behavior that is not in accord with God’s Word. It does mean that we should accept and love everyone in the likeness of Christ, which can soften all of our hearts and make us more receptive to God’s loving chastisement. (Heb. 12:6)

Who am I? I am a believer and follower of Jesus Christ – nothing more, and nothing less! This is the identity which governs my life.

Key Verse: Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all. Colossians 3:11

Who Are We?

God has preserved a living faith and doctrine through His grace and acts of providence over centuries of time. It is our sincere hope that a greater appreciation of God's faithfulness and a better understanding of our particular spiritual heritage will bring increased gratitude for our high calling. This can help shield us against the influence of unsound doctrine.

Three basic, uncompromising teachings of Christ help define the doctrine of His true church. The first defining doctrine is belief in a true spiritual rebirth as Jesus taught Nicodemus, "*Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God*" (John 3:5). Our first birth produces the sinful nature of Adam in all our lives. "*Behold I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me*" (Psa. 51:5). A new spiritual birth is necessary so that the old man is crucified and we no longer serve sin (Rom. 6:6). This new birth is made possible by grace through faith in Christ's shed blood, which results in repentance, conversion, baptism of faith (Acts 2:38) and Christ dwelling in us (Gal. 2:20).

The second defining doctrine is a change in behavior as we become a "new creature" in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) through the miracle of conversion. We become renewed in the spirit of our mind and put on righteousness and true holiness (Eph. 4:23-24). Good works based on the fruit of the Spirit and Christ-like love exemplify our renewed nature (Gal. 5:22-23; 1 Cor. 13). The early believers demonstrated this love by returning good for evil, even when under heavy persecution. They did not bear arms or go to war because they loved their fellow man. They enjoyed a unique and precious spiritual fellowship based on true Christ-like love.

Christ and the Apostles consistently taught the third defining doctrine of separation from and nonconformity to the world. Jesus said of His followers, "*They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world*" (John 17:16). The Apostle John taught, "*Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him*" (1 John 2:15). The world can be defined as human life and society without God.

With the initial rise of Christianity in the first century, Satan tried various tactics in his battle against the church. First, he brought persecution upon the new church to destroy it outright, but instead the church flourished and increased. As believers scattered, they preached and lived the Word wherever they went (Acts 8:4). About 300 years after the death of Christ, the Roman Emperor Constantine was moved to halt the persecution and promote Christianity as the religion of the empire. While this brought a welcome relief to persecuted believers, the new edict involved the mixing of Christianity with pagan religions. The officially recognized "church" lost its distinction and became corrupted by the world. Separation of church and state was not an option, because a common religious loyalty bound all together. The introduction of child baptism facilitated this homogeneous society, for everyone was to become a member of the state church at birth. For centuries, the Bible was kept unavailable to the common man. As the religion and commandments of men increased in emphasis, the light of truth diminished, and the flame of true love flickered and grew dim as the church entered the Dark Ages.

Even in such difficult times, a remnant of the true faith remained, and Satan changed tactics once again. In a subtle maneuver, he offered the choice of embracing a partially "reformed" church or persecution and possibly death as a heretic. The Reformation did place emphasis on the authority of Scriptures, justification by faith and the value of serving others, and it helped define the priesthood of all believers. However, some believers quickly realized that the Reformation only partially addressed the doctrinal errors of the state church.

One notable example of standing firmly on the counsel of God's Word was the Schleithem Confession, in which a group of Swiss believers responded to seven major errors of the state church. Baptism of faith was reserved for those who had consciously repented and experienced a true spiritual rebirth; church discipline was applied to erring members; closed communion was practiced; separation from the world was enjoined; sound church leadership was sought from within the congregation; they refused to bear arms against their fellow man; and they abstained from swearing of oaths. Many of the reformers considered these true believers as heretics and persecuted them ruthlessly.

A group of these believers became known as Anabaptists, or New Baptists, mainly because of their strong belief in adult baptism based on faith. Their doctrinal motto was "Sola Scriptura," which meant that the Scriptures alone formed the foundation of doctrine and life. This movement, along with other means used by the Holy Spirit, influenced Samuel Froehlich, a young seminary student in Switzerland. After his conversion, the Lord blessed his ministry and in 35 years a fellowship of believers (church) had grown to about 110 congregations in several European countries. This church spread to America in 1847 where we know it as the Apostolic Christian Church of America. The Apostolic Christian church has continued over the years to seek diligently to follow the whole inerrant counsel of God.

History reveals that many individuals and churches lost their way when they left the defining doctrines of Christ. Some groups became friends with the world in doctrine and life style and became a nominal church. The Word tells us clearly "*...the friendship of the world is enmity with God...*" (Jam. 4:4). On the other hand, some focused too much on themselves and quenched the Spirit of true love. Christ warned the church of Ephesus that though they were sound in doctrine, they had "left their first love" and were in need of repentance (Rev. 2:2, 5).

God has been faithful in preserving a living faith for all remnants of faithful believers that truly love Him, "*...the LORD thy God, He is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love Him and keep His commandments...*" (Deut. 7:9). We pray that our children will follow this heritage of faithfulness and experience the wonderful works of God. "*That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments*" (Psa. 78:6, 7). Through God's grace and mercy, we can answer the question, "Who are we?" with the same identity expressed in last month's article: "I am a believer and follower of Jesus Christ."

Key verse: "...upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18)

Unspotted From the World

The Scriptures clearly teach that we are to walk in purity of heart, keeping ourselves unspotted from the world (Jam. 1:27; 1 Pet. 1:22). Unspotted can be defined as clean, pure, undefiled, holy, and free from guile or worldliness.

We often make a great deal of effort to keep our material possessions unspotted. We can purchase “spot remover” for carpet, clothing, glass, and numerous other items. Although there is nothing wrong with reasonable efforts at sanitation, we must be careful that it does not become a preoccupation or an attempt to impress others. Material spots are temporary and often not very important.

If our eye glasses or our car windshield have spots on them, it might impair our vision and put us in physical danger. That could be serious enough, but it is still only temporary. In our spiritual life, keeping ourselves unspotted from the world has eternal consequences and requires a total surrender of self to God. Even a small spot of “self” can grow into pride and have serious ramifications; for we know that “...*God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble*” (Jam. 4:6). If we think that we are able of our own strength to do everything necessary to keep ourselves pure, no doubt we will fail. “*Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall*” (1 Cor.10:12).

Many Scripture passages encourage us to be unspotted from the world. David wrote of the importance of purity when he asked “*Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? ...He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart...*” (Psa. 24:3-4). He also recognized that man could not be pure by his own power: “*Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting*” (Psa. 139:23-24).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “*Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God*” (Matt. 5:8). Paul wrote to Timothy, “*Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned*” (1 Tim. 1:5).

How can we keep ourselves pure and unspotted from the world? In His intercessory prayer, Jesus pleaded on our behalf: “*Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth*” (John 17:17). Being unspotted from the world really must start with reliance upon the Word of God, which we must approach with a humble heart of sincere self-examination. It is largely a matter of attitude. Are we willing to humbly obey what God asks of us? Are we truly desirous to be free from the contaminations of the world and make the necessary sacrifices to keep ourselves pure? Do we recognize how desperately we need God’s grace to work toward these goals?

Although we can never be spotless by our own efforts, we are promised that God will provide. Jesus told the rich young ruler: “*If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me*” (Matt. 19:21). Further, we are promised that whatever we sacrifice for the Kingdom we shall “...*receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting*” (Luke 18:30). Few, if any, of us have been asked to give everything as the rich young man was, but if we are of a humble, submissive attitude, God will provide grace so that we can be a “*living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is (our) reasonable service*” (Rom. 12:1).

We must remember the condition of the Laodicean Church: “*Because thou sayest I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:...*” (Rev. 3:17). We cannot hide our condition. Jesus said to all seven of the churches in Asia, “*I know thy works...*” (Rev. 2 and 3). God also knows us better than we know

ourselves, and we can be thankful that He gave those churches the opportunity to repent. “*As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent*” (Rev. 3:19). Without God’s love, grace, mercy and forgiveness, we would never be kept unspotted from the world.

The help (grace) we receive is a gift God freely gives to His children. We must be willing to do our little part, but we all recognize that we receive more from the Lord than we deserve. David, while in great distress and feeling forsaken of God, said: “*But I am a worm and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people*” (Psa. 22:6).

Good intentions are vital, but to say and not do is of little value. Jesus told of the man who had two sons. He asked them to go to work in his vineyard. The first said he would not go but later changed his mind and went. The second son said “*...I go sir: and went not*” (Matt. 21:30). The second son appeared to be of a ready mind, but he did not do his father’s will. Are we “Ready to go, ready to stay, ready my place to fill; Ready for service, lowly or great, Ready to do His will” (“Ready”, Hymns of Zion, #124)?

To be unspotted from the world, we must have the mind of Christ and exemplify His character (1 Cor. 2:16). Additional Scripture passages that remind us of the importance of focusing our minds on Christ include: “*For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*” (Matt. 6:21); “*...be of one mind ...*” (2 Cor. 13:11); “*... in singleness of heart, as unto Christ...doing the will of God...*” (Eph. 6:5-6).

Through a life-long process of sanctification, and only by God’s grace and mercy, will we ultimately be found blameless before Him. We must acknowledge and correct our errors along life’s way, and through His advocacy and cleansing we are made worthy (Eph. 5:26-27; 1 John 1:7-10; 2:1-2). “*And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Thes. 5:23).

God knows our hearts. May we be able to say like David: “*Judge me, O Lord; for I have walked in mine integrity...examine me, O lord, and prove me...*” (Psa. 26:1-2).

Pure motives are well reflected in the Zion’s Harp hymn, “Pure and Holy Love”, #72, v.9.

“Love of Jesus, love of brethren,
Heal our souls from every smart!
Grant to us Thy purest motives
And a pure, unspotted heart.”

Key verse: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (Jam. 1:27).

Because He First Loved Us

We often hear the phrase “put first things first” in relation to establishing priorities. The New Testament uses the word “first” in several instances which clearly describe where our hearts and lives should be focused.

When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment in the law, He responded with the same “thou shalt” statement which Moses spoke as He summed up the law for the Children of Israel (Deut. 6:5). “*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.*” Then Jesus underscored this by saying, “*This is the first and great commandment*” (Matt. 22:37-38). Jesus went on to command: “*Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*” He then summed up the entire subject by stating: “*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*” (Matt. 22:39-40).

How can we come closer to fulfilling these two great commandments? Jesus expanded on these truths when He said to His disciples: “*A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.*” He then explained the significance of obeying this commandment: “*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples if ye have love one to another*” (John 13:34-35). Jesus set a very high standard with this “new” commandment, but He asks of us no more than what He has freely given to us: unconditional, self-sacrificing love. We might also ask, “How can we come closer to loving as He has loved us?”

One of the key elements in answering these questions is found in 1 John 4:19: “*We love him because he first loved us.*” We cannot as humans ever come close to fulfilling the love commandments unless we have received Christ’s love into our hearts. Christ-like love cannot be produced independently in the heart of man. It can only be experienced and shared once it has been received from Him through repentance and rebirth.

Every believer has experienced a time in life when it was recognized that the only answer to his hopelessly lost condition was to be found by grace through faith in the sacrificial death and shed blood of Jesus Christ. This required establishing a deep personal relationship with Christ as one’s Saviour, which can be described as our “first love.” Grasping the reality that the kindest, most loving individual who ever lived, the sinless Son of God, was willing to die a horrible death for the sins of rebellious human beings, allows one to be immersed in a love which is beyond description. This “first love” provides a foundation for the believer to build upon and return to for his entire life. When Jesus taught the importance of His disciples abiding in Him so that they could bear much fruit, He entreated: “*...continue ye in my love*” (John 15:7-9).

When we take time to reflect upon the marvelous truths that our sins have been forgiven and that we are God’s children and joint-heirs with Christ, it should bring sincere thankfulness and refresh our first love. We are strongly warned in Romans 2:4-5 that we could become hardened and forget the “*goodness and forbearance and longsuffering*” of God. We are reminded that it is “*the goodness of God (that) leadeth thee to repentance.*” We are blessed to have so many relevant examples and warnings in the Old Testament to help us avoid the same pitfalls that were a snare to the children of Israel (1 Cor. 10:6). The word “remember” is used countless times in the Old Testament for obvious reasons. When the Israelites were being prepared to enter the Promised Land, Moses gave some very strong warnings about not forgetting how God had been so good and merciful to them. He spoke of how their appreciation might fade when they would have plenty to eat, goodly houses and the blessings of a fruitful land. “*Beware that thou forget not the Lord thy God, in not keeping his commandments, and his judgments, and his statutes, which I command thee this day*” (Deut. 8:10-17). Instead of love and thanksgiving towards God, they

were forewarned that they might say: “*My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth*” (Deut. 8:17).

Again, we might ask, “How could this ever happen to me?” Let us consider carefully the example of a church in the early years of Christianity which was directly addressed by the Lord Jesus and chastised for having lost its “*first love*” (Rev. 2:4). We quickly learn that this church was fruitful in many areas. They were commended for good works and for patience. They were diligent in identifying and addressing sin and false teachers. They had a spiritual stamina in their labors and “*had not fainted*” under the pressures of their time. The crucial element which was missing is revealed when Jesus pleads with them to repent and “*remember therefore from whence thou art fallen*” (Rev. 2:5). They had fallen “away” from the keen remembrance of what Christ had done for them and thus had blurred their identity as His disciples. They were doing many right things, but not for the right reason. They were not motivated by the love of Christ. The Apostle Paul taught that we could be eloquent teachers and prophets, understand mysteries, have great faith to remove mountains, give abundantly to the poor (good works) and live a life of ultimate self-denial—but without charity all of this would profit nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

We should now come to the moment of truth and undertake sincere, personal self-examination. As we look deeply into our hearts, do we see a faded, flickering ember of that first love, or is there a bright flame of passion which drives everything that we do? The Apostle Paul spoke often of this vibrant love and commitment. One of the phrases he used gives a wonderful picture of being motivated by Christ’s love. He said, “*the love of Christ constraineth us*” (2 Cor. 5:14).

How thankful we can be that the message to the Ephesians included a clear path for regaining what had been lost. That path is repentance. Repentance is an acknowledgment of heading in the wrong direction, humbling oneself in godly sorrow and, by God’s grace, having a change of mind and turning around. One of the indications of putting “first things first” will be how much our thought life revolves around remembering what Christ has done for us. Much of the evidence of being refreshed in our first love for Christ will be fulfillment of the “new commandment,” by obeying the beautiful exhortation found in Hebrews 13:1: “*Let brotherly love continue.*” This we can do “*because He first loved us*” (1 John 1:19).

Key verse: “We love him because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19)

Godly Sorrow Worketh Repentance

To be restored to our Creator, we must repent. God commands it (Acts 17:30). Christ taught, “*Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish*” (Luke 13:3). Peter, inspired of God, preached, “*Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...*” (Acts 3:19).

For generations, our church has taught and modeled a biblically-based process for bringing forth the fruits of repentance, including confession of sin, restitution and conversion to a Christ-centered life. This heritage is something to be treasured. Yet, our familiarity with what this looks like must not blind us to what repentance actually is. While visible changes in attitude and lifestyle will surely be evident as our hearts are conformed to the image of Christ (Matt. 3:8; Rom. 8:29), repentance is not simply the external aspects of a process or a checklist of tasks that we must do. It is the condition of a heart which mourns for sin as it turns toward God by faith in Christ (Acts 20:21).

Paul writes, “*...godly sorrow worketh repentance...*” (2 Cor. 7:9-10). Godly sorrow is that which is “*poor in spirit*” (Matt. 5:3). The Greek word translated “poor” means to beg out of shame. It is the recognition of one’s utter inadequacy to save himself from his sin, as expressed by Isaiah in his vision of the Lord: “*Woe is me! For I am undone...for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts*” (Is. 6:5). It is the humility of the publican, who “*would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner*” (Luke 18:13). Paul further explains that the godly sorrow of repentance brings a change of mind, with indignation toward sin and zeal for godliness that encompasses all aspects of our lives (2 Cor. 7:11).

We cannot will ourselves into godly sorrow; it results from fixing our eyes upon God’s holiness and facing the dreadful reality of our unworthiness before Him. “*O wretched man that I am!*” exclaimed Paul. “*Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?*” (Rom. 7:24). The answer is Jesus Christ, whose death we caused. We mourn for our part in that and fall to our knees in repentance. Such is the godly sorrow of which Paul speaks. “*To this man will I (the Lord) look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembleth at my word*” (Is. 66:2).

Having reflected on what repentance is, it is worthwhile to consider what it is *not*. First, repentance is *not* a focus on self like that which we see in the rich young ruler who asked Jesus, “*Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*” Jesus responded with a question, “*Why callest thou me good?*” (Luke 18:18-23). Had the man honestly answered this question and reflected on the goodness of God, he should have recognized his own sin and begged forgiveness from the Savior who stood before him. Instead, he justified himself, and when Jesus invited him to “*follow me,*” the man went away sad. He felt sorrow, but not godly sorrow. Though he may have met the external requirements of the Jewish law, his heart was far from righteous (Matt. 15:7-9). The attachment of his heart to this world kept him from receiving the very salvation about which he inquired.

Second, just as repentance is not a focus on self, neither is it a focus on others. We must be careful not to compare ourselves to our peers rather than to God (2 Cor. 10:12). Christ told of a Pharisee who thanked God that he was “*not as other men*” (Luke 18:11). Such expression makes a mockery of sorrow. Godly sorrow laments not the faults of others, but the depravity of oneself (Matt. 7:3). True repentance comes from humble self-examination in light of God’s Word, not by comparison to others. (Psa. 26:2; 2 Cor. 13:5)

Third, repentance is not legitimized by simply going through the motions. We all do well to heed the example of the Israelites. God provided the Law to Israel as a “schoolmaster” to point them to Christ, including detailed instructions for the sacrifices they were to bring as a symbolic covering for their sin. The Israelites faithfully performed these sacrifices, but they gradually began to focus more on the sacrifices themselves than the repentant hearts they were meant to represent. *“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,”* wrote David. *“A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise”* (Psa. 51:17). *“The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit”* (Psa. 34:18). In addition, there were those who, when confronted with their sins, rent their clothes, covered themselves with sackcloth, and lay in ashes to demonstrate their sorrow, but this was not what God wanted. *“Rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God,”* He said (Joel 2:13). It is not outward rituals that God wants, but hearts that are fully yielded to His will (Ezek. 33:11, Rom. 12:1-2).

Finally, repentance is not just a one-time event in our lives. When we acknowledge that a soul has *“begun his repentance,”* it is just as we say: a beginning. Repentance is a frame of mind which should come forth readily as long as we live. It is as descriptive of the believer as it is prescriptive for the lost. Christ said to the church at Ephesus: *“Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent...or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick...except thou repent”* (Rev. 2:5). As Christians, *“if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us”* (1 John 1:8). Recognizing any error (sin) in our lives, we want to respond as David did: *“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me”* (Psa. 51:1-3, 10).

In summary, repentance is truly the working of the Holy Spirit in a humble heart. As we encourage its fruits in one another, let’s be careful not to categorically define it by our personal or self-righteous standards (Rom. 10:1-3). May we wait on the Lord to mold each one of us, *“being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in [us] will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ”* (Phil. 1:6).

Key verse: *“A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”* (Psalm 51:17)

Submission to Authority

Submission is difficult. We simply do not naturally desire to have anyone rule over us. But that is precisely what it means to submit – to yield or surrender to the will or authority of another – even if we have other ideas, desires, or opinions. Human nature rebels against such a thought. We really don't want anyone to tell us what to do.

However, God is the author and creator of an established order. He directs us to submit to His Word and to His method of keeping order in His creation (John 1:1; 8:31-32; Jam. 4:7). As author, He is the final authority in everything. All power comes from the Lord God Almighty and is delegated as He sees fit to earthly authorities. Those authorities are not only governmental such as kings, presidents, judges, police, and military, but include family authority and spiritual authority as well. It doesn't matter if we don't agree with the authority, we are called to submit. In fact, submission almost always includes disagreement. The Bible gives many examples of God-ordained authorities and calls us to surrender our will to theirs and be subject to them as long as we are not asked to violate God's Word. Following are several of these examples.

Governmental

“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God... for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour” (Rom 13:1-7). *“Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God”* (1 Pet. 2:13-16).

Family

Husbands are to submit to Christ who is their “head” (1 Cor. 11:3). Wives are to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22-24) and children to their parents (Eph. 6:1). All of this is to be carried out with mutual love and respect in the pattern of Christ's unconditional love for us. (John 13:34-35; Eph. 5:25)

Church

“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17).

The Word of God clearly calls us to surrender our will and yield to the authorities that He has placed over us – in our homes, in the Body of Christ and in society. We are called to respect and honor those to whom it is due – not necessarily because of their actions, but rather because of their position. Our political leanings should not diminish proper respect and prayer for our leaders.

In the church we are called to submit ourselves to those over us in the Lord, to those who are older than us, as well as to our peers. Isn't it shameful that so often we desire or demand that others submit to us and yet we find it so difficult to submit ourselves? Whether we assert our understanding of Scripture, or our personal conviction, or simply our feelings and opinions, our prideful human nature wants to exert authority and demand "rights" rather than submit. Love motivates us to submit for the sake of the unity and peace of the Brotherhood. Likewise, when Christ-like love is the motivation of those in authority, they, like Christ, will never ask anything that is unreasonable.

We really can't submit if we are of a carnal mind. (Rom. 8:7) However, if we are followers of Jesus, we will be led to submission. *"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross"* (Phil. 2:5-8).

Not only are we called to submit, but also to pray for all authorities. If we pray that the highest authority (God) would supply them with the wisdom and humility to rule well, and if we trust that God hears our prayers, and has ordained the "powers that be," submission is much easier. *"I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour"* (1 Tim. 2:1-3).

It is a very serious error to be at variance with and disrespectful of the leadership body ordained to be over us in the Lord. We are to esteem them very highly for their work's sake and not speak evil of them. (Acts 23:3-5; 1 Thes. 5:12-13; 2 Pet. 2:10) We also recognize that when earthly authorities ask something of us that conflicts with God's Word, we are first responsible to God as the ultimate authority. However, it is necessary to be certain that the earthly authority is asking us to disobey God, and not justify our resistance based on personal disagreement with their requests. *"...be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up"* (Daniel 3:18). *"Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men"* (Acts 5:29).

The biblical examples of obeying God rather than men were in response to men's denial of God – or in an attempt to place other gods higher than the Lord God Almighty – not mere disagreements with teachings or positions. If we are fully submitted to Christ and His will, we will not be deceived, but will be able to distinguish between corrupted earthly authority and godly direction meant for our good.

Whether we are leaders or followers, *"every one of us shall give account of himself to God"* (Rom. 14:12). This sobering truth should make all of us very cautious about confidence in ourselves and foster a spirit of humility. *"Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God"* (Eph. 5:21).

Theme verse: **Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.** Romans 13:1

Principles, Doctrine, Traditions and Rules

A lawyer tempting Jesus asked Him a question, saying, “*Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind...And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*” (Matt. 22:35-40). Jesus later elaborated on these principles with a “*new commandment...That ye love one another; as I have loved you...*” (John 13:34).

The Lord’s Prayer contains less than 70 words. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is 286 words. The Declaration of Independence is 1322 words. The Constitution was adopted for six very clear, short reasons which can be recited in a matter of a few seconds. Recent legislation (rules) was passed for health care reform that had over 2400 pages and for reform of the banking system that had over 2300 pages, and yet there is much lack of clarity in the meaning and application of these documents. Solomon said “*And further by these my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh*” (Ecc. 12:12). Jesus condemned “wordy” prayers when he said “*...for they think they shall be heard for their much speaking*” (Matt. 6:7).

We live in a society that seems to have lost sight of the fundamental principles that form the basis for what is right and what is wrong. There is a trend to replace principles with rules (laws). When rules do not accomplish their purpose, they are supplemented with more rules and with more detail. On the surface this seems to be the thing to do, because it is relatively easy, and it seems that it should enhance compliance. It is correct that simple rules are easy to understand. However, circumstances and patterns of thinking change so rapidly that we cannot possibly adjust the rules fast enough to keep up with all of the rapid advances in technology and many other new developments which impact our daily lives. Often we struggle to know what to do as new challenges and opportunities come our way.

The rapidly changing ideas and attitudes in society are often used to justify behavior that only a few years ago would have been unthinkable. Young people are facing decisions that most of us would never have imagined. Many people are confused. Isaiah and Jeremiah have well described these conditions. “*Woe unto them that call good evil, and evil good*” (Is. 5:20). “*Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush*” (Jer. 6:15). Why is it seemingly so difficult today for many to make good decisions about what is right or wrong?

Some general examples of this loss of focus may give us insight into the problem. Many families have seemingly lost sight of the need for fathers to set a godly example and lead with the love of Christ. Many schools seem to have lost sight of the fundamental principle that the adults are to be in charge, and those in charge must set examples that help students learn to respect authority and high moral standards. Too many elected officials seemingly ignore the concepts of right and wrong, frequently making selfish, often unethical, decisions.

If our society really embraced the fundamental principles of the Bible, people would have more success in correctly discerning new situations, rather than simply making a new or longer list of rules.

Principles are defined as fundamental truths which are timeless and universal. They produce predictable results when we live by them; they are in effect whether we like them or not; they are in effect whether we understand them or not; they are external to us, and once understood, they become self evident and enable us to discern and function in many different situations. Principles are from God. The

Word commands us as believers to learn and teach spiritual principles (the oracles of God) and not remain as babes who are poorly equipped to discern good from evil (Heb. 5:12-14).

Doctrine is essentially what is taught. The doctrines of the New Testament are the truths taught by Jesus and the Apostles. The principles of the doctrine of Christ are summarized in several Scriptures (Matt. 22:37-39; John 13:34-35; Heb. 6:1-2). There are also many false doctrines (Rev.2:14). We are instructed to speak “*the things which become sound doctrine*” (Tit. 2:1). It is essential that our doctrine be “*the doctrine of Christ*” (2 John 9) and that we are not “*tossed to and fro...by every wind of doctrine*” (Eph.4:14) which comes across our path.

Traditions are those practices and customs that are handed down from one generation to another. They are the application of what we learn and know, and may be good or bad. The application of sound biblically-based principles in our lives through good traditions and practices is important in demonstrating our faith in God as lights in the world and as the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13-16).

Rules are specific directions for how things are to be done. They are generally guidelines or directives designed to control specific behavior. Rules change as society changes; they are quite narrow in scope, and the results are often unpredictable. Many of them are needed in attempting to guide our behavior if we do not live by sound principles.

Rules in and of themselves are neither good nor bad. We need some rules to serve as examples that help give clarity and meaning to principles and doctrine. The younger we are, the more rules we need. As we mature, and begin to understand the principles behind what is right and wrong, we should be able to evaluate new challenges and make wise discernment, rather than to rely upon additional rules for each new situation. When we are converted, we are given grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help us discern, based on a continual growth in understanding of the principles of the doctrine of Christ (John 8:31; 2 Pet. 3:18).

Focusing on principles rather than the specifics of rules will not lead to a broader way, if we follow closely the principles of the Bible, starting with the basic commandments that Jesus emphasized (Matt. 22:37-39; John 13:34-35). If we also remember that Jesus said if we love Him we will keep His commandments (John 14:15), we will find that there is no room for the world in our lives. As our love for the Lord and His Word grows, may we humbly and willingly apply biblically-based principles, doctrine, and traditions in all aspects of our lives.

Theme verse: “If ye love me, keep my commandments.” John 14:15

Guarding the Heart

“Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23). Jesus said, *“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”* (Matt. 6:21). The Apostle Paul exhorted Timothy: *“...keep thyself pure”* (1 Tim. 5:22). How well we guard our hearts will affect every aspect of our lives, including our faithfulness to God and our example to others.

Unfortunately we are afflicted with a universal heart condition which will lead to our eternal destruction unless the remedies in God’s Word are applied. Long ago God lamented that *“the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth”* (Gen. 8:21). Jesus said, *“For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts...”* and countless other sins (Mark 7:21). James asked this sobering question of believers: *“From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?”* (Jam. 4:1).). The purpose of this article is to address the serious challenge faced by every believer in guarding his heart from evil.

Jesus gave mankind a message of hope in His Sermon on the Mount when he said: *“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God”* (Matt. 5:8). The only way that man’s heart can become pure in the sight of God is through rebirth, by faith in Jesus Christ and repentance. (John 3:3; Acts 20:21) This purity comes forth from a sanctified heart—one set apart for and belonging to God; cleansed from sin by ongoing faith in the shed blood of Christ, the Holy Spirit and God’s Word. (Acts 26:18; Heb. 13:12; Rom. 15:16; John 17:17)

We can learn much from the many examples in the Bible of individuals who either did or did not guard their hearts from evil influences by utilizing the many resources offered by our Heavenly Father.

Eve looked past all of the beautiful provisions God had given to her and Adam in the Garden of Eden and gave in to the pride in her heart and the desires of her eyes, reaching out and taking the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:1-6). When we drop our guard, we also may wander carelessly toward temptation, making *“provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof”* (Rom. 13:14). In contrast, Daniel established a powerful safeguard when he *“...purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself...”* (Dan. 1:8). He made a firm choice with deep conviction in his heart, and then he was able to draw fully upon God’s help as the temptations grew in severity. As believers, we are offered a wonderful promise with regard to the nature and severity of the temptations we may encounter throughout life. *“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it”* (1 Cor. 10:13). This verse should be memorized as a part of our armor against the Devil (Eph. 6:11). However, just like Eve, Daniel and others, it is our choice as to whether we take the *“way to escape.”*

Perhaps one of our greatest dangers is to think that we are not vulnerable to yielding to certain temptations. The verse immediately preceding God’s promise regarding temptation issues a sober warning: *“Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall”* (1 Cor. 10:12). The Apostle Paul saw the need to take strong measures to keep his flesh under subjection, so that his witness and ministry would not be destroyed: as he put it, *“...lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway”* (1 Cor. 9:27).

Job stated that he had made a covenant with his eyes—which was really a vow to guard his heart and mind. (Job 31:1) Likewise, we should resolve to resist every form of evil influence which we might face. This includes sensual images and other inappropriate materials on the Internet and other media, the attraction to excess offered by the appeals of marketing, unhealthy relationships with work associates, friends or brethren, addiction to pleasure and fashion, as well as warping our minds and wasting our time with unwholesome and unedifying entertainments. The biblically-based exhortations and warnings of our church leaders as well as the guidance provided by many of our traditions provide powerful deterrents, which we, like Daniel, can by God’s grace utilize to resist temptation in all its forms. We will face the consequences of whether or not we heed this good counsel. Proverbs 1:30-31 declares the results of ignoring counsel and despising reproof: “...*they shall eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices.*”

The consequences of sin are indeed bitter fruit. Sin brings the burden of guilt and takes away our peace and joy; it often causes others to suffer and it always grieves the heart of Jesus. Ongoing sin that is not dealt with biblically will lead to hardening of the heart, with great risk of a return to “living in sin” and the possibility of renouncing one’s faith and subsequent loss of salvation (Heb. 10:26-29).

The Word of God is the best weapon for guarding our hearts. (Ps. 119:11) We are fortified with the assurance that “*the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation...*” (2 Pet. 2:9). Jesus gave us wise instruction when He exhorted, “*Pray that ye enter not into temptation*” (Luke 22:40). This very thought brings a sense of caution with regard to which influences, associations and environments we willfully allow ourselves to encounter.

By God’s grace, and in light of the sacrifice of our loving Saviour (1 Cor. 6:20), let us shield our hearts against harmful influences with the timeless truths of His Word. Let us humbly examine our hearts daily for any impurities. Let us be especially watchful in those areas of known weakness, where we, like Eve, can be easily attracted to forbidden fruit. Having a sound, mature fellow believer to whom we are fully accountable is also a powerful deterrent to yielding to temptation.

Finally, let us never forget that all sin begins with a thought (the imaginations of the heart). Thankfully, the powers of Heaven are at our disposal in this war: “*Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ*” (2 Cor. 10:5). In guarding our precious hearts, may we all reaffirm this beautiful commitment of the Psalmist of old: “*I have inclined mine heart to perform thy statutes always, even unto the end*” (Ps. 119:12).

Key verse: For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he... (Proverbs 23:7)

Giving Heartily, as to the Lord

Charitable giving is taught and modeled throughout the Bible. It was demonstrated profoundly by our Heavenly Father when He gave His only begotten Son, who then gave His life so that we can spend eternity with Him. (John 3:16) The purpose of this article is to help us understand the scriptural teachings which guide our charitable giving. Application of these teachings will bring glory to God and will further His work here on earth.

All charitable endeavors should be done with a heartfelt desire to bring glory to God. “*And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men*” (Col. 3:23). Our efforts must be motivated by love for God and our fellow human beings; otherwise, even the greatest of benevolent offerings will be in vain: for without “... *charity, it profiteth me nothing*” (1 Cor. 13:3). We should also recognize that giving is a commandment of the Lord. (Luke 6:38) We are called to labor diligently so that we can provide adequately for those entrusted to us (Rom. 12:11; 1 Tim. 5:8) and so that we “...*may have to give to him that needeth*” (Eph. 4:28). The Word commends giving to those in need (Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 9:12-13) and condemns “*despising the poor*” (Jam. 2:6). The Apostle John questions whether the love of God is in us if we see our brother’s need and withhold our compassion from him. (1 John 3:17)

There are many biblical teachings regarding the attitude with which we are to give. We are to give humbly in the selfless spirit of Christ, with a willing, cheerful heart and without expectation of recompense or reward.

We are instructed to give with “simplicity” (Rom. 12:8) which means in humility, with sincerity of purpose and without fanfare. Jesus was very displeased with the Pharisee who boasted openly about his fasting and tithing (Luke 18:10-14). It should be our heart’s desire to give privately (whenever this is practical) and without seeking the praise of others (Matt. 6:1). It is also scriptural that evidence of our good works helps others see the hand of God working which may move them to glorify Him. “*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven*” (Matt. 5:16). The key difference is whether we want to be seen because of pride, or if we are serving humbly in a role which is naturally visible, with a sincere desire to do it heartily for the Lord. If the latter is our heart’s desire, any recognition here or reward in eternity will be unexpected, because all we will have done is our “*reasonable service*” (Rom. 12:1). What a joy for those faithful servants who will someday be surprised to hear the Lord say, “*Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me*” (Matt. 25:40).

The Word exhorts us to be ready and willing to give of ourselves and our resources to others (1 Tim. 6:18), with the first requirement being a “*willing mind*” (2 Cor. 8:12). What is the response of our heart when a collection to help a worthy cause is announced or we learn of any specific need? Do we sigh inside and feel the weight of a sense of duty being pressed upon us? The Apostle Paul warned against giving grudgingly or of necessity; “...*for God loveth a cheerful giver*” (2 Cor. 9:7). Rather we are to respond with the positive view that this is an “*opportunity to do good*” (Gal. 6:10), even if our ability to contribute is limited, because “...*it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not*” (2 Cor. 8:12). Already in the time of David’s gathering of resources for the temple we see the joy which comes forth with

an attitude of giving willingly: *“Then the people rejoiced, for that they offered willingly, because with perfect heart they offered willingly to the Lord: and David the king also rejoiced with great joy”* (1 Chron. 29:9).

We are given teachings and examples throughout the Bible which make it clear that we are to give generously of those things over which God has made us stewards. They are not our own—they belong to God and we will someday give an account of our stewardship. *“Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful”* (1 Cor. 4:2). Old Testament principles for giving to the Lord include proportional tithing and offering something of significant value--the firstfruits of one’s harvest and the best of one’s flock. While teaching about stewardship, Jesus said: *“For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required”* (Luke 12:48). We are thankful that the instruction in the New Testament calls each of us to search our own hearts, seeking the guidance of the Spirit (John 16:13) to make these decisions. *“Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give...”* (2 Cor. 9:7). If we look to the example of our beloved Savior and what He has done for us, it should move our hearts out of deep love for Him to give freely and generously of what we have. He gave a very pointed charge to His disciples when He said, *“...freely ye have received, freely give”* (Matt. 10:8). The Word in its completeness acknowledges that we are also given the privilege of enjoying the fruits of our labors, always recognizing God as the one who *“...giveth us richly all things to enjoy”* (1 Tim. 6:17). This same verse warns us to never *“...trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God...”* Rather we are to *“...do good...be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate...laying hold on eternal life”* (1 Tim. 6:18-19).

In summary, all of us have something we can give, whether it be our physical resources, a caring heart of love or any form of service for someone in need. Jesus gave us a beautiful example when He washed the disciples’ feet. This exemplified a very loving, humble deed of service. (John 13:4-16) When finished, He said, *“If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them”* (John 13:17). Knowing, understanding and applying the instructions in the Word regarding charitable giving will bring glory to God and multiplied spiritual blessings. (2 Cor. 9:10-14; Heb. 13:16) The greatest gift of love we can ever have a part in is helping a lost soul (often unbeknown to us) receive the *“unspeakable gift”* of salvation (2 Cor. 9:15). This, like all worthwhile endeavors, can be done only by the grace of God. (John 15:5; 2 Cor. 9:8)

**Key Verse: “And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men”
(Colossians 3:23)**

Accountability

A steward is someone who is entrusted with responsibility for something belonging to someone else. Paul writes, “*Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful*” (1 Cor. 4:2). In Christ’s parable of the unjust steward, the day came when this servant was required to give an account of his stewardship. (Luke 16:2) Being held accountable simply means that one is expected to be open to examination and review with regard to his responsibilities. A faithful steward is trustworthy and reliable—fulfilling his commitments to those whom he serves and to whom he is responsible.

Every child of God is a steward of the spiritual responsibilities entrusted to him by the Heavenly Father. The principle of being held accountable as a servant in Christ’s earthly kingdom is described by the Apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:4. “*But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust of the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing man, but God, which trieth our hearts.*” Every one of us is ultimately accountable to “...*the Lord, the righteous judge...*” (2 Tim. 4:8) with regard to our life here upon this earth.

As we progress through life, we should always be open to admonition and being instructed in the “*way of God more perfectly,*” as in the case of Apollos, who was “*fervent in the spirit*” and who “*taught diligently the things of the Lord*” (Acts 18:24-26).

The Lord Jesus Christ is our greatest example of one who was fully dedicated to fulfilling the mission entrusted unto Him. This dedication was evident throughout His life. At one point He said, “*My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work*” (John 4:34). He also declared, “*For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me*” (John 6:38). In His beloved high priestly prayer, Christ testified, “*I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do*” (John 17:4).

We also have the biblical record of several expressions of commendation by the Heavenly Father, to whom His beloved Son was accountable. At the time of Christ’s baptism and again at His transfiguration, a voice from heaven said, “*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*” (Matt. 3:17; 17:5). It was prophesied by Isaiah that God would acclaim the fulfillment of Christ’s ultimate mission to die for the sins of all mankind as His crowning achievement: “*He shall see the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied..therefore will I divide him a portion with the great...because he hath poured out his soul unto the death...*” (Is. 53:11-12).

How seriously do we take the covenant of faithfulness we made to our God at the time of our baptism? What does faithfulness really entail? We can observe that Jesus from his youth was fully dedicated to carrying out His Heavenly Father’s “business” (Luke 2:49). The Psalmist’s expression of commitment took into account his respect for the heritage of God’s word and for faithful servants who had gone before him. “*Thy testimonies have I taken as an heritage forever...*” (Ps. 119:111). “*For thou O God, hast heard my vows: thou hast given me the heritage of those that fear thy name*” (Ps. 61:5). We are taught in the Word that we live today under the aura of a great cloud of witnesses made up of faithful men and women of God from all ages of time. This should generate within us a deep sense of responsibility to also be

found faithful. *“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us”* (Heb. 12:1).

We will be held accountable for our words and deeds as servants of the most High God and ambassadors for Jesus Christ. In our walk of life we also represent our church, which is a part of Christ’s Bride—for whom He has great expectations. *“...Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word. That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish”* (Eph. 5:25-27).

In the order of the church which God has established here on earth, faithful men are given spiritual oversight over His flock. We are accountable to our spiritual leaders who will someday give an account to God of their stewardship over the church (Heb. 13:7, 17). How wonderful when an account can be given such as the beautiful expression of the Apostle John: *“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth”* (3 John 4).

In view of the brevity of our lives (Ps. 90:12) and the certainty of Christ’s return, we are lovingly forewarned: *“Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness”* (2 Pet. 3:11). Paul exhorted Timothy to be an example *“in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity”* (1 Tim. 4:12). Like David, we should walk in integrity, willingly open to the Lord’s examination. *“Judge me, O Lord; for I have walked in mine integrity”* (Ps. 26:1).

Our accountability can be enhanced if we share our inner thoughts and struggles with a sound, mature fellow believer. This requires humility, vulnerability, compassion and mutual reliance upon the standards of purity found in God’s Word. We should hold each other accountable to seek, by God’s grace to be Christ-like in both our private and public lives--in all of our relationships and activities. We should use respect and discretion in our spoken word as well as anything we might post through the far-reaching electronic media of our time. The Apostle Paul exhorted, *“Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers”* (Eph. 4:29). Jesus said, *“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God”* (Matt. 5:8).

Let us continue to follow the wonderful example of humility, unconditional love and faithfulness exemplified by our beloved Saviour. This should inspire us to give Him our very best. By the grace and mercy of God, and by faith in His sacrifice on our behalf, we can have a lively hope of someday hearing those beautiful words of approval from our Saviour, *“Well done, thou good and faithful servant...enter thou into the joy of thy lord”* (Matt. 25:21).

Key Verse: I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth (3 John 4)

Accountability Structures

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to the spread of the gospel is our failure to live it out. The world may despise our faith, but there is something they despise even more, which is hypocrisy. The sinful lifestyles of many celebrities receive little notice, but when a professing Christian is caught living a lie, the public holds nothing back in its condemnation. Man inherently knows that he ought to live consistent with his beliefs. Christians are certainly no exception, as James writes: “*Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only*” (Jam. 1:22).

If hypocrisy is so despicable, why is it such a struggle even for the Christian? Paul lamented this very question as he acknowledged the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. (Gal. 5:17) Sadly, even Peter yielded to his flesh, and he had to be confronted by Paul because of his dissimulation (hypocrisy) and the doctrinal error this represented (Gal. 2:9-14). Having learned his lesson well, Peter later wrote that we are to “(lay) *aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies...*” (1 Pet. 2:1). He demonstrated, by God’s grace and through the loving accountability of his brother, Paul, the truth of Romans 6:11-15 and 8:6, 13-14.

Man’s sinful nature is a nasty thing. Indeed, any pretense of righteousness is “*as filthy rags*” (Is. 64:6). How thankful we are that God has cleansed us from our sin through the shed blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. But “*shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid*” (Rom. 6:1-2). We are accountable to God (Rom. 14:12) for “*every idle word*” (Mat. 12:36), and it is “*required that [we] be found faithful*” (1 Cor. 4:2).

At the outset, God has provided two things to help us live a life of integrity. First, everyone is born with a conscience. Unbelievers “*show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts...accusing or else excusing one another*” (Rom. 2:14-15). Second, when someone is born again, God sends the Holy Spirit to indwell him, to “*bring all things to remembrance*” (Rom. 14:26) and “*guide [him] into all truth*” (Rom. 16:13).

Still, “*the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*” (Mat. 26:41). Thus, in His love for us, God has preserved His Word, built the Church, and instituted the family to hold us accountable and discourage sin. We must actively seek this accountability, however. If we allow ourselves to be isolated from their influence, we may soon stumble and find ourselves counted among the hypocrites. Just as an animal separated from the herd is far more susceptible to attack, so are we more vulnerable to temptation when we try to go it alone. This is especially relevant in an age when personal travel for business, education and other purposes as well as “private” access to technology are so commonplace.

Let’s examine the accountability structures available to us through God’s Word, the church and family, and consider some ways in which we can be supported by them. First, God has given His inspired Word to reprove, correct, and instruct us according to the truth (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Nothing is more effective towards conforming us to the mind of Christ and calling us back when we stray. It is “*perfect, converting the soul,*” “*pure, enlightening the eyes,*” and by it, we are warned (Ps. 19:7-8). Quiet time to read and study the Bible should be ingrained in our habits as the first item on each day’s to-do list. Bibles should be on display and easily accessible throughout our homes. It can also be very useful if we develop patterns which keep scriptural references in

places which serve as frequent reminders of our accountability: in our homes, at work and when we travel. Memorization of Scripture is a wonderful tool for keeping the Word in the forefront of our minds. (Ps. 119:11)

Second, one of the pillars of our church mission is to nurture the believer. This includes efforts to “*provoke unto love and good works*” (Heb. 10:24), to confront sin, and to apply discipline when appropriate as instructed in the Word (Matt. 18:15-18; 1 Cor. 5). We must not “*forsake the assembling of ourselves together*” (Heb. 10:24), no matter how busy our lives get. Church attendance should be the rock in our schedules around which we arrange everything else. If we have reasonable choices between living close to work or close to church, let’s choose church. A shorter commute is not worth isolating our families from the body of Christ. As much as possible, let’s plan our vacations around being in church on Sunday; if that’s not feasible, we can still call in. When scheduling conflicts arise, let’s prioritize church activities over other activities. When going away to college, let’s favor campuses where we can live and frequently associate with other believers. Let’s try to maintain healthy, open communication with our local elders, “*who watch for [our] souls, as they that must give account*” (Heb. 13:17). Let’s also guard our hearts in our relationships. For example, find a way to include a third person if you must meet with someone of the opposite sex. Even if you are confident in your integrity, this will at least help you “*abstain from all appearance*” of impropriety (1 Thes. 5:22).

Third, God instituted the family in part to keep us close to Him. Husbands are to take the lead, bringing up their children “*in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*” (Eph. 6:4) and nourishing their wives with the water of the Word (Eph. 5:26). When husbands fail to do their part, their wives are called to hold them accountable by their chaste conduct (1 Pet. 3:1-2). Each of us should make sincere effort to keep in close contact with family, whether that family is by bloodline or by spiritual mentorship. When traveling alone, call home frequently. Be committed to acknowledging struggles and to confessing any failures to those who will hold you accountable to the standards of God’s Word – and then make sure you do.

There is another source of accountability worth mentioning: the people around us. Like Paul, we should invite the accountability of watching eyes (Phil. 3:17). Hopefully, our lives will testify of the joy, peace, and contentment of a child of God. If/when we stumble, however, our willingness to repent and make sincere efforts to overcome will both acknowledge the reality of sin and show the way to salvation to a watching world. “*Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand*” (Psa. 37:24).

Finally, let’s remember the One who is always watching. Do you *really* believe that God is omnipresent? If so, then even moments of isolation won’t cause you to become careless. God is the ultimate accountability partner. May we be faithful witnesses of His grace.

Key verse: “He that walketh uprightly walketh surely: but he that perverteth his ways shall be known.” (Proverbs 10:9)

Respect for Our Heritage

As children of God, we have a tremendous heritage. This is a term often used, maybe even taken for granted, but perhaps we've never asked, "Just what is our heritage? What have we inherited?" On a grand scale, we've become "*heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together*" (Rom. 8:17). Although God's heritage is the church, "*Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock*" (1 Pet. 5:3), the overcoming church's heritage is everything. "*He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son*" (Rev. 21:7). In addition to these "*exceeding great and precious promises*" (2 Pet. 1:4), we have inherited much from our Apostolic Christian forefathers and many other believers who lived in the centuries before our Brotherhood came into being. "*For thou O God... hast given me the heritage of those that fear thy name*" (Ps. 61:5).

It can be challenging to discern the real treasures of one's heritage. Many a hard-working man has become wealthy – only to leave his substance to children who've no appreciation for the blood, sweat, and tears that were required to produce the wealth. In the face of great wealth, it is no simple task to look deeper for the real treasures. However, those who do, are rewarded by, and learn to appreciate, an even greater wealth. Monetary wealth is tangible. But there are greater treasures that go deeper than that which is seen. The most valuable earthly inheritances include values, morals, ethics, and other intangible characteristics that far exceed the value of money. Who can place a value on integrity, or contentment, or commitment? Can all the financial freedom in this world be of more value than the freedom of always telling the truth?

The present is inarguably shaped by history, such that we inherit great treasures from our fathers – of which we may be largely unaware. Just as a wealthy child may not understand how difficult it was for his father to earn his substance, and how easily a child may waste it by not knowing its value, we may be inclined to underestimate much about our heritage. What are the true treasures of our heritage? Clearly the greatest portion of our inheritance is eternal life, which we have not yet fully received, although God has given us a measure of it in advance: "*...who also has given unto us the earnest of the Spirit*" (2 Cor. 5:5).

Along with the promise of eternal life with God in the time to come, we find ourselves very grateful for the present treasures of fellowship, a good measure of unity in application of the Scripture, and many other facets of our lives as Apostolic Christians. Clearly we are recipients of blessings that are the enduring results of other men's perseverance, dedication, and spiritual labor. "*And herein is that saying true, One soweth, and another reapeth. I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labour: other men laboured, and ye are entered into their labours*" (John 4:37-38).

However, have we asked ourselves if there are underlying treasures that are even greater? If we've been raised by parents who taught us the Bible from the time we were little, can we place a value on such a foundation of truth? Along with our faithful predecessors and the Psalmist, we can declare: "*Thy testimonies have I taken as an heritage forever: for they are the rejoicing of my heart*" (Ps. 119:111). How difficult would your life be if your inclination was to lie rather than tell the truth? In a time in which many religious groups deny the truth of the

Bible, do we understand just how much it means to share a nearly universal expectation within our Brotherhood that all things must rest on the truth of God's Word? Can we grasp the value of the sense of commitment that leads to being willing to die for the sake of the gospel – and that we are recipients of such a shared commitment even though we've not experienced such persecution for many years here in America? Do we maintain the trust that permits us to “*bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ*”? (Gal. 6:2). Can we place a value on the blessing of brethren who were willing to follow Jesus, turning the other cheek and not returning evil for evil? (1 Pet. 3:9).

Above all, we are forever indebted that our church is built firmly upon the solid rock, which is Jesus Christ. As so aptly stated by the Apostle Paul, our faith must be “*...built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone*” (Eph. 2:20).

As a contrast to your experience, consider the challenge facing a child who grows up in a household of nearly twenty people sharing a tiny shack – none of whom are her parents... a child who at the age of ten is expected to go out on the streets and bring back money to support the drug addictions of her housemates. Or consider the heritage of a six-year old boy who is the primary caretaker of his three siblings who faces the tough choice of digging through garbage cans or stealing to find food for his family. What would be the heritage of a young girl who believes her only option to survive is to use her body as a means of earning a living – who has many children before she turns twenty – whose only experience with men is demeaning and degrading. These aren't made up. They are real life examples of souls whom God loves.

Let's be very thankful to our loving and merciful Heavenly Father. It is a priceless treasure to share in the heritage of a fellowship of sanctified, born again believers, (though not unencumbered by the flesh), who speak the truth in love, and love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. “*For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ*” (2 Cor. 2:17). The true riches of God are ours if we are faithful! “*He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?*” (Luke 16:10-11).

If we have a genuine appreciation for the rich heritage we enjoy, “*Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another*” (Rom. 14:19).

Key verse: For thou, O God...hast given me the heritage of those that fear thy name. (Ps. 61:5)

Walking With God

“Just a closer walk with thee; Grant it Jesus is my plea. Daily walking close to thee: let it be, dear Lord, let be.” (Gospel Hymns #805)

These beautiful words describe the heart’s desire of every true believer. The purpose of this article is to share some thoughts on how we might experience this closer walk with God more consistently—enabling us to live fruitful, overcoming lives.

After the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, the first person described as walking in close relationship with God was Enoch. We are told simply that “*Enoch walked with God*” (Gen. 5:22, 24). Some additional evidence of Enoch’s special relationship with God is given in the New Testament. Hebrews 11:5 tells us that it was “*by faith*” that Enoch was translated and that “*he pleased God,*” which was no doubt because of his faith, since “*...without faith it is impossible to please him...*” (Heb. 11:6). It is also very instructive that the Hebrew name “Enoch” means “disciplined” and “dedicated,” which appears to be prophetic in this case.

How closely we walk with God is dependent upon the outcome of a battle which is waged in our minds. This is where the concept of being disciplined takes on critical importance. For our thought patterns to be ordered properly, we must discipline ourselves to learn to direct our thoughts aright. This kind of self-discipline applies to countless situations in life. For example, if we can discipline our minds to such an extent as to learn a second language or to play a musical instrument, we should be able to make sincere efforts to think about and apply scriptural truths every day.

The Apostle Paul wrote very openly about his need for self-discipline. By stating “*I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content...*” (Phil. 4:11), he acknowledged it was not always that way for him; he needed to learn to be content. And learning requires study. Paul wrote, “*Study to show thyself approved unto God...*” (2 Tim. 2:15). Study means to put forth a mental effort. Paul also wrote that he had to keep his body under subjection lest he would become a castaway (1 Cor. 9:27). These examples reflect the dedication required to win the battle of the mind as well as the struggle against the flesh. These endeavors can only be accomplished by God’s grace, because by our own strength we can do nothing that pleases Him (John 15:5). We believe that Enoch’s walk of faith, dedication and discipline was directed toward pleasing God.

There must be a driving force (motivation) which helps us be dedicated to a cause and willing, by His grace, to discipline ourselves to succeed. There are many different types of motivation which influence our lives, but none compare to love for Jesus Christ our Saviour. “*We love him because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19). We love Him because He saved us from our sins through His great sacrifice on the Cross (Matt. 1:21). We love Him because He intercedes on our behalf for our every need (John 17: Heb. 4:15-16) and because He is the source of strength which we need to succeed. “*I will love thee, O Lord, my strength*” (Ps. 18:1). This all important motivating love for the Lord may also be referred to as “our first love.”

Thus, one of the key steps in walking closer to God is to stir up or refresh this motivating love in our hearts for Him. There are a number of ways this can be accomplished. Renewed appreciation for our first love may occur during times of worship, edifying fellowship with other believers, observation of God's beautiful creation, service to our fellow men and other inspiring experiences. We can enhance this motivating love by starting our day with quiet time with the Lord, during which we pray, read, and meditate upon His Word and then resolve to apply these teachings as we live out the day. Each moment of remembrance of spiritual truths should help draw us into closer communion with God. "*My meditation of him shall be sweet: I will be glad in the Lord*" (Ps. 104:34).

We can be assured that our Heavenly Father will promptly meet us in communion when our thoughts and prayers turn to Him. "*Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you*" (Jam. 4:8). "*The Lord is nigh unto all that call upon him...*" (Ps. 143:18). Likewise, if our daily tasks are done with love for the Lord as our motivation, we will find ourselves walking and rejoicing in His presence. "*Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as unto the Lord...*" (Col. 3:23). "*In thy presence is fullness of joy*" (Ps. 16:11).

Satan's battle for our minds often consists of distraction, by using his weapon of the power of suggestion. When Enoch walked with God he was no doubt focused on that which has eternal value. Our focus on spiritual things is easily distracted when we become involved in unedifying activities or allow ourselves to be caught up with "*vain thoughts*" (Ps. 119:113). We make conscious choices as to how we will spend our time and where our thoughts will dwell. These choices reveal our priorities. Jesus said, "*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*" (Matt. 6:21). We seriously handicap our chances of winning the battle of the mind if we become occupied with things which war against and/or corrupt our souls. (Tit. 2:12; 1Pet. 3:10) "*Be not deceived, evil communications corrupt good manners*" (1 Cor. 15:33). We are to have a transformed, renewed mind in Christ which focuses on righteousness and holiness. (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23-24) "*To be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace*" (Rom. 8:6).

When we walk in close relationship with God, we more fully experience the abundant life Jesus came to give His own. (John 10:10) We can then testify like David of old: "*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul*" (Ps. 23:1-3). Jesus described His picture of an intimate relationship with us in the beautiful account of the Good Shepherd. He said, "*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me*" (John 10:27). The greatest joy in life is to walk with God in peace and with an abiding hope in His promised salvation. (Heb. 6:19)

May God help us to grow in faith, to rely upon His grace to increase our dedication and discipline and to be responsive to the powerful motivation of love for our beloved Lord and Saviour. This will bring us into a closer walk with God, and multiplied blessings will follow.

Key Verse: "In thy presence is fullness of joy" (Psalm 16:11)

Our Interactions with Other Professing Christians

The purpose of this article is to provide scriptural direction when interacting with others (not of our church) who profess Christianity. We should first of all be thankful that there are other people who are desiring to serve God. We should not treat them as our enemies, nor should we expect to adopt what they believe and do. The prophet Malachi instructs us to “...discern...between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not” (Mal. 3:18).

In our daily discernments, we seek God’s grace to “*Prove all things, (and) hold fast to that which is good*” (1 Thes. 5:21). Yet, we are not to judge other men’s hearts or destiny (Matt. 7:1). Only God knows the hearts (Ps. 44:21) and he will try each one in the refiner’s fire (Prov. 17:3).

We are accustomed to and appreciate commonality in the application of our Apostolic Christian doctrine. This encourages unity of spirit and peace among the brethren. (Eph. 4:3) When we observe other Christians applying their beliefs in a different manner, we may be tempted to be critical or judgmental. “*And John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbad him, because he followeth not us. But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part*” (Mark 9:38-40). The disciples’ chief reason for forbidding this individual was that he did not follow them (literally, was not in the same way). That Jesus did not criticize the man is noteworthy, and we should likewise abstain from critical statements and pre-judging “*another man’s servant*” (Rom. 14:4). Neither did He suggest that the disciples join with him; He simply said to forbid him not. A similar incident occurred in the Old Testament when Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp instead of around the tabernacle as the rest of the seventy. (Num. 11:26-29) Another account is given in Joshua 22 in which the tribes on “*this side Jordan*” made an erroneous conclusion about the motives and sincerity of those on the “*other side Jordan*” regarding worship practices. These examples in the Old and New Testaments have similarities in that individuals met with disapproval for doing good things in a different way than was accepted by those observing them. Neither Christ, Moses nor Joshua joined in criticizing those who were different, and in each case, some good came of their efforts. If someone is doing good in the name of God or Christ, they cannot be doing it lightly. No one benefits if the unbelieving world sees conflict and strife among Christians.

On the other hand, we must be wise and discerning when observing or evaluating someone’s declaration of faith and their practices. We must try the spirits. “*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world*” (1 John 4:1). One way we can do this is by observing their fruits (deeds). “*Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?*” (Matt. 7:16). If someone professes to be a Christian but is living or promoting a sinful lifestyle, his beliefs are certainly open to question. We should use God’s Word to test the teachings or beliefs of an individual or group. (Acts 17:11) Some common areas of doctrinal differences are the depth of the conversion experience; the attitude toward sin and the application of church discipline; the role of the church in the believer’s life; unconditional eternal security; baptismal practices and simplicity of faith in an inerrant Word coupled with doctrinal unity. Sadly, we may find that not all who claim the name of Christ have sound beliefs. The Apostle Peter warns us of the danger of falling into the same error. “*As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest (twist the meaning of), as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness*” (2 Pet. 3:16-17).

There are times when we might feel obligated to attend other churches for funerals, weddings, or other special occasions. When doing this, we must use discernment regarding our participation. For example, we should not take an active part in such things as communion or altar calls. We also need to be careful and circumspect in recognizing and avoiding false doctrine. *“That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive”* (Eph. 4:14).

Some positive things we can do with other professing Christians are to be the salt and light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16), and to teach all nations by word as well as by our example (Matt. 28:19, 20). We must maintain a firm commitment to our own spiritual integrity while having a genuine concern for the salvation and spiritual welfare of others. The Holy Spirit will guide us in how we can share our faith in Christ with a friend or coworker in a way that allows us to be a clear witness without blending our doctrine with other beliefs. With the counsel of our church leadership, we may take opportunities to cooperate with other groups in serving our fellow men in a way that allows us to be salt and light and does not create inappropriate spiritual involvement. (Gal. 6:10) Jesus recognized the reality of our living *“in the world”* along with the necessity of keeping ourselves from evil: *“...I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil”* (John 17:11, 15).

We of the Apostolic Christian Church gratefully acknowledge our hope of salvation, as do many others. In all cases, it is only by abiding grace and faith based on God’s truth. This becomes clear when we read of the innumerable host of saints in heaven that had washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. (Rev. 7:9, 14) We will honor God by avoiding offence and always seeking the best for others. *“Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved”* (1 Cor. 10:32, 33).

Key verse: “Then shall ye...discern between...him that serveth God and him that serveth him not.”

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is the ability to handle with discretion information of a sensitive or privileged nature. All of us are faced with expectations of confidentiality in a variety of settings and relationships, including family, church, work and many others.

Families built on love and trust understand that many personal matters remain within the family circle. Experiences such as conflict, financial difficulties, academic struggles, health issues, correction and discipline and other personal matters can usually be worked out within the safety of the home environment or with appropriate counsel, but individuals can be severely hurt if personal information is shared unnecessarily.

A healthy, well-functioning church family is also built on love and trust, with Christ and His Word as the foundation. For instance, individual members sometimes fall into error to the point of needing loving church discipline. *“And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it...”* (1 Cor. 12:26). The close ties of brotherly love in the body will compel each member to help the healing process and protect the suffering member from the harm which would come from gossip or public exposure of the matter. Likewise, when someone needs spiritual counsel, he or she must be able to share personal matters with an appropriate individual (elder, minister or spiritual mentor) who can be trusted to maintain confidentiality. *“That thou mayest regard discretion, and that thy lips may keep knowledge”* (Prov. 5:2).

Every organization, including the church, must have leadership which is entrusted with various responsibilities. The Word identifies certain qualities for those who are called to spiritual leadership. They are to be just, holy, temperate, of sound doctrine and having a good reputation (trustworthiness) in the eyes of those outside the church (1 Tim. 3:7; Tit. 1:8-9). They must be able to handle sensitive, personal information and make sound, biblically-based decisions which may impact many lives. Such individuals are expected to honor their commitments of faithfulness and confidentiality life long, even if they are no longer active in their duties.

Confidentiality is based upon several biblical principles, including faithfulness, integrity and trust. *“It is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful”* (1 Cor. 4:2). God seeks out the faithful (dependable) individual for ever greater responsibility. *“...thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things...”* (Matt. 25:21). God gives great respect to the virtue of integrity. It exemplified the life of His beloved servant Job. (Job 2:3) *“The just man walketh in his integrity: his children are blessed after him”* (Prov. 20:7). Numerous Scriptures state the powerful truth of our being able to put unwavering trust in God. As a human example of this virtue, we read of the blessing of trust in marriage: *“The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her...”* (Prov. 31:11). This godly virtue has application in every valuable relationship we experience. Finally, the second of the two greatest commandments gives us the last word in this matter of confidentiality: *“Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”* (Matt. 22:39). Take a few moments to ponder how confidentiality is woven into the application of each of these Scriptural principles. Think about individuals who readily come to mind as someone you know can be trusted to maintain confidentiality. Are you one of those individuals in the eyes of others?

Many examples could be given of how confidentiality is violated and the serious consequences which may follow. We will cite several of them which are all too common among us.

Human relationships inevitably experience hurts and grievances of various kinds and degrees. When trespassed against, we are subjected to powerful temptations to get even and to tell others--to gain self-justification and discredit the name of the one who has hurt us. God's Word holds us to a much

higher standard. *“Debate thy cause with thy neighbor himself; and discover not a secret to another”* (Prov. 25:9). Jesus, the ultimate peacemaker, taught: *“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone...”* (Matt. 18:15). (See also James 1:26).

Teachers and ministers sometimes use a real life example to make a spiritual point, assuming that if they do not use names or other specifics they will not violate confidentiality. In some cases this may be harmless, but in others it has been very hurtful and embarrassing because it is easy to complete the picture and identify individuals. This simply confirms the importance of being circumspect and humbly seeking the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in all such endeavors. *“For God doth instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him”* (Is. 28:26).

One of the most grievous breaches of confidentiality in our time consists of the inappropriate sharing of information about individuals and church matters in various forms of mass communication. Perhaps privileged information has been obtained from someone who is upset and feeling they were unfairly treated, and it is passed on in a biased, inaccurate form. Human emotions such as fear of losing something we value may embolden us to justify spreading information which has not been carefully checked for accuracy or which is clearly not meant to be public. We may convince ourselves that concern for the welfare of the church justifies our actions. Nowhere in the Word of God can we find that good intentions justify doing something that is wrong. Just how serious is it to violate the fifth commandment? *“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor”* (Ex. 20:16). Just how serious are the sins of slander (harming someone’s reputation—Prov. 10:18) and sedition (undermining God-ordained authority—Gal. 5:20)? When we open our hearts to receiving such information or pass it on to others, we join the ranks of the talebearer. Once again, God holds us to a much higher standard. *“A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter”* (Prov. 11:13).

We also need to consider the consequences of spreading information of a confidential nature which can be easily misunderstood and misapplied, because there is no opportunity for meaningful dialogue. Very likely this will generate fear, create discord and provoke irrational thinking. *“Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth!”* (Jam. 3:5). Is this edifying and does it bring glory to God? *“For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind”* (2 Tim. 1:7).

In an environment of Christ-like love and mutual respect, we will use appropriate avenues to express our concerns and present our questions to those who seek our spiritual welfare. *“Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things”* (Gal. 6:6). Let us strive diligently to re-build mutual trust and walk in the beauty of integrity as described by David in Psalm 26.

Key verse: “A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth a matter” (Prov. 11:13)

Our Living Hope

“Hope is patience with the lamp lit.” This quote by a third-century Christian author suggests the thought of having confidence in the likelihood of obtaining what one desires. More importantly, God’s Word gives the believer much assurance regarding the present and effectual possession of a blessed hope: *“Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ”* (Tit. 2:13).

The New Testament Scriptures consistently portray hope as the confident expectation of something desirable or joyful. Even in temporal matters, some hope of reward for our labors is justified; *“...that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope”* (1 Cor. 9:10). However, the ultimate hope and goal of the believer is to reach his home in heaven. Faith in the death, shed blood and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ makes this living hope possible. *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”* (1 Pet. 1:3). The sure promises of God are the source of our heavenly hope: *“In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began”* (Tit. 1:2). In addition to the hope of heaven beyond this life, having hope enables us to endure the tests and trials in this life: *“And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope”* (Rom. 5:3-4). All of us become discouraged at times, but God’s Word gives us a wonderful encouragement: *“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God”* (Ps. 42:11).

Hope is a valuable possession, and God intends that we share it with others. By God’s grace, we can share the comfort and hope derived from enduring struggles or trials in our lives with others finding themselves in similar circumstances. *“Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God”* (2 Cor 1:4). This sharing of hope one with another is one of the most productive and worthwhile forms of fellowship and is an ideal way to draw closer to our brothers and sisters. Communicating our hope of salvation is also a form of witnessing to the lost. *“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear”* (1 Pet. 3:15). Sharing our hope with both brethren and friends is one way for us to be *“...a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish”* (2 Cor. 2:15).

Having hope is an essential factor in our salvation, *“For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it”* (Rom. 8:24-25). In this sense, hope is closely intertwined with faith, *“For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith”* (Gal. 5:5). Our ultimate salvation will include leading an overcoming life, by the Lord’s grace--motivated by our love for Him. The hope of seeing God at Christ’s return gives us an additional incentive to keep ourselves pure. *“And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure”* (1 John 3:3). Hope allows us to approach God *“...by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God”* (Rom. 5:2). We possess *“hope...as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast...”* connecting us to the Rock, which is Jesus Christ (Heb. 6:19). Hope lends stability to our Christian walk that we might *“...continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard...”* (Col. 1:23).

Having *“...hope toward God... that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust”* (Acts 24:15), allows the believer to look beyond the struggles of this world and time. Jesus Himself was driven by this same hope (assurance) when faced with His future agony upon the cross,

“...who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). Likely, our Savior was thinking not only of His own future joy in heaven, but of ours also *“who would believe on Him”* (John 17:20). In like manner, let us pray and have this same confident expectation that loved ones still lingering without the door of grace will yet turn to Him in repentance and obtain the like *“hope of salvation”* that we possess (1 Thes. 5:8).

The Holy Spirit moved the prophet Jeremiah to pen a wonderful portrayal of an enduring hope, even when remembering his *“affliction, misery, wormwood, and gall.”* *“This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord”* (Lam. 3:21-26). Just as the prophet of old, we have our struggles in this time as well, but we will fulfill our Savior’s hope and fond expectation for us *“...if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end”* (Heb. 3:6).

A portion of the very purpose and vision of our Lord and Savior was that we might enjoy an abundant life in Him: *“I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly”* (John 10:10). Indeed that abundant life is grounded in hope through believing in the God of hope and it is enabled by the power of His Holy Spirit: *“Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost”* (Rom. 15:13).

Theme verse: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Peter 1:3)

Modern Day Idolatry

The basic elements of the following account actually happened. It may help us understand the power which an idol may exert over a person.

A hardened man drives down the highway on his way home. He is accustomed to the shadowy world of smugglers, thieves, and other petty criminals. His struggle to survive in a rough world has made him calloused to the wonder of life. As the miles fly by, his watchful eyes notice that two cars have been following him. A hardness that is not quite fear comes over him. He is quite familiar with evil intentions.

If he were a man of God, he might begin to pray. But he is a man used to relying on his own cunning to get what he wants in life, and thinks he can take care of himself. He verifies his concern by changing speeds numerous times. The two cars stay behind him and he knows they are just waiting for a convenient time to rob him of the substantial sum of money he is carrying. Assessing the options, he is rightfully concerned, but continues to believe that he is capable of taking care of himself.

Rounding a curve, he observes one of the cars accelerating to pass him. The other comes up close behind him. As they round the curve, he sees a slow moving semi-trailer truck ahead, and quickly grasps why they are choosing this moment to box him in. Supremely confident, he boldly decides to escape the trap by passing the semi on the right shoulder. He has no doubt that he can outrun the bandits.

To his dismay, as he pulls even with the semi's front wheels, the shoulder narrows and his right tires slip off the pavement onto a soft shoulder. The soft soil grabs the car and he veers off the road and down an embankment. For the first time, fear grips him. His car bounces to a stop at the foot of the hill. He knows he won't be able to drive out of this situation. Heart pounding, he climbs out of the car and begins to make his way to hiding. His eyes catch movement at the top of the hill. The sunlight glints off of several pistols. Now he can taste fear. He prays.

He doesn't pray to the living God, but rather grasps the image of a skeleton of death on the gold chain around his neck. He prays fervently, "Help me, *Grim Reaper*. Help me. Save me from these men." The men search vainly. It's as if they can't see him. One of them passes within three feet of his hiding place behind a little shrub. Finally they give up and go away. The man gives thanks to the little gold image on his neck. He believes the idol hid him from the thieves' view and kept him safe.

Although we rarely witness it, idol worship still exists in our time. This man continues to pray to his idol god and believes in its protection. Idol worship is common across the world.

There are many other kinds of idols besides graven images. Sports figures, modern music artists, and Hollywood stars are some examples. In fact, anyone admired (worshipped) more than God can become a type of idol. Our possessions can be the idols that come between us and God. Could there be something in our life that compares to the profound *abomination* that is worshipping and praying to a graven image? The Lord taught the children of Israel: "*Cursed be the man that maketh any graven or molten image, an abomination unto the Lord...*" (Deut. 27:15).

An abomination is something morally disgusting or abhorrent, vile and repugnant to God. Daniel writes of the abomination that makes desolate sitting in the holy place. And Malachi, speaking of their worship of other gods, condemns his people, saying: "*Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god*" (Mal. 2:11).

What would cause a man to put his hope in a graven image? Perhaps the man who worships the skeletal *Grim Reaper* was worshipping other idols before he cried out to his false god. His first reliance was clearly on his own ability. His self-confidence had gotten him through many difficult situations in life. Perhaps his greatest idol was himself?

Daniel's horrifying vision of the "*abomination that maketh desolate*" (Dan. 11:31) was most likely directly fulfilled by Antiochus IV Epiphanes when he set up an idol in the Temple and perhaps even sacrificed a pig on the altar. But there was a prideful attitude that he had before he committed these actions. "*Neither shall he regard the God of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god: for he shall magnify himself above all*" (Dan. 11:37). The "I-doll" came before the idol. Perhaps this is a spiritual correlation that we can all take into account.

Paul teaches that our body is the temple of God. (1 Cor. 6:19-20) In this spiritual allegory, the outer courts of our life interface with the world, but the inner parts of our being are reserved as the dwelling-place of a holy God. The altar of our heart bears the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. (Eph. 5:2) If we have set up an "I-doll" in place of the Living God, could it lead to, or even be a horrifying abomination that will make us desolate?

Few, if any of us would consider worshipping a physical idol, but if--like the man who worships the Grim Reaper--we rely on ourselves, and our own wits, are we not taking those first steps? Perhaps the "I" factor is an abomination that will make us desolate. If we trust our own judgment, esteem our self higher than our brother, if we do not submit to sound spiritual counsel and correction, if we regard our own thoughts as wiser than the Bible, or lift ourselves up in any way above our Creator, is it not magnifying oneself above all? (Luke 18:9-14) If we do these things, how can we hope to keep our hearts holy?

It requires some very deep and sincere soul searching to determine if we are putting selfish interests or personal pursuits ahead of proper subjection of our entire life to God. (Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Cor. 9:27) The Apostle Paul writes: "*...all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any*" (1 Cor. 6:12). We surely need the grace of God and perhaps also an objective, mature fellow believer to help us assess where our affections, time priorities and activities need adjustment.

**Key Verse: "...for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God."
(Luke 16:15)**

Implacability

The word implacability is not commonly used in our day, yet the very serious condition it describes is something we may struggle with from time to time. It is included in the Romans 1 description of the natural sinful state of man (Rom. 1:28-32) and indicates an unwillingness to be placated, pacified, or brought to a place of peace. In other words, living in an unsettled and contentious state and not willing to be reasoned with or to have our thinking tempered by others.

Being implacable is fundamentally different than being “steadfast and unmovable” (1 Cor. 15:58) as these terms apply to our personal faith and trust in God.

As believers, we are exhorted to put off the former things and do the things which make for peace (Eph. 4:22, Rom. 14:19). We are instructed to work (endeavor) to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. Displaying an unwillingness to be at rest or at peace is opposite this. There is no scriptural model for causing unrest or disturbing the peace in the church; though history is replete with examples of such behavior and the division, heartache and loss that accompany it.

The man Diotrephes demonstrated implacability in the early church which John confronted in his third epistle (3 John 9-10). His unworthy characteristics included a desire for preeminence (the approval of others) which begins in the heart and manifests itself in various ways depending on our position in life. It may be present even if we are not in a position of authority; perhaps alone in our heart or in secret among our confidants. It is important to note that Diotrephes refused counsel.

One of the most dangerous places we can be is to have made the determination that our personal understanding and interpretation of truth or a particular issue is absolute. An accompanying implacable spirit may insist that a different viewpoint would necessarily imply deception of the other party. This mindset leads to the rejection of counsel, often with elaborate justification, and an isolation that breeds error and blinding self-justification. The potential for hurt to others and damage to the Lord’s work is great.

True accountability requires input from those who will speak the truth in love and with grace and respect (Eph. 4:15; Col. 4:6), even (or especially) if it is opposite to our thinking. If we are not challenged in our thoughts and perspective, we are not being held accountable. (Prov. 27:17)

The individual with an unyielding and implacable spirit who arrives at this place of self-justification can soon develop the characteristics of a scorner. At this stage, he no longer hears rebuke (Prov. 13:1) and even despises those who would correct him. “*Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee: rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee*” (Prov. 9:8). Note that, in what should be a serious admonition for anyone approaching this state, others are even warned against attempting to engage them in rebuke as they are no longer open to it.

An honest self-examination should ask whether we have shut ourselves off from learning from others, perhaps by marginalizing or “writing off” those with whom we may disagree. Could it be that at least a part of our conflict with them is rooted in a defensive protecting of ourselves from needed rebuke? Remember that God typically uses fallible men to deliver the gospel message itself. Men are imperfect in their choice of words, tone, or even example, yet this does not free us to reject the truth of their message. Jude lists three Old Testament examples where stubborn self-justification caused great harm (Jude 11). Each individual manifested this in different ways. Cain rose up in jealousy over his brother who had found favor with God by his sacrifice. Balaam is rebuked for greedily seeking the honor of men and

earthly gain. Korah saw himself as justified in opposing Moses' leadership and was condemned for his gainsaying.

It is noteworthy that Jude used these examples to rebuke the implacability of individuals who were critical of things they did not understand (Jude 10). Probably everyone of us has had the experience of thinking or speaking negatively about someone or some situation only to find later that we had an inaccurate understanding of the facts and had reached a wrong conclusion. The harsh rebuke found in Jude, as well as the outcomes of Cain, Balaam and Korah, should cause us to reflect carefully on any strong opinions and assumptions we may hold. This is especially applicable if we find ourselves communicating negatively about those who are in authority over us; whether in the family, workplace, or church.

What are some indications that we may be flirting with this grievous condition? Do we find ourselves easily excited and "worked up" over issues that arise? Are we quick to make a controversy of an issue when none need exist? Do we look for an argument just for argument's sake?

We should ask ourselves whether the charge of implacability could be made about us in other areas of our lives. If married, do we resist or "shut down" input from our spouse? At work, do we rationalize and self-justify when approached about a behavioral or performance issue? Do we find ourselves always needing to be right in a conversation? Is it possible there is a pattern of implacability that we have wrapped in spiritual language and justification, which may be especially tempting to do in a church context?

In contrast, the Scripture is clear about the state of the heart that can be reached and used by God. *"To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word"* (Is. 66:2). We see this in the examples of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Paul, and others who first humbled themselves before they were useful to God. Both their words and their actions reflected their broken and contrite heart.

Even Jesus *"...humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross"* (Phil 2:8). He learned obedience by the things He suffered (Heb. 5:8). When He was reviled, he did not retaliate (1 Pet. 2:23).

If we have a truly humble and obedient heart that follows after the things which make for peace, we will seek to edify (build up) others. We will guard our heart and the things on which our mind dwells, choosing to think on what is true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report (Phil. 4:8). We will recognize that our perspective is limited and will humbly seek counsel of others who will lovingly challenge us in the light of God's Word. We will enjoy the blessings of a submissive and yielded spirit, established, strengthened, and settled by the God of all grace (1 Pet. 5:10).

Key verse: Ephesians 4:3 Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Spiritual Headship

There are many facets of spiritual headship as defined in God's Word. In this article we will focus on the duties of the priest of the home and balancing work and family responsibilities.

Any human organization must have structure to accomplish its purposes. For the structure to be effective, the order of authority must be understood and followed.

The Bible clearly defines the order of authority in the home. "*But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God*" (1 Cor. 11:3). The Apostle Paul reinforces this in Colossians 3:16-19 and Ephesians 5:23. He completes the order of authority in the family when he further states, "*Children obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord*" (Col. 3:20).

The orderly structure that God established for the home is designed to hold families together, provide for their material needs, and most importantly, provide for their spiritual welfare. Although many attempts have been made to modify the order that God set in place thousands of years ago, none have improved upon God's order of creation.

There may be those who fear that the man is given too much authority over his family. If anyone over-emphasizes a few verses out of the Bible, this can happen, but if we take the whole counsel of God, this clearly is not the case. Let us consider the very high standard which is established for the head of the home: "*Husbands love your wives, even as Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it*" (Eph. 5:25). The Lord expanded the protection for families when he wrote, "*Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged*" (Col.3:21).

Christ never does anything that harms the church (His Bride) nor does He ever ask anything unreasonable of us. As husbands follow Christ's example they will not intentionally do anything to hurt their wives, nor will they intentionally do anything to discourage their children. Indeed they will be intentional about shoring up their courage and will choose their words carefully, by the grace of God (Col. 4:6). And when they err, they will seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

Jesus was the perfect example for the church. Fathers must strive to be Christ-like examples for their wives and children. This does not mean that the family worships the husband as the head of the household. The family does not worship the man, they worship the Lord whom the husband seeks to follow. The godly order of authority leads us from the husband to Christ and ultimately to God, in whom we safely trust.

Although it is not possible in a short article to list all of the duties of a husband as the priest of the home, perhaps a few examples, based on biblical principles, may prompt husbands to deeply ponder their responsibilities. Godly husbands will be faithful, first to God—"But seek ye first the kingdom of God..." Matt.6:33, and then to their wives "...what God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mark. 10:6-9), and finally to their children "...bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:3.)

A believing husband will lead family worship, teaching the Word of God to his family by word and example. He will love his wife with heartfelt, self-less love. "*So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies*" (Eph. 5:28). His wife and children will safely trust him because they will observe his love for the Lord and will see that he places their welfare above his own interests. He will not waste his time

in worldly entertainment or selfish activities at the expense of time for his family. He will use discretion in preserving needed personal time for edifying activities.

Being a godly priest of the home requires men to have a healthy balance between work and family responsibilities. Paul reminds us that “...if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel” (1 Tim. 5:8). Although there may be circumstances beyond his control, the godly man will work to provide adequately for the material needs of his family without being materialistic. While he may not be able to provide as much as some others, God can supply the needs of those who are diligent. David wrote, “*I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread*” (Psa. 37:25).

Additionally, the godly man must not do as the rich man who placed his confidence in material goods. He pulled down his barns and built bigger ones. He then said to himself, “...*Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry*” (Luke 12:19). That very night, when his life was taken from him, he faced the loss of all things because he had placed his trust in riches.

Paul encouraged Timothy to “*Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy*” (1 Tim. 6:17). Jesus had earlier explained the spiritual dangers of trusting in riches: “*Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God*” (Mark 10:24-25).

The pressure on men to “be successful” often makes them spend too much time in material pursuits. Our culture and indeed our heritage have taught us to have a strong work ethic. The Apostle Paul wrote that we should not be “...*slothful in business*...” (Rom. 12:11). Sometimes our strengths can lead us into difficulty. We can so easily be caught up in the pursuits of the world which are of no eternal profit. This can lead to covetousness, pride and competitiveness. The godly husband will earnestly endeavor to have his and his family’s priorities bring glory to God. He will regularly take inventory of how his time and resources are being spent, whether to further God’s kingdom or to lay up earthly things that perish with the using (Matt. 6:19-20; Luke 12:21-31).

These biblical principles should guide us when we have opportunities for advancement in our earthly labors. They will help us determine if our choices will edify and bring our family together or contribute to the pressures to fragment and become self-absorbed. They will provide a foundation for application of the mind of Christ in spiritual headship.

Key verse: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he them; male and female created he them.” (Gen. 1:27)

Lessons from the Temptation of Christ

A wise soldier studies his opponent so that he knows how to defeat him and is not taken off-guard and defeated himself. As Christians, Satan is our enemy. Like good soldiers, we must be vigilant in learning his tactics in the battle for our souls. Perhaps no passage of Scripture reveals Satan's tactics so clearly as Matthew 4:1-11, an account of Christ's temptation in the wilderness. Following are nine particular lessons it holds for us.

Be extra careful following mountaintop experiences. In the preceding chapter Christ had just heard his Father's public affirmation: "*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*" (Matt. 3:17). As often happens, however, that mountaintop experience was immediately followed by an emotional and spiritual valley. God does not tempt man with evil (Jam. 1:13-14), but He does allow us to be tempted. Why? For one thing, He is glorified in our obedience, and we cannot demonstrate obedience unless we have the opportunity to disobey. Perhaps this is why, in His foreknowledge, He frequently allows a time of spiritual struggle after a spiritual high point. He faithfully prepares us for the battles He knows we will have to fight and, by His grace, are able to win (1 Cor. 10:13).

Satan attacks when we are weak and attacks our areas of weakness. After forty days of fasting in the wilderness, Jesus was alone, hungry, and undoubtedly exhausted. Satan deliberately chose such a time to strike. What did he strike first? Christ's legitimate desire for food. Eerily reminiscent of his opening words in Eden, "*Yea, hath God said...?*" (Gen. 3:1), Satan's first words to Christ were, "*If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread*" (Matt. 4:3). He often starts by raising doubt before trying to destroy our faith.

Satan seeks to defile God's purpose. Food is intended to nourish our earthly bodies, but why did God create our bodies with this need in the first place? It is one way that He points us to Himself. Our bodies' hunger for food reflects our souls' hunger for God. That is why Christ called himself the "*bread of life*" that removes hunger forever (John. 6:35). Could Christ have made stones into bread? Yes. Would He have been wrong to do so? Perhaps not, but He understood the aim of Satan's subtle suggestion. To regard physical food as the ultimate satisfaction for His desires would be to place His own will above His Father's will. His reply was brilliant: "*It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*" (Matt. 4:3-4). God created everything for a purpose, but *nothing* exceeds our need to depend on Him for sustenance.

Scripture is the best weapon against Satan. To each of Satan's challenges, Christ responded with the Word of God. God's Word is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17), "*quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, ... and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*" (Heb. 4:12). It is our best and most reliable weapon in spiritual battle.

Satan seeks to leverage our victories against us. The devil is crafty. He knows we are sometimes weakest when we feel strong. Satan didn't waste any time in seeking to capitalize on Christ's victory and the potential for pride that might have accompanied it. "*If thou be the Son of God,*" he said, "*cast thyself down [from this great height]. For it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee, and in their hands they shall bear thee up...*" (Matt. 4:6). As a man, perhaps Christ was tempted to show that He could

do it. He was certainly capable. But again, His focus was on God's will, not His own. "*Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God*" (Matt. 4:7), He replied, quoting Scripture once again.

Satan uses Scripture to deceive. Having been beaten by Scripture once, Satan sought to twist truth to his own advantage. We saw this same tactic in Eden when Satan correctly told Eve that her "*eyes [would] be opened*" and she would know good and evil by eating the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:5). It is true that God can send His angels to catch someone who is falling, but only if it is in His will. We cannot manipulate His will to our desires.

Satan knows we are impatient. We know that God is faithful and will ultimately be victorious. We know He will fulfill His plan for each of our lives in His time. "*Wait on the Lord,*" encouraged David (Ps. 27:14). "*Ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise*" (Heb. 10:36), said the writer of Hebrews. But waiting is hard. We so often want the promise now!

Christ knew He would conquer death and hell, but while He was fully God, He was also fully man. Thus, it must have been tempting when Satan showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and said, "*All these things will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me*" (Matt. 4:9). In other words, let's just take care of the whole thing right now. The catch, of course, was that in doing so, the Author of Truth would submit himself to the father of lies. With the fate of eternity at stake, Christ defeated Satan: "*Get thee hence, Satan, for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve*" (Matt. 4:10).

God rewards our faithfulness. Immediately following His rebuke of Satan, God sent angels to strengthen His Son. "*Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you*" (Jam. 4:7-8). God was there all the time, just as Jesus promised all of us who will faithfully follow Him: "*...lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world*" (Matt. 28:20).

Temptation is not a sin. Jesus Christ was "*...in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin*" (Heb. 4:15). Being tempted is not a sin; giving in to temptation is sin (Jam. 1:15). Furthermore, Satan can only act to the extent that God allows him to act, and God's will is for all men to be on His side (1 Tim. 2:4) and to be victorious (2 Cor. 2:14). If we submit to His control, He will provide the strength necessary for victory.

As Christ demonstrated, and as promised in 1 Corinthians 10:13, there is always a way of escape from temptation, if we will avail ourselves to the promised grace and the knowledge of the enemy that we have learned by experience and in the Word of God.

Reconciliation

Jesus Christ came to earth with the distinct mission of reconciling lost and sinful mankind to God. He was characterized by a “*ministry of reconciliation*” (2 Cor. 5:18) and He has committed to us, His followers, the “*word of reconciliation*” (2 Cor. 5:19). Jesus has set the example of the paramount principle of reconciliation. He was willing to pay the ultimate price of His life to fulfill His mission. As the pure lamb of God, He took upon Himself the sins of all mankind. “*For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him*” (2 Cor. 5:21). This was the greatest act of love ever performed. He asks us to follow this example by willingly giving our all to live in harmony with each other here on earth. “*Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren*” (1 John 3:16).

We are taught in the Word that we cannot expect to be at peace with God unless we make sincere effort to be reconciled with our fellow men. Jesus taught the necessity of forgiving in order to be forgiven. “*For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*” (Matt. 6: 14-15). This is a critical initial step toward reconciliation. We are thankful that the Word acknowledges that we may not always be able to achieve complete peace if the other party is unwilling. “*If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men*” (Rom. 12:18). Jesus also made it clear that an intrinsic desire to work toward peace must be a cardinal attribute of a child of God. He said, “*Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God*” (Matt. 5:9). He knows our hearts and will be satisfied when we make sincere, concerted efforts toward genuine reconciliation.

We have a responsibility to work toward reconciliation whether we are the one who needs to forgive or the one who needs forgiveness. Jesus taught that there is no limit to our need to forgive. “*And if he (thy brother) trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him*” (Luke 17:4). Jesus demonstrated that we are to forgive even if the trespasser does not repent. Looking down from the Cross to His cruel tormentors He said, “*...Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*” (Luke 23:34). Stephen demonstrated this same benevolent forgiveness when he cried out, “*...Lord lay not this sin to their charge*” (Acts 7:60). Jesus reminded us that if we know that our brother has something against us, before we can honor Him with our gift (worship, service, etc.), we need to address the matter. “*...first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift*” (Matt. 5:24).

The first step in the forgiveness/reconciliation process is to prayerfully search our hearts before God (Ps. 139:23-24), who will, through the Spirit’s conviction, help us come to a humble acknowledgment of our error, when this is needful. This recognition of error (sin) should bring us into a state of godly sorrow and repentance (Ps. 34:18; 2 Cor. 7:9). It is to a humble heart that God will grant His abundant grace (1 Pet. 5:5) and mercy (Psa. 86:5), so that we can move forward with the necessary steps toward reconciliation--either with a person we have grieved or one who has hurt us.

We must offer a sincere apology to the one we have grieved, and it is best if this can be done in person. We should say something like, “I am very sorry for what I have done. This was wrong and I make no excuses.” It can be very helpful if we also state clearly the wrong that we did, so there is no question about our full understanding of the seriousness of the error and our taking of responsibility for it. It is also important to sincerely offer to do what we can to make amends or restitution. If we are the party who was aggrieved, it is very important that we verbally acknowledge an apology and specifically state our forgiveness. It can be very helpful in the healing process if we can calmly talk through what happened and the struggles that were experienced, always keeping in mind the example of the Lord Jesus and the goals of putting the matter behind us and restoring our love.

Unfortunately we are often tempted to short-circuit this process of reconciliation. Simply saying the words, “I’m sorry,” and expecting the matter to be forgotten is insufficient. This can leave many unanswered questions about sincerity as well as the level of desire for healing and reconciliation. Sometimes an attempted apology goes something like this: “I am sorry that you were offended or hurt by what I said (or did).” This is not an apology. It reflects self-justification and puts the blame on the other person for being hurt. Humility does not include self-justification. It involves seeing ourselves as God sees us. Another version of an ineffective attempt to apologize may go something like this: “I am told that I was wrong in what I said (or did). So I am sorry.” This does not reflect a humble acknowledgement of error or a sincere desire for reconciliation. Unless we can break down the prideful desire for self-justification, we cannot hope to reach a true peace and reconciliation.

When the proper steps are taken toward reconciliation, we can experience a bond of love which is greater than if the infraction had never occurred. We can read in the Word of the beautiful example of the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau (Gen. 33:1-15). Another example is the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers (Gen 45:1-15). After Jacob died Joseph’s brothers feared he would seek revenge, and they pleaded for forgiveness (Gen. 50:17). Joseph replied, “...fear ye not: I will nourish you and your little ones. And he comforted them and spake kindly to them” (Gen. 50:21).

We need to recognize that we cannot expect to achieve genuine forgiveness and reconciliation without God’s grace. If we depend upon human strength, we will fail. Satan will torment us with the accusations of not being sorry enough, thorough enough or having fully forgiven. Even though we are unlikely to forget such an experience, when we put our trust in God’s strength, He will complete the work and allow peaceable fruits to come forth which are far beyond our expectation (Eph. 3:20-21).

Key verse: Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. (Matthew 5:9)

The Greatest Commandments

“And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30-31). In another Scripture, Jesus said, *“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets”* (Matt. 22:40). Given the emphasis our Savior has placed on these two biblical principles, let us study each of them to increase our appreciation and fulfillment of them.

“...With all thy strength.” In this context, strength indicates the ability and power given to us by God. When we consider our imperfections, our strength might seem small, but when we exercise our God-given abilities to serve others, God is glorified (Prov. 24:10; 1 Pet. 4:11). We take encouragement from God’s Word that He accepts our weak efforts when we apply them in sincerity. *“For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not”* (2 Cor. 8:12).

“...With all thy mind.” Our mind is our intellect, and it forms our reasoning, our desires, our opinions, and our memory. When we pattern our mind after that of Christ, we will be humble and modest about our own thoughts and ideas and esteem others higher than ourselves. *“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus”* (Phil. 2:3-5). That which we think about or allow into our mind greatly affects who and what we are. *“For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he...”* (Prov. 23:7). If we truly desire to love God with our entire mind, we should make conscious effort to *“think on”* good things (Phil. 4:8).

“...With all thy soul.” Our soul within us is immortal and possesses a deep desire to be with God, its Creator. *“As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?”* (Ps. 42:1-2). The knowledge that our soul will live forever in one of two eternal destinations motivates us to make sound, biblically-based decisions regarding right and wrong. *“And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; That ye may approve things that are excellent...”* (Phil. 1:9-10). The truly converted soul rejoices in the promise of salvation: *“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation...”* (Is. 61:10).

“...With all thy heart.” Our heart is the center of our will, our purpose, and our passions. The Bible describes man’s heart in many ways: we can have an honest and good heart, or an evil heart of unbelief, a willing heart, a hard heart, a proud heart, or a pure heart. The many descriptions of our heart in the Scriptures indicate that its condition is largely up to us. One way to test the condition of our heart is through an honest assessment of our priorities. Jesus said, *“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”* (Matt. 6:21). When our heart is right, our love will truly *“abound yet more and more”* for the One who *“first loved us,”* and *“sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”* and has given us the *“gift of eternal life”* (Phil. 1:9; 1 John 4:19, 10; Rom. 6:23).

“...Thy neighbor as thyself.” The account of the Good Samaritan exemplifies the second commandment given by Jesus (Luke 10:29-37). The Samaritan’s attitude in this account is revealing. If the injured man was a Jew, he could easily have held a grudge against him since the *“Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans”* (John 4:9). However, the Scriptures tell us he immediately had compassion on the unfortunate man and went to much effort and expense to help him. *“Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord”* (Lev. 19:18). In addition, the Samaritan had a more generous and optimistic opinion of the injured man

in that he must have viewed him as being worth saving because he was “half alive” instead of forsaking him because he was “half dead.” Thinking of someone in genuine love and in the best possible light and having an unselfish concern for their welfare made the difference between life and death in this account.

“...All the law and the prophets” are fulfilled when we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. Christ challenges us to love unconditionally, even when it is not returned: “But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil” (Luke 6:32-35). The love of God is our example for loving one another. “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:16-18).

Christian love is the pinnacle of spiritual growth described by the Apostle Peter: *“And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:5-8).* Our adherence to these two biblical principles of love will greatly enhance our obedience to the entire Word; our gratitude to God for our deliverance; a deep concern for the spiritual and physical needs of our fellow man; and a sincere desire for the peace, unity and edification of all of our fellow believers in Christ. It will bring glory and honor to God.

Key Verse: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart...soul...mind...and strength ...Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:30-31)

The Joy of Overcoming

“In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Jesus has overcome the world! We may have tribulation in the world. We may face temptations and trials. We may feel weak and sometimes overcome by the world--helpless to defeat Satan by ourselves. But be of good cheer--Jesus has overcome the world. If we die with Him, we can overcome, and shall live with Him also.

“It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him” (2 Tim. 2:11).

No matter what we label them, habitual sins and shortcomings keep us from living in real joy. Overcoming is only possible when deep down inside we reject sin with a finality that says we are done with it. It includes a complete rejection of all sin--from Adultery to Zealotry. There is little joy in overcoming only the obvious sins. James reminds us that if we commit any sin, we are guilty of all the law (Jam. 2:10-11). Praise God for mercy and forgiveness to the repentant soul (Heb. 4:16, 1 John 1:9-10; 2 John 2:1-2), but how much greater joy when we do not allow sin to have dominion over us, because we are not under the law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14).

There is a reason that the Lord God Almighty gave the law to Moses and the Israelites. The actions that were forbidden are sources of hurt and pain. Consider any of the works of the flesh, and it is clear that each is considered sin because it hurts someone. Greed motivates one to benefit at the expense of others. Sexual sins pollute one's own body (1 Cor. 6:18). Telling lies, or even just partial truths, leads to mistrust. Thinking the worst of others leads to broken relationships and is the fruit of believing imaginations and lies that we tell ourselves (2 Cor. 10:5). These are just a few examples of the many different ways that not overcoming leads to sadness and hurt.

On the other hand, overcoming these sins changes everything and brings real joy.

“And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1 John 1:4-10).

In His letters to the seven churches Jesus promised eternal joy to *“him that overcometh”* (Rev. 2 & 3).

There is no greater joy than to know that through Christ Jesus, the Living God has enabled victory over temptation (1 Cor. 10:13). In overcoming sin and self, we find ourselves serving instead of striving, giving instead of taking, loving rather than rejecting, extending mercy rather than judging, and confessing rather than covering up. If we fail, recognizing and confessing our sins and turning away from them is the first step toward restoring joy.

James writes that it is our selfish desires that lead to sin and strife (Jam. 1:14-15; 4:1). If it is our own lusts that lead us to sin, then overcoming can only become reality if we are dead to our own lusts. This is the preaching of Christ. This is the preaching of the Cross. It may seem too simple, but it isn't. If we die to self, we overcome our desires. If we indulge our self, we foster and promote sin. If we sin, we lose our joy. The "good news" is not only that Jesus died for our sins, but that if we die with Him; we shall also reign with Him. It is in dying to self that we obtain the power to live--and to live with joy! This is the second step toward joy.

"For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

Some of us may justify our errors by counting our service to others as a counterbalance to sin. Others may justify a lack of service to others by emphasis on withdrawing from the world. The fullness of joy comes not only through dying to self, but also through loving and serving others for the right reasons. As believers we are called to *fill* our lives with love and service to others, if we hope to experience the full joy of salvation. This is in stark contrast to the man who cleaned out his house and left it swept, garnished, and empty, permitting the evil spirit who had been cast out to return and bringing seven others with him (Matt. 12:43-45). Replacing the empty self-motivated works of the flesh with fruitful Spirit-motivated love and service is the third step toward joy.

It will not bring joy to simply re-label greed as "good stewardship," judgment as "holiness," nor apathy as "tolerance and love." Purity of heart blooms most readily when we are engaged actively in serving others as directed by the Holy Spirit. If we serve, we will have little time for selfish pursuits. Abundant self-indulgence enabled by prosperity along with failure to help the poor was the sin of Sodom (Ezek. 16:49).

The joy of the overcomer is found through: recognition of sin, confession, dying to self, turning away from sin and serving others. Such joy fosters even more joy and provides the strength to go on in the face of difficult tests of faith--and even through persecution. Paul concludes two of his letters with similar thoughts: *"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might"* (Eph. 6:10);

"Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe" (Phil. 3:1).

Perhaps he knew that overcoming brings joy, and joy brings strength, and strength overcomes, and that *"The joy of the Lord is your strength"* (Neh. 8:10).

Key verse: "And these things we write unto you, that your joy may be full." (1 John 1:4)

Spiritual Pride

True humility begins with a broken and contrite spirit that grasps the price Jesus paid on the cross. It glories in the salvation freely given by our Savior, “in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).

It is a sad reality that religious people are vulnerable to an insidious and deceptive pride in their convictions and spiritual understanding. Each of us who truly seek to see ourselves in the light of God’s Word would do well to examine our hearts for any trace of spiritual pride.

Perhaps the clearest biblical definition of spiritual pride is found in Luke 18:9-14 when Jesus spoke a parable to “certain who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others”. The two men went to pray with very different heart motives. The publican—a despised member of society—acknowledged his sin in a humble appeal for the Lord’s mercy. His prayer was heard and he was justified by God. In contrast, the Pharisee—a respected member of a prominent spiritual sect—sought to justify himself before God by putting others down and highlighting his own good deeds. Self-justification is no justification at all (Rom. 10:1-4).

Jesus reserved his strongest words of condemnation for those with spiritual pride. He spoke many “woes” to the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and pride (Matt. 23:1-33). While affirming their teachings, He exposed their hearts for doing good works in order to be seen of men (v. 5). He decried their practice of putting heavy burdens on others (v. 4), and condemned them for “shutting up Heaven” by judging the spiritual condition of others and making their own determination of who was fit in God’s eyes.

He exposed their tendency to over-emphasize certain religious practices while neglecting more important matters of judgment, mercy, and faith (v.23) and He revealed the hypocrisy of an outward appearance of religious faithfulness while hiding corruptness in the heart (v. 25-28). And perhaps most damning, He showed how they failed to see themselves in the Word as they read the prophets and vainly proclaimed that they would not have failed as their fathers did. They were convinced they were right and were not open to being taught or having their thinking challenged.

Saul the Pharisee was evidently filled with spiritual pride as well. He was zealous, but not in a good thing (Gal. 4:17-18). He was convinced that he was right and that he was aligned with God’s Word (Acts 9:1-2).

The converted Paul was also zealously concerned with sound doctrine in what he believed and taught as directed by the Holy Spirit. For instance, he rightly insisted that the new Gentile believers did not need to be circumcised in order to become Christians. But in love he also yielded to the Jewish rituals in order to work for peace in the church (Acts 21:15-26). Where he could have expressed liberty he submitted himself for the sake of his brothers’ conscience in a beautiful example of humility.

We might ask whether spiritual pride is an issue in the Christian faith today. Evidently so, as it warranted strong warning in Acts 20:30, “Of your own selves shall men arise speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.” And in Jude 16, “their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men’s persons in admiration because of advantage.”

Two men are held out as examples in John III. Diotrephes was soundly rebuked because he loved to have the preeminence. His errors included refusing to receive certain believers and church leaders, going so far as to forbid others who did and casting them out of the church. He was guilty of prating; or speaking with idle, careless talk reminiscent of II Pet. 2:12 “speak(ing) evil of the things that they understand not”.

Demetrius, on the other hand, was commended for walking in truth and having a good report of all men. We all have the potential for the actions of both Diotrefes and Demetrius – which are we nurturing?

Apollos was an “eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24) who demonstrated a humble, teachable spirit when Aquila and Priscilla “expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly” (18:26). He was then able to be even more effective in putting his fervent spirit and mighty teaching to work in the Lord’s vineyard.

Above all Jesus, who was equal with God, modeled humility and lacked any pride. It is in this context that we are exhorted to do nothing “through strife or vainglory” and to put on the mind of Christ who “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant”. How fitting that we sing in Zion’s Harp #186, “Behold Jesus, He was humble, He exalted not Himself...in Him dwelt no vain ambition, nor a boasting disposition; so He calls to me and thee, learn humility from me.”

Let us consider some manifestations of spiritual pride and humbly consider whether we have any of them in our lives:

A spiritually proud individual is convinced that he is right and most everyone else is wrong, leading to a disregard for others (Rom. 12:16). He might hold to the false idea that if two people disagree, one is necessarily deceived and thus build around himself an impregnable wall of self-justification.

A spiritually proud person sees himself as more enlightened than others, claiming to having been led of the Holy Spirit, even in areas that conflict with Scripture. Someone in this advanced state of deception is almost completely unwilling to receive correction.

A spiritually proud brother or sister is willing to raise themselves above God-appointed and accountable church leadership while making themselves accountable to no one. They may justify taking undue liberties (Gal. 5:13) or they may practice unwarranted severity (Col. 2:20-23), in both cases motivated by spiritual pride.

A spiritually proud man or woman is closed to input from others whom they have deemed beneath them. They hold their own beliefs and convictions as unassailable, and are not open to counsel, more because they have held them for a long time or heard them over and over again than because they are biblically based.

Sadly, this prideful condition is usually covered by a false humility that actually draws attention to the individual in a subtle and hidden manner. False humility is pride in its most cloaked and deceptive form.

When we find any trace of these things in our lives, the biblical remedy is found through confession and repentance, trusting a merciful Savior who shed His blood that we might be forgiven and cleansed from all unrighteousness (I John 1:9) and sanctified by the Word (Eph. 5:26). May God grant us grace to see ourselves as we truly are in the light of the Word.

Theme verse: “Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.” Matt. 23:12

A New Commandment

“The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell; It goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell.” Hymns of Zion, #289, verse 1.

One of the most fundamental needs of mankind is to love and be loved. One of Satan’s greatest weapons is to cause strife and a loss of love among God’s people.

With these thoughts in mind, we think of the message of Jesus Christ: *“A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another”* (John 13:34).

With the need for love so universal, we might wonder why it was necessary for Jesus to deliver a new commandment. It seems that it should just come naturally, especially for God’s chosen people.

There was a degree of love among God’s people before Jesus came to earth. The word “love” or a form of the word appears in the Old Testament hundreds of times, and yet those teachings were very difficult to apply by the efforts of man. In spite of the instruction to *“Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt”* (Deut 10:19), when it came to loving people, most of their efforts were directed only toward those of their own nation. The way they treated their enemies was certainly very different than what Christ taught later.

A new understanding of loving one another was needed. The love that God showed by sending His Son to die for our sins, and the love that His Son showed by willingly coming to live in a sin-filled world and then die for those who committed the sins, goes far beyond anything demonstrated under the Law of Moses. Thus it was necessary for Jesus to emphasize a new way of thinking about relationships with God and among His people.

We must remember that Jesus did not come to destroy the Law. He came to fulfill it. One of the definitions of “fulfill” is to accomplish what was intended. The Children of Israel were not living as God intended. They needed to go well beyond the “minimum” in terms of love for one another. They needed to love with a new heart (Ezek. 36:26-27).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained that the commandments in the Law of Moses needed to be taken to a much higher level. He often exhorted the believer to purity and obedience, starting in the heart. (Matt. 5-7; Mark 7:20-23). James 1:13-16 further clarifies the importance of resisting temptation in the privacy of the heart and thus avoiding the resulting sin. Jesus also said *“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good unto them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you”* (Matt. 5:43-44). That was certainly a change from what the children of Israel were used to doing.

It was so important to Christ that we show love toward one another that He did not want us to even approach the altar with a gift if we were lacking in love. This could apply to any act of service. *“Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee: Leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift”* (Matt. 5:23-24). It is not enough to abstain from physical sin; we must not allow the thought of sin to take root in our minds and we must seek peace among ourselves (Rom. 12:18). Other examples could be given from Christ’s sermons that would extend the intent of God’s commandments.

As we can readily understand, the concept of love at the level that Jesus commanded was truly “new” in the minds and thoughts of the people. Jesus put it all in perspective when He was asked by a lawyer, which is the great commandment. He replied that we are to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind, and the second is like unto it. We are to love our neighbor as our self. He then taught them that on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matt. 22:35-40).

There are many examples we could cite of Christ’s great love for us. First, He left the glories of heaven and came to earth to live among sinful men. He knew that He would face all of the temptations that Satan could devise against Him. He knew that he would experience torment from those in authority and, perhaps more significantly, from His own people (“*For neither did His brethren believe on Him*” John 7:5). He knew that He would face a brutal trial and a horrific death. Finally, He knew that He would face the burden of bearing the sins of the entire world. In spite of all of this, He willingly came to rescue man from sin. It was said of Him that “*...he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil*” (Luke 6:35).

Jesus said “*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*” (John 15:13). He lived those words to the very end. As He was dying on the cross, He was concerned about the welfare of His mother and asked John to take care of her (John 19:27). He interceded for a dying sinner who realized at the very end of his life that he was not prepared for eternity (Luke 23:43). Also, he forgave His executioners even though none of them acknowledged that they needed forgiveness (Luke 23:34). We are the recipients of such great love. Jesus prayed for us personally: “*I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them*” (John 17:26). Finally, “*We love him because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19).

Jesus emphasized that to demonstrate true love, we must know the source of love. “*As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love*” (John 15:9). He also made it clear that our love for Him must be evident in our lives: “*If ye love me, keep my commandments*” (John 14:15).

How can we demonstrate to everyone around us that we are truly seeking to follow Christ’s example? “*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*” (John 13:35.)

Key verse: “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another...”

The Assurance of True Faith

The danger of labeling a complex subject is that we run the risk of oversimplifying to the point of distortion. Such may be the case with “once saved, always saved,” the common name for the false doctrine of unconditional eternal security. Make no mistake: it is a false doctrine; the Word clearly shows that. However, in rejecting “once saved, always saved,” we must be careful not to deny the power of God in the lives of His children. Let’s review what we know from the Word about our salvation, the promise of eternal life, and the need to remain faithful.

First, we must recognize that God is sovereign and free to save whomever He wills (Rom. 9:15). When Adam sinned, God would have been justified in closing the book on His relationship with man. *“But God, who is rich in mercy...even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ...that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace...for by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God”* (Eph. 2:4-8). God *chooses* to save those who come in humble faith in Christ (Eph. 1:15-16; 1 Tim 2:4), and thus His people are repeatedly called the “chosen” and the “elect” (Col. 3:12).

Though God’s gift of salvation is unearned, it is not unconditional. The answer to the Philippian jailer’s question, “What must I do to be saved?” was a condition: *“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved”* (Acts 16:31). God’s Word has many conditional statements, including 2 Chron. 7:14: *“If my people...shall turn from their wicked ways,”* and Romans 10:9: *“If thou shalt confess...and believe that God hath raised [Jesus] from the dead, thou shalt be saved.”* Thus, we know that God requires genuine faith on the part of those who are to inherit eternal life. Further basic responses are embodied in the *“fruits of repentance,”* which result from true faith (Mat. 3:8): confession of sin, sorrow for and turning away from sin, and submission of one’s will to God’s by obedience to His Word. They are modeled in David’s Psalm 51 prayer and proclaimed by God as the type of heart He seeks: *“...him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembleth at my word”* (Is. 66:2). God promises to save those who choose to respond in faith to His free gift (John 1:12).

God desires that all men come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9) and that those whom He saves possess their vessel in sanctification and honor, *“for God hath called us unto holiness”* (1 Thes. 4:3-4, 7). We are sanctified as a result of God in His mercy justifying us through Christ. It is His work, available by grace through faith (Heb. 10:10, 14; 12:14; Phil. 2:12-13). We are to be dead to sin and alive unto Christ, no longer under the dominion of sin (Rom. 6:11, 14).

Yet, as Christians, we are subject to temptation and if we yield it is sin. If we deny this, we deceive ourselves (1 John 1:8; 5:17). We are called to walk in faith and in the Spirit, whereby we can overcome temptation (Rom. 6:13; 1 Cor. 10:13). Thankfully, Christ is our *“advocate with the Father”* and *“the propitiation for our sins,”* (1 John 2:1-2). We trust His ongoing sanctifying work in our lives (John 17:17; Eph. 5:25-26) which moves us to humbly repent for any sin we commit and be cleansed through the propitiating sacrifice of Jesus Christ, by which he is qualified to be our advocate (1 John 1:7-9; Heb. 7:24-25; 9:14, 22; 10:19). Thus, we need not live in anxious fear of our salvation being snatched away. God promises to never leave or forsake us (Heb. 13:5), and He wants us to rest in the confidence of the gift of eternal life. The same Paul who warned of *“every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us”* (Heb. 12:1), expressed confidence that *“he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ”* (Phil. 1:6). We who are in Christ Jesus rest in the promises that no external forces can separate us from Him (Rom. 8:38-39).

We may, however, choose to walk away (Luke 8:13, Heb. 6:6). Man’s free will does not end at the foot of the cross. Christ said, *“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his*

cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Indeed, the Word teaches that some will walk away. Paul writes, *“The Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils, speaking lies in hypocrisy, and having their conscience seared with a hot iron”* (1 Tim. 4:1). Christ warned the church at Ephesus: *“Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen...or I will come unto thee quickly and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent”* (Rev. 2:5). He later exhorts them to *“be faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life”* (Rev. 2:10), which echoes his earlier words: *“He that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved”* (Mat. 24:13). Clearly, lifelong perseverance is another condition of God’s free gift of eternal life.

These Scriptures refute any notion that man is free to do what he pleases upon finding salvation in Christ. They also counter the idea that a man who “falls away” was never really saved in the first place. We must remain diligent in our walk with God life-long. In Hebrews we read this warning: *“Exhort one another...lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, for we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end”* (Heb. 3:13-14). 2 Peter 2:20-22 removes any remaining doubt: *“If, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb: the dog is turned to his own vomit again, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.”*

What a joy to undergird our peace by simply trusting in the whole counsel of God. *“Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith...”* (Heb. 10:22); *“Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast...”* (Heb.6:19).

Key Verse: “These things have I written unto you...that ye may know that ye have eternal life...” (1 John 5:13)

Church Governance

“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation” (Rom. 13:1-2). *“Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king”* (1 Pet. 2:17).

Every one of us is under various levels of authority and all are called upon to respect and/or exercise various types of authority: in the home, the nation, the work place and the church, with all being ultimately under the authority of Almighty God. This article discusses church governance from the perspective of its biblical role and responsibilities, as well as our individual obligations as members of the church, the Body of Christ.

Paul explains: *“And he gave some, apostles, and some, prophets: and some evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”* (Eph. 4:11-12).

We are given some examples of the structure and function of church authority in the New Testament. This includes the labors of the Apostles Paul and Peter in shepherding various churches, Paul’s instructions to Timothy (1 Tim. 3:1-13) and Titus (Tit. 1:5) to ordain elders and deacons (including their qualifications), ordination of deacons by the twelve Apostles (Acts 7:1-7), and the assembly of apostles and elders at Jerusalem to address church issues (Acts 15:1-29). The Apostle Peter, himself an elder and inspired of God, gives very sound and helpful counsel to all who are called to serve in this office (1 Pet. 5:1-9). We believe that our forefathers were diligent in applying biblical examples and teachings when the roles and functions of our church leadership were established. Many aspects of our church authority structure are outlined in the section on Apostolic Christian Church Governance in our Statement of Faith.

We have examples of the calling to leadership of Moses (Ex. 3:11-22; 4:1-17), David (1 Sam. 16:1-13), Isaiah (Is. 6:1-9), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:1-10) and others. They were called from various backgrounds and due to their limitations there was often a humble reluctance to serve. Yet God assured them He would provide. Serving in the office of elder is a very humbling experience (Acts 20:19). It requires a willing heart (1 Cor. 9:17), much prayer, and grace and wisdom from above. Our brothers and sisters have been faithful over the years in fulfilling the simple request of the Apostle Paul: *“Brethren pray for us”* (1 Thes. 5:25).

God will grant a shepherd’s heart to those He calls to this role, as so beautifully described by Jeremiah: *“And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith the Lord”* (Jer. 23:4).

Elders are accountable to Almighty God, to the Elder Body, and to the congregations they serve (1 Cor. 4:2). They work together for the biblical unity, spiritual welfare, and peace of the Brotherhood. Each elder before he is approved, makes a promise before the Elder Body to support their conclusions as reached by candid and respectful deliberation and counsel, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit and based on the whole counsel of God’s Word (Phil. 1:27; Acts 15). There is no hierarchy in the Elder Body and brothers are asked to serve on rotating committees for the sake of order (1 Cor. 14:40) and to carry out various spiritual and administrative duties.

What are the responsibilities for all of us as members of the Body of Christ? As already mentioned, prayer is the first priority. We are taught to respect our leaders highly for their labors on our

behalf and for the Lord's church. *"Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, specially they that labor in the Word and doctrine"* (1 Tim. 5:17). Our responsibility according to the Word goes even deeper: *"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you"* (Heb. 13:7). This scriptural teaching may go against our nature. It certainly stands out against the strong cultural trends to set aside and criticize authority. But obeying God's Word brings peace and joy—exactly the kind of environment He seeks for His beloved Body, the church, as it works together in love and mutual respect and points the lost to the Lord Jesus Christ.

We find examples in the Old Testament of both blessing and condemnation, depending upon how God-given authority was viewed. Jethro gave fatherly, constructive advice to Moses--and all were blessed (Ex. 18:13-27). Korah rose up in rebellion against Moses and he and his followers were destroyed (Num. 16:1-35). David was sought by Saul, but he was mindful of God's warning: *"Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm"* (1 Chron. 16:22). Absalom rebelled against King David and lost his life (2 Sam. 15:4—18:17). Undermining and resisting authority is defined as the sin of sedition and is named among the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:20).

When an elder does not follow a consistent pattern of godly, compassionate service and does not adhere to the Word which requires that he receive counsel, there is a mechanism in place and scriptural directives to address this appropriately (1 Tim. 5:19-20). We are thankful that these measures have not had to be taken very often as we have been blessed with many faithful men of God who devote a significant portion of their lives on our behalf and are motivated to serve by the love of Jesus Christ who gave His all for us (2 Cor. 5:14; Eph. 5:25).

As elders it is uncomfortable for us to write or speak about the topic of church governance. Yet, we take seriously the warning that no Scripture is ever to be set aside or diminished (Rev. 22:18-19). Rather, *"...all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works"* (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

A "thoroughly furnished" church will apply all of these teachings with loving diligence. Good open communication will be encouraged. Spiritual leaders will be easy to be entreated and impartial (Jam. 3:17). It will be understood that they must be vigilant, providing oversight with a Christ-like, sacrificial love, giving sound warnings and admonitions with clarity (John 10:11; 21:15-17; 1 Pet. 5:8). God will richly bless His flocks when they follow His teachings in humility and love.

Key verse: *"...live in peace and the God of love and peace shall be with you"* (2 Cor. 13:11).

The Faithful Church: Defined By Love

In Revelations 3:7-13 we are given an encouraging description of a church that Christ found to be very sound in their service toward God. We often hear the church in Philadelphia described as the faithful or loyal church. Christ had nothing negative to say about the church that was in Philadelphia.

What was so special about the church in Philadelphia? Jesus said the church of Philadelphia "... *hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name*" (Rev.3:8). Philadelphia was faithful to the Word of God and to the name of Jesus.

What does it mean to be faithful? To be faithful is to be firmly connected to the truth and to duty; to be constant in performance and true to one's word.

Throughout the year the concept of "the faithful church" will be explored in a number of ways in these "Light from the Word" articles. In this first one, we will look at the faithful church as defined by love.

Since the faithful church is defined by love (Col. 1:2-4), we need to understand what that means. We must go beyond simply defining love. We need to better understand the application of godly love, which always seeks what is best for us. We could easily go to the dictionary for definitions or we could go on line and get hundreds of opinions about what it means. However, since we are talking about the faithful church, the bride of Christ, we should look to the Word of God for application of His love through instructions as to how we should live. The Word gives many teachings which establish standards and boundaries that are for our spiritual welfare. Through submission to God's loving direction and care, we can benefit from the many instructions in His Word that guide us aright and enable us to overcome the temptations that Satan brings. (1 John 2:15, 5:1-3; Rev. 12:11).

Love comes to us from many sources. We must begin with "*God is love*" (1 John 4:16) and "*...love is of God*" (1 John 4:7). There is no greater definition of love, nor is there a greater source of love than God. "*We love him because he first loved us*" (1 John 4:19). If we want to live godly lives, we must demonstrate godly love. We must also be willing to share our love with many others and in many circumstances. Godly love is an attribute of holiness. God said "*Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy.*" (Lev. 19:2).

Jesus said, "*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self*" (Matt. 22:37-39). If we apply these two commandments to our daily walk of life, we will find many opportunities to expand and share our love.

Our love for God extends to our love for Christ who is of God. Our love for Christ can best be expressed by following His example as portrayed in the Word of God. Jesus emphasized the importance of being faithful through obedience when He said "*If ye love me, keep my commandments*" (John 14:15). He also said, "*as I have loved you, that ye also love one another*" (John 13:34).

Part of loving God is to recognize that, unworthy though we may be, God still loves us and shows it in powerful ways. "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16). God's love for us exceeds our ability to comprehend it.

Our love for God will be evident if we love God's people. This is a direct application of the second great commandment. It was also emphasized by Peter when he wrote that we should see that "...ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently" (1 Pet. 1:22), and "Love the brotherhood" (1 Pet. 2:17).

Additionally our love for God is expressed by our love for the church, the bride of Christ. Each congregation is made up of brothers, sisters, converts, friends and children. How much we love them is a reflection of how much we love God. We know that some people are easier to love than others. We also know that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. If our love for God is only as strong as our love for the least of His people, perhaps the brother or sister who is most difficult to love, how strong is our love for God?

We also demonstrate love for God through our love for our family. It is easy to love everyone in our family when everything is going well, but how do we respond if our spouse or child frequently disappoints us? If God only loved us as much as we love our spouse or child at the most difficult of times, would we truly feel the love of God? God loves us in spite of who we are and in spite of our imperfections.

If the only requirement to be a part of the faithful church would be to love our Heavenly Father, His Son, the Holy Spirit, our brotherhood and our family, that would seem to be enough of a challenge. However, to truly fulfill the requirement for godly love, we must go much further.

We are to love our neighbor as our self (Matt. 22:39), and although the word "love" is not used in these scriptural references, we are to love the fatherless and widows (Jam.1:27), and the stranger (Matt. 25:35). To complete the definition, or boundaries of biblical love, we must add Christ's exhortation to love our enemies (Matt. 5:44). In order to apply the standards which godly love sets for us, it is necessary to examine our lives very carefully. We must also examine the Scriptures carefully to grasp what they teach us about love. Jesus did not overlook sin (as evidenced by His actions in the temple or His reaction to those who thought themselves perfect), but He never allowed His dissatisfaction with sinful behavior to cause Him to lose sight of His mission on this earth—to reach out to everyone in love. We must do likewise.

There will be individuals and situations that will try our love to the limit, but he who is faithful until the end will find his name in the Book of Life. If the faithful church is defined by love, it must consist of members whose lives are defined by love.

Key verse: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)

The Faithful Church: Based on Whole Counsel of God

As believers, we can be so grateful that God has revealed Himself to us. He does that in a variety of ways but primarily through His Word, the Bible. As we “labor in doctrine” (1 Tim. 5:17) to discern the whole counsel of God through His Word, we need to rely on the Holy Spirit, the authority of church leadership, and a multitude of counselors as we humbly seek to gain insight into God’s will for us.

As we consider the critically important matter of determining the whole counsel of God, we must humbly recognize our own fallibility and hold a reverence for God and His revealed Word. Our Sovereign God has chosen what to reveal and what will remain secret (Deut. 29:29). We must also have a deep respect for the inspired nature of God’s Word and a trust that it is absolutely true and given for our learning. “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works*” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). As Apostolic Christians, we believe that “the Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God to man” (Statement of Faith #1).

God’s Word is nowhere more manifest than in the embodiment—or incarnation, literally “in the flesh”—of His Son, the man Jesus Christ. John begins his gospel with this foundation, “*in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” (John 1:1). John makes it clear that this Word is Jesus Christ who “*was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth*” (v. 14). Any effort to comprehend the purposes and will of God should be considered through the lens of Christ’s life and mind which we are commanded to mimic (Phil. 2:5).

The Word itself gives guidance on its purpose and how we are to use it. “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom;*” (Col. 3:16) “*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.*” (Psa. 119:105). In applying God’s Word, we soon find that it cuts to the heart of the matter, true to its description as a sharp sword (Heb. 4:12, Eph. 6:17).

We are warned to handle God’s Word carefully and without deceit. “*But (we) have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully;*” (2 Cor. 4:2). Rather we are entreated to apply it carefully in our lives. “*Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth*” (2 Tim. 2:15).

These warnings are given because there is a very real possibility that we could apply the Word incorrectly. Even the Apostle Paul was subject to verification of his words and preaching. Indeed the Bereans were commended for not only receiving the word (from Paul) “*with all readiness of mind*”, indicating an openness and engaged heart and mind, but also a sincere desire to discern the truth in the light of God’s Word as they “*searched the scriptures daily (to see) whether these things were so*” (Acts 17:11).

As fallible people, we are subject to the temptation to approach God’s Word with the intent to justify ourselves or to find support for our beliefs. If we truly desire to be directed of God, we must read the Bible to see what He says we should believe and how we should live without determining beforehand what we think it says. It can be all too easy to “proof-text” our beliefs – to search until we find a verse that seems to support our thought and stop there, perhaps well short of the “whole counsel” of God on the matter.

Another trap is to lift a verse from the pages of God’s Word and use it in isolation, or out of context. Satan did this when tempting Jesus. The enemy told the Lord, “For it is written, He shall give

his angels charge over thee, to keep thee” (Luke 4:10) and boldly suggested that Jesus test this verse by throwing Himself from the pinnacle of the temple. Jesus rebuked him with the fullness of God’s Word and the balance of “*thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God*” (Luke 4:12, Deut. 6:16).

In an example from the Civil War, a preacher from the South used Joel 2:20, “*I will remove far off from you the northern army, and will drive him into a land barren and desolate...and his stink shall come up, and his ill savor*” to suggest that the North was wrong and would ultimately fail. The outcome of that conflict reveals the folly of such a thing and we must be careful today not to make the same errors. Similarly, countless attempts to pinpoint the end of the world have been fruitless and have caused many to scoff (II Pet. 3:3-4). As we heard at conference, we have no authority to divide God’s Word more than He does.

The very real possibility that we could take a verse out of context or inappropriately emphasize one area of Scripture to the exclusion of the other necessitates a caution in the practice of randomly opening the Bible and laying too much weight on what we read there in isolation from other Scriptures. This in no way denies the blessings and benefits of letting the Scriptures fall open and preaching by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But we should consider our flesh whenever we approach God’s Word and be especially aware that we could be tempting God by pressing Him to answer our specific questions. Job learned that God is Sovereign and will reveal what He wants us to know in His good time and way.

In our desire to be led of God we must recognize that interpretation is not a private or individual matter (2 Pet. 1:20-21). We are influenced by a culture that prizes, promotes, and exalts individualism. But God’s Word is replete with warnings of the dangers of pride, self-sufficiency, and independence. If we find ourselves resisting the church, our parents, and/or the pattern of Christian understanding throughout the ages, we should stop and question our thinking, motives, and heart. God is not the author of confusion but of peace (1 Cor. 14:33).

Finally, we can be thankful to be a part of a church that continues to seek to follow the whole counsel of God together, and in doing so, to experience the blessings of unity of brethren (Psa. 133:1).

Theme verse: “For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

The Faithful Church: Obedient to Scripture

Motivated by our love for God and a deep desire to please Him, members of the faithful church are called to obey His Word, “... *that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more*” (1 Thes. 4:1). Jesus stated simply, “*If ye love me, keep my commandments*” (John 14:15). Faith is at one with obedience, which provides evidence of its validity. (Jam. 2:18) We are taught that “*without faith it is impossible to please Him*” (Heb. 11:6) and that Abraham, the father of faith, exemplified faith in action. “*By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive as an inheritance, obeyed*” (Heb. 11:8). By our obedience we not only prove our love for God, but we establish ourselves as one of His own: “*But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him*” (1 John 2:5).

The faithful church understands and appreciates the significance of the Scriptures. Not only do the Scriptures give us comfort, hope, and joy for our daily lives, but God’s Word also provides the wisdom and instruction to obtain our eternal salvation. “*And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works*” (2 Tim. 3:15-17). Obedience to the Word of God is vital because the Scriptures will provide the standard of judgment in the last day. “*He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day*” (John 12:48).

In order to obey the Scriptures, one must have personal knowledge of them. Wisdom, prudence, and godly fear characterize sound biblical knowledge. “...*that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding*” (Col. 1:9); “*The heart of the prudent getteth knowledge...*” (Prov. 18:15); and “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge...*” (Prov. 1:7). Asking God to give us spiritual discernment as we prayerfully and reverently read and study His inspired Word results in the correct understanding of the “*word of truth*” (2 Tim. 2:15). Knowledge of the Scriptures at a personal level is essential that one be “*grounded and settled*” in the faith (Col. 1:23), and be not “*carried about with every wind of doctrine*” (Eph. 4:14). A sincere love for our God and a Spirit-led knowledge of His Word results in humble obedience to Him and brings true joy to the heart of the believer: “*O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day. I have not departed from thy judgments: for thou hast taught me. How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth.*” (Psa. 119:97, 102-103). It is only with God’s grace that we can humbly comply with the teachings of His Word. (John 15:5)

We believe responsibility for doctrinal stewardship within the church rests with all of us, and with heightened accountability and authority with the Elder Body. Through prayer, the leading of the Holy Spirit and a firm reliance upon Scriptures, our elders humbly seek to provide sound teaching and to encourage correct understanding and application of the principles of God’s Word in all our lives (Acts 15; 1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Tim. 4:13, 16; 5:17; 2 Tim. 4:2). They must not carry out these duties as “*lords,*” but as humble servants, motivated by the love of Christ. (1 Pet. 5:2-3, John 21:15-17). Another duty of church leadership is to serve as “*watchmen on the wall*” and sound the alarm when matters of spiritual significance confront the church. They are to be vigilant in watching for the cunning devices and methods which Satan is constantly refining to try to destroy us. (1 Pet. 5:8) Submission to church authority is asked of us as another expression of God’s love for His church and His care for our souls. (1 Thes. 2:11-13; Heb. 13:17) As God’s children, we are to search the Scriptures and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to confirm that what we are being taught is sound, scripturally-based truth (John 16:13; Acts 17:10-11).

The proper interpretation of God's Word is crucial for maintaining sound doctrine so that the faithful church may continue to "*earnestly contend for the faith*" (Jude 3). Scripture exhorts us to not add to or take away from biblical truth, to avoid misapplication of Scripture, and to humbly seek and receive counsel (Prov. 12:15, 30:5-6; Gal. 6:3; 2 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 22:17-18). To lay aside true doctrine ultimately results in disobedience to God's Word: "*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables*" (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Praying for our elders will greatly assist in their discernment of God's Word. "*Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you*" (2 Thes. 3:1). Earnestly seeking to teach and obey "*all the counsel of God*" as the source of absolute truth is a tremendous safeguard in maintaining sound doctrine (Acts 20:27).

The Scriptures contain many promises and blessings for the believer who lives an overcoming life through obedience, by His grace. As a faithful church, we become members of the family of God, "*For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother*" (Matt. 12:50). Keeping His Word brings us the blessing of divine fellowship, "*Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him*" (John 14:23). Obedience to Scripture enhances peace and unity within the church: "*...that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel*" (Phil. 1:27). The ultimate outcome for all loyal believers in Christ of the faithful church will be an eternal home in heaven: "*Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city*" (Rev. 22:14).

Key Verse: "If ye love me, keep my commandments." (John 14:15)

The Faithful Church: Submissive

The faithful church is based on love and obedience to the whole counsel of God's Word. These biblical principles were discussed in previous Light from the Word articles. We will now focus on the essential attribute of submissiveness on the part of each member of the body, so that it can grow stronger as a whole and bear much fruit to the honor and glory of God.

The faithful church consists of a group of believers who are committed to serving God and edifying one another. We are bound together in a living, God-ordained body whose success relies upon love-driven submission by each member. *"From whom (Christ) the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love"* (Eph.4:16).

Submission consists of yielding our own will or preferences with the understanding that there is a higher purpose to be attained. This purpose includes bringing glory to God by dwelling together in peace and unity, which also brings special blessings to the church: *"...live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you"* (2 Cor. 13:11). Submission requires a bending of our will, and its true beauty is born of our devotion to God and to what He has called us to be. It is not submission if we comply only when we agree with what is asked.

Jesus has set the perfect example of submission. He said, *"I can of mine own self do nothing...because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me"* (John 5:30). The ultimate act of submission was when Christ laid down His life on our behalf. We see that His submission to God's plan for our salvation created an agonizing struggle for Him. He prayed earnestly, *"Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done"* (Luke 22:42). His struggle arose from a pure, sinless heart which was facing the unthinkable burden of being separated from His Father because of our sin.

God understands how we as humans wrestle with our prideful self-will and how easy it is to justify what we think is right. *"Every way of man is right in his own eyes: but the Lord pondereth the hearts"* (Prov. 21:2). A humble spirit will help us acknowledge our struggles with the carnal mind before the Lord and seek His grace for objective discernment. We will remember that we are to seek the welfare of our brother and the entire body of believers above our own. *"Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth (well-being)"* (1 Cor. 10:24). We probably will not be asked to lay down our life for another, but it can also be very difficult to give up our self-will. *"Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren"* (1 John 3:16).

There will always be differences of opinion among brethren on this earth regarding liberty and restraint in application of God's Word in various matters. (Rom. 14) Some things should be respectfully left to individual conscience and others require establishment of standards within the church which are based on biblical principles. When our faith rests on the foundation of Jesus Christ and our relationships within His body are based on selfless, Christ-like love, we can trust that the Holy Spirit will guide the church in these matters (John 16:13). In the pattern of the Apostles (Acts 15:1-29), humble servant leaders search the Scriptures and rely upon the Holy Spirit for direction; and as submissive brethren we receive their direction with joy. (Acts 15:30-31) That is a joy that springs from a humble recognition that we benefit from and vitally need loving direction from others as we walk with a limited understanding as individuals. (1 Pet. 5:5) This is made possible only by God's grace.

We are cautioned by the warning that no Scripture is of private (personal) interpretation (2 Pet. 1:20). We also recognize that if our motive for counsel is only to seek reinforcement of our views from those who agree with us, we are neglecting the safety of broader understanding. (Prov. 11:14) If we become "...wise in our own conceits (opinions)" (Rom. 12:16), we will be unable to reason together and live in a peaceable, harmonious relationship within the body. The Apostle Paul compares the marriage relationship to that of Christ and the church, His body. (Eph. 5:22-33) He begins this discourse with the exhortation: "*Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God*" (Eph. 5:21). The fear of God causes us to take very seriously our marriage relationships as well as our responsibilities within the church. The fear of God should cause us to tremble when we consider that He hates "putting away." (Mal. 2:16) As in marriage, there is a covenant-based oneness among the members of the body of Christ into which we are baptized. (1 Cor. 12:12-13) If we become influenced by the attitudes of the divorce culture of the world, our minds may begin to toy with the desire to escape the obligations we once vowed to fulfill. The concept "irreconcilable differences" has arisen from this divorce culture and is used by many to justify breaking the sacred marriage relationship. This same false reasoning is sometimes used to justify breaking the bonds of brotherly love within the church family. (1 Cor. 12:25) This concept has no scriptural basis. "*Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves*" (Phil. 2:3). Nothing is impossible with God when His grace is applied and brethren are willing to make sincere effort to achieve the higher purpose (mission) God has established for His church. This includes spreading the Gospel message of salvation to the lost, nurturing the believers, preserving sound doctrine and offering loving deeds of service to our fellow human beings. Jesus prayed that the church would walk in the love and mind of Christ, enabling the world to know why He came. (John 17:23)

The faithful church will seek to practice submission as prescribed in the Word of God and exemplified by Christ. It will be known for its brotherly love, compassion for all, peace, and unity of spirit. In an atmosphere of love, trust and mutual respect, submission will not be a burden, but a privilege. Jesus said, "...my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:30). "*Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous*" (1 Pet. 3:8).

Key Verse: "Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God." (Eph. 5:21)

The Faithful Church: Separated from the World – Part 1

As believers, we read much in the Bible about the dangers of “the world.” How do we recognize various aspects of worldliness (carnality, ungodliness, being spotted by the world) and protect ourselves from its influences? We can readily recognize forms of ungodliness such as pornography as being evil by their very nature. However, not all things that are temporal are inherently evil. They only become so when we overdo our affection for them, spend too much time in seeking after them, or misuse them. God’s Word tells us, “*Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him*” (1 John 2:15). Satan, the master deceiver, loves to mix good and evil together and then tell us “it is not that bad” or regarding popular sins that “everyone is doing it.” Again, the Scriptures warn us “... *a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump*” (1Cor. 5:6) and “*Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil...*” (Ex. 23:2). Applying sound judgment in all these cases requires that we pray for discernment: “*Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart...that I may discern between good and bad:*” (1 Kings 3:9).

Various Scriptures describe worldliness as an entanglement with the ungodly and temporal affairs of this life (Matt. 6:19-21, 2 Cor. 4:18, 2 Tim. 2:4). Worldliness covers a broad area, and contains both inward and outward characteristics. The inward includes sins of the heart such as pride, envy, lust, etc. This article will address two examples of worldly entanglement: the misuse of wealth and abuse of technology. It is always wise to consider how the biblical principles related to the examples may apply to other areas where we struggle personally.

An aspect of ungodliness that receives a great deal of attention in God’s Word is our attitude about and our use of wealth (1 Tim. 6:6-11). Too much emphasis on material gain almost invariably results in our spending prolonged excessive time and attention on work and less with our family. This may cause us to neglect important priorities, such as family devotions or even church attendance. “*All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not*” (1 Cor. 10:23-24).

Trusting in riches arises from wrong desires of the heart, including selfishness, greed and pride, and may cause us to forget God who gives us our possessions. “*And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the LORD thy God...*” (Deut. 8:12-14). Jesus’ words make it very clear that trusting in riches is a hindrance to our entering heaven. “...*Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!*” (Mark 10:24).

Scripturally speaking, there are also many good uses of wealth. Without it, we could not properly care for our families, build churches nor provide for the poor through charitable giving. “... *let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth*” (Eph. 4:28). With the possession of wealth comes unmistakable responsibility. “*Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate*” (1Tim. 6:17-18). Jesus sums up the proper attitude regarding our wealth with the following principle: “*But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*” (Matt. 6:20-21).

Similar to wealth, technology also possesses both worthwhile and dangerous applications. Technology continues to advance at an astounding rate. As an illustration, the memory and processing capability of today’s average smartphone is greater than the computer used to land Apollo 11 on the

moon. Unfortunately, its misuse is often a source of ungodliness in that which we see and hear. *“I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes”* (Psa. 101:3) is a clear biblical precept that should be applied by every believer, since church leaders cannot be expected to specifically address each new technology as soon as it appears. Honest answers to the following questions may be useful in providing discernment in our use of technology: *“Do I really need it?” “Am I using it wisely?” “Does it tempt me?”*

Spending too much time with any technology, solely for purposes of entertainment and frivolous communication, borders on modern day idolatry. *“Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play”* (1 Cor. 10:7). In another Scripture, we are told to *“redeem (make the best use of) our time, because the days are evil”* (Eph. 5:16). Many of the challenges we face seem to be continually changing and increasing in complexity. We might even find ourselves wondering if God’s Word still applies to every situation we face. Let us consider the account of Paul addressing a divisive question regarding worldliness: should believers purchase and eat meat previously offered in sacrifice to idols? The Apostle reminded the Corinthian church of two important scriptural principles: first, Christ shed His blood equally for each one of us. Second, charity towards our fellow believers (showing an active and sincere love) will prevent offense and judgmental attitudes (Rom. 14:15, 1 Cor. 8). Paul exhorts us to apply the principles of God’s Word, worshipping God in spirit and in truth, and out of a heart of humility and Christ-like love. In addition, he sets aside his personal feelings in order to set an example for the church. *“I will eat no flesh, lest I make my brother to offend”* (1 Cor. 8:13).

The timeless principles of God’s Word are relevant yet today when we humbly apply them to our lives. A church body is obligated to protect itself from the dangers of worldliness, but if we place more emphasis on man-made rules, however well-intended, than on the principles of God’s Word, we are relying on the *“oldness of the letter”* (the old law) rather than the *“newness of the spirit”* (Rom. 7:6). One purpose of the Holy Spirit within the heart of believers is the correct understanding and application of the Word of God. *“And take (use)...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”* (Eph. 6:17). The topic of Separation from the World continues in next month’s *“Light from the Word.”*

The Faithful Church: Separated from the World – Part 2

The Faithful Church: Separated from the World-Part 1 focused on what constitutes worldliness (carnality, ungodliness, being spotted by the world), the misuse of wealth, and the abuse of technology. This article will focus on modesty and relationships. Modesty will include attitudes of the heart (pride/humility), lifestyles/entertainment and appearance.

Modesty is motivated by a love for Christ. It includes good moral behavior, wholesome appearance, appreciation of values, such as: submission, humility, kindness, and a lack of sensuality or desire for power. Modesty is sometimes called “sweet reasonableness”. Modesty and moderation go hand in hand.

We may struggle to put the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21) in proper perspective with modesty. However, Jesus had no problem with that. He went to the core of the matter: the attitude of the heart.

“And he said, that which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornication, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.” Mark 7:20-23

Jesus didn’t distinguish which of those sins were the most serious. Throughout His ministry He seemed to stress the importance of the heart (attitude) of man. We must be careful that we do not take lightly some inappropriate behavior while condemning others. All of them are evil.

Although pride in and of itself may not be worse than the other issues, pride seems to lay the foundation that other heart issues build upon. What is in the heart will be revealed by our actions. Jesus recognized this and helped us understand that if our heart is not separated from the world (pure), our actions cannot be separated from the world. Pride is a feeling of the heart that causes us to be deceived and to think more highly of ourselves than we should. There are many scriptural warnings against pride and many examples where pride caused the downfall of the proud person.

“The wicked in his pride doth persecute the poor: let them be taken in the devices that they have imagined” Ps. 10:2. *“Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall”* Prov.16:18. *“For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life is not of the Father, but is of the world”* 1 John 2:16.

Among the many examples of those who were overcome by pride are Haman (Esther 6:6) and the Pharisee who was so “thankful” for how good he was (Luke 18:11-12). Humility is the opposite of pride and draws us closer to God. Humility demonstrates meekness of spirit and helps us to think neither more nor less of ourselves than God would have us to do. We are God’s creation and should not think of ourselves as having no value. (Matt. 16:26). Neither should we lift ourselves above others and think ourselves to be more than we are. Many scriptural references encourage us to strive for humility. *“Better is it to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud”* Prov. 16:19. *“Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven”* Matt. 18:4.

Although there are many examples of humble men in the Bible (David, 1 Samuel 7:18; John the Baptist, Matt. 3:14; the Centurion, Matt. 8:8), there is no greater example of humility than Jesus Christ.

He did not strive for physical beauty (Is. 53:2), for popularity (Matt. 8:20), for rank (Matt. 13:55) or for worldly possessions (Matt. 8:20).

The attitude of the heart, whether proud or humble, will impact our life style and how we use our time. It has been said that our checkbook and our personal “calendar” reveal much about our attitude toward God. It is not evil to allow some entertainment in our lives, but we must avoid those things which increase the likelihood that we will fall into activities that Christ said would defile us.

We also need to be careful that we do not fill our schedules to the point where we do not have enough time to devote to God. We should think about how our choice of activities is looked upon by Jesus Christ. How uncomfortable would we be if Jesus saw how we use our time and resources? We were reminded at the Rockville conference that there are activities that for many years, we have been cautioned to avoid. We were also reminded that these warnings are based on the scripture and we cannot change the scripture. Therefore, we should pay attention to these kind admonitions. When we are tempted to do something that we are advised to avoid, perhaps it would be helpful to ask ourselves if we would do them if Jesus planned to be with us for the day. If Jesus came to our home for a short stay, what impact would it have on our lifestyle or those things that would occupy our time? Would we take Him where we planed to go or would it be necessary to adjust our schedule? Of course, we realize that He is indeed with us at every moment and sees not only our actions, but also our thoughts (1 Chr. 28:9).

Our outward appearance is often a reflection of what is on the inside. We do not ask our brothers and our sisters to make themselves unattractive or undesirable to be with. We simply need to avoid being sensual or trying to attract inappropriate attention to ourselves. A humble appearance is one of the ways we can separate ourselves from the world and bring glory to God (1 Pet. 3:3-4).

“Relationships” relate to how we interact or are interconnected with other people, and more importantly, with God. With whom do we chose to spend our time? Do we love the Lord with all of our heart, soul and mind? Are we able to keep the commandment that we love our neighbor as our self? (Matt. 22:37-38).

Do we seek relationships with those who encourage us to live more godly lives, or do we choose those who draw us to more worldly behavior? Most of us spend some time with those who may have a faith different from ours. In these circumstances, we must maintain a close walk with God and not be drawn toward the world. (Eph.4:14). If we are truly successful in separating ourselves from the world, we will be drawn closer to God.

Key verse: “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you” (2 Cor. 6:17).

The Faithful Church: Serves Others

KEY VERSE: *“As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.”* (Galatians 6:10)

In the midst of a self-serving world, true believers have an opportunity to demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ by serving others. It is too easy to get caught up by the whirlwind of activities that surround us nearly every day as we fulfill our earthly pursuits. Although we need to provide for our families, it is not necessary for God’s children to get caught in the web of materialism and entertainment. There is no end to the fleshly desire for more of the “good” things that the world has to offer.

One of the ways we can escape the trap of materialism is by serving others. We only have a fixed number of hours in a day and in our lifetime. If we spend too much time on self interests, there may not be enough time to serve others.

The fourth pillar in the Mission Statement of our church is “To offer loving, humble deeds of service to fellow believers and all mankind in the name of Christ”. As we look to the Bible for instruction to fulfill this mission, we find ample instruction from Jesus about serving others.

When asked by a lawyer what he should do to inherit eternal life, Jesus confirmed to him, and to us, that the two great commandments are to *“...love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.”* (Luke 10:27) Trying to justify himself, the lawyer asked “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus pointed out very clearly that the true neighbor was the one who served in time of need. (Luke 10:30-37). Mercy was shown by lovingly serving the injured traveler.

To learn true service, we must look to Jesus’ example. If we carefully consider what Jesus said and did, we can learn how to apply the two greatest commandments. Although He was the Master, He was here to serve. *“I am among you as he that serveth.”* (Luke 22:27). The Son of God, who truly is our Lord and Master, and had the authority to require others to serve Him *“made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.”* (Phil. 2:7). He taught us that if we think we *“...have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.”* (Luke 17:10).

As Lord and master, He was willing to humble himself. On the way to the cross He still modeled to all His love for and submission to the Heavenly Father, even though He knew one of His disciples would betray him, one would deny that he even knew Him, and all would for a time desert Him. (John 13:4-5). He still looked into the hearts of His disciples and loved them with deep compassion as He continued to teach truth and to lay the foundation for Holy Communion. Jesus went beyond providing for the needs of this life. He fulfilled the ultimate act of service for each of us by giving His life on the cross and shedding His blood for our sins.

As believers in Christ, we want to follow His example by serving Him and His children. How can we serve Him when He is not on earth? We can worship, honor and praise Him, and glorify His name by following His commandments. A natural response from those who love and serve Him is to perform loving deeds of kindness to His people and to all who are in need. When we serve His people, we serve Him. Jesus told of those who could not remember when they had fed, clothed, visited and given him drink. He said *“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”* (Matt. 25:40).

We know that individually we cannot help everyone. Where do we start? Jesus often reminded us to serve the poor: “...call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: and thou shalt be blessed because they cannot recompense thee.” (Luke 14:13-14). There does not seem to be a down side to helping the very poor. The poorest of the poor will not complain that our help was not good enough.

There are many organizations not of our denomination that do very good work and are worthy of support. However, we are blessed to have a very sound structure in our brotherhood that enables us to reach many who are in dire straits with minimal administrative costs. Through our brotherhood it is possible to give and “...let not your left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.” (Matt. 4:3-4).

We may think that by serving others we are giving more than we receive, but we receive many blessings by serving others. Service to others allows us to glorify God by letting our “...light so shine before men, that they can see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” (Matt.5:16).

We are blessed by encouraging others to serve as we show “a pattern of good works” (Titus 2:7) and by considering “...one another to provoke unto love and good works.” (Heb. 10:24). Service to others also provides evidence of faith. James wrote “...faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.” (James 2:17). Service will enrich our lives. “That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate.” (1 Tim. 6:18).

We may be concerned that we cannot do enough, and what we do is so small that it is not of any value. The parable of the talents helps us understand that God only expects from us what He has given us. He does, however, expect us to use wisely what we have. (Matt. 25:15-28). Even very small deeds of service are not forgotten by God. “For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward.” (Mark 9:41). The poor widow only gave two mites, but her “give all” servant attitude is still remembered nearly 2000 years later.

Our service must be done willingly and with a godly attitude. When we do so we find that “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35). This is made clear in a hymn we sing:

*“Seeds of goodness we are sowing
In the hearts of men today.
Bless it Lord that it many prosper,
And bear fruit for harvest day.
Hasten gladly to the labor,
Consecrate to God your heart.
Say this day unto your Savior,
Lord, I'll gladly do my part.”
Hymns of Zion, #46, verse 1.*

The Faithful Church has a Heart for the Lost

Theme Verse: *“He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.”* (Matthew 12:30)

Who is the Faithful Church? What is meant by the term, “heart”? Who are the lost? According to the Word, the faithful are those who continue in an endeavor through both good times and difficult times. Jesus encouraged His disciples by letting them know that they were, *“they which have continued with me in my temptations.”* (Luke 22:28) “Continuing with Jesus” means that we consistently co-operate with Him in His obedience to the Father. It was in this obedience that Jesus overcame the world. John tells us, *“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.”* (1 John 5:3-4). We understand that obedience to the Lord’s commandments is the essence of the Faithful Church.

The Lord taught His disciples that, *“a good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things.”* (Matthew 12:35) In contrast, He condemned the unbelieving of His people saying, *“For this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.”* (Matthew 13:15) From these teachings of Jesus, we understand that the heart is the seat of truth in our being – it indicates who we really are. Moreover, Jesus clearly teaches that actions are indicators of what is in the heart.

The word translated as “lost” in the New Testament carries a much greater significance than a lost set of keys or some other object. It is steeped in a sense of perishing and death similar to how a doctor might feel that he has “lost” a patient who died despite the physician’s best effort. It is a condition that seems incurable. The greatness of God is that He is able to bring life out of death. Even when we might consider someone to be hopelessly lost, Jesus offers life. The parable of the prodigal son is just one example that Jesus used to communicate this to His disciples. *For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.* (Luke 15:24)

The very purpose of Jesus coming to this world is to seek and save the lost. *For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.* (Luke 19:10)

It seems self-evident that the purpose of Jesus ought to be the purpose of the church. However, like so much of life in the spirit, fulfilling this purpose is possible only when it comes from the heart. In fact, according to the words of Jesus, the heart will reveal itself - bringing forth limitless charity from a good heart and horrifying indifference from an evil heart. A heart that has not been transformed by Jesus cannot care about the perishing, and in stark contrast, a heart that has been reborn through Jesus cannot be indifferent.

This concept of indifference is the heart of Jesus' message to the Pharisees. As they witnessed Him delivering men, women, and children from the power of evil spirits, they accused Jesus of doing so by the power of Beelzebub (Satan). The profound indifference they exhibited toward those who had been delivered from bondage is astonishing. As eyewitnesses of humanly impossible miracles, they could only see the threat to their way of life and were uncaring and indifferent to the shattered chains of wickedness. Perhaps that is why Jesus' reply to them was, "*He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.*" (Matthew 12:30)

Jesus did not condemn those who were actively opposing all that was good - perhaps because it is obvious that all that is evil is sin and that idol worship is contrary to the worship of the living God. Rather, He homed in on exposing the indifferent and inactive - those who were perceived as good people. But their good did not include "gathering" with Jesus, and He condemned their seemingly benign inaction as a very malignant "scattering."

What does it mean to "gather" with Jesus? What did He do? Jesus told His hometown congregation of Nazareth that, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.*" (Luke 4:18-19)

If He is the Head and the church is His body, then we ought also to preach the Gospel to the poor. If He was sent to heal the brokenhearted, then we will tenderly and patiently do all we can to heal the broken hearted. If He came to preach deliverance to the captives, then we will gather with Him by preaching deliverance to those who are captive to lust, addiction, pride, hopelessness, and every other form of spiritual slavery. We will demonstrate the proof of deliverance by living free from these. By the power of His Spirit, we can open the eyes of the blind and set the bruised free. In faith and love, we can freely proclaim the awe-inspiring and genuine hopefulness that now is the acceptable year of the Lord. Through simple faith and deep humility, the Faithful Church will gather with Jesus.

I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. (2 Timothy 4:1-5)

Out of a pure heart, let's gather with Him.

The Faithful Church: Uses Spiritual Discernment

And they shall teach my people the difference between the holy and profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean. (Ezek. 44:23)

From the beginning of the ministry of our Lord Jesus, the need for discernment was apparent. As the Apostles established the church in Jerusalem and Judea, the need for discernment continued. And as the church spread to the Gentile world, the need for discernment only grew as Gentile believers had to learn about the living God – beginning with the very basics. But we also see that Jewish believers had numerous erroneous beliefs that needed correction.

If we examine the state of the nation of Israel in the time of Jesus, we find a people who had forsaken idol worship some four hundred years previously. They had recognized the major errors of their fathers and committed to worshiping God alone. To varying degrees they had embraced the Law and the Prophets and developed a remarkable oral commentary on the Law that documented the thoughts of the most respected teachers in Israel. However, several divisions developed, most notably the division between Pharisee and Sadducee – the Pharisees embracing the Law and the Prophets as the Word of God, and the Sadducees denying all but the five books of Moses.

As the time of the birth of Christ drew near, there were numerous other factions within the Jewish people. There were Essenes and Zealots, and within the Pharisees, there were adherents to Rabbi Hillel and others who followed the stricter teachings of Rabbi Shammai. The Hasmoneans were descendants of Aaron who held the priesthood and were the nominal power after King Herod. However, the followers of Rabbi Hillel, who was a descendant of David, also held significant power.

In contrast, the Jews, to whom were given “the oracles of God”, were in extreme disagreement – even arguing whether the prophets spoke the word of God or not. Such a divided nation cried out for spiritual discernment. It was into this maelstrom that Jesus plunged when he turned the water into wine and first revealed power beyond human ability. Crowds followed Him everywhere, sensing His wisdom and the presence of God. He brought clarity to discussions that had been contentious for many years. He taught from a spiritual perspective based on full knowledge of the truth rather than the limited perspective of man.
(John 1:14 and 3:34)

In some cases, entrenched positions had been at odds with each other for centuries. For example, the woman at the well asked Jesus,

“Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet. Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.” (John 4:19-20)

As so often occurs, she had presented only two options. Jesus answered her,

“Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. (John 4:21-24)

As Jesus presented the Samaritan woman with a truth beyond what she had previously understood, we find several core principles of spiritual discernment:

1. The truth is often beyond what men have considered or been able to comprehend.
2. Jesus is the source of truth.
3. Satan often presents temptation and creates confusion through logically inconsistent questions (falsehoods) or arguments such as the false dilemma rooted in an “either-or” statement that he put in the mind of the Samaritan woman.

Discernment is the act of sorting through information in order to distinguish the truth. The purpose of discernment is “to be able to determine good vs. evil” such that we can “Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.” (Rom. 12:9) In order to abhor evil and cleave to good, we must first be certain we have distinguished between them correctly. Discernment brings enlightenment to the believer and glory to God. (2 Cor. 4:6)

The following are some principles of discernment to aid in this correct judgment when evaluating spiritually oriented communication and thinking.

Principle #1 - Discernment requires humility.

- This includes a mind open to the possibility of personal errant thinking and the willingness to follow the evidence of the Word to its conclusion. (1 Cor. 10:12)
- Humility esteems the understanding of other believers, while acknowledging that no single believer past or present has (or had) a full understanding. (Phil. 2:3)

One of the greatest risks for young and immature believers is to be exposed to ideas contrary to one’s beliefs. Discernment practices caution. In contrast, one of the greatest risks for a mature believer is to isolate oneself and only consider perspectives with which one already agrees. Such isolation prevents biblical correction and can lead to serious error.

Principle #2 - Discernment must be built on a solid foundation of truth.

- Logical fallacies are false by definition. (Psa. 4:2)
- Truth and good judgment cannot proceed from false premises. (Job 21:34)
- Rumors and partial information lead to errant conclusions.

Perhaps all too often one hears that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men and interprets it to justify the foolishness of men. Foolishness is just foolishness. God is true and cannot and will not lie.

Principle #3 - Discernment requires full information, often from multiple perspectives, to gain a complete understanding.

- There is safety in a multitude of counselors. (Prov. 11:14)
- Recognizing that God sees and knows all, truth does not fear understanding and welcomes full information. (2 Tim. 1:7)
- At times, differences in individual discernment and the need for united (common) application of Scriptures on a matter require that church leadership meet in conference to come to agreement. (Acts 15:6, 28)

Principle #4 - Discernment of spiritual issues relies on the Bible and the Holy Spirit as the sources of wisdom and truth.

- This requires a good knowledge of the Scriptures. (2 Tim. 3:16)
- Understanding the Bible requires a spiritual mind. (1 Cor. 2:10-15)
- The Spirit gives greater discernment to some as it pleases Him for the benefit of the whole Body of Christ. (1 Cor. 12:7-11)
- Experience and maturity enable clearer discernment. (Heb. 5:14)

It seems that the devil often uses the Word to plant seeds of doubt and discontent. He put the thought in the Lord's mind ... "*IF* thou be the Son of God ..." and the Lord had to combat the thought with other portions of Scripture, saying, "It is written..." It is vital that we accept "all the counsel of God" and do not take any Scripture out of context – as Satan did.

Principle #5 - Holy Spirit led discernment fosters the bond of love in believers.

- In doctrine, the Spirit brings unity. (Isa. 29:24)
- Where God permits discretion, the Spirit brings forbearance. (Eph. 4:1-6)
- In areas of uncertainty, the Spirit brings mutual submission and esteem (Rom. 14:10)

As human beings, made from the dust of the earth, we are woefully limited in our ability to know all the facts, and our motivations are often vilely self-centered. We have a tendency to desire a particular outcome and then look for evidence to support our foregone conclusion. We are horribly predisposed to judging wrongly. Only by looking to Jesus – the author and finisher of our faith – can we find truth and life. Following His example, walking in the Spirit with deep humility, we can learn to discern righteously and avoid the deceptive falsehoods of the devil.

The Faithful Church: Sound Conversions

God's plan for fallen mankind, as written in the Word and taught by Jesus, is for sinners to be awakened to an understanding of their lost condition, to repent, and be converted. Thus the matter of conversion is fundamental to the teaching and doctrine of the church. Our Statement of Faith reflects the biblical teaching of a true conversion beginning with faith in Christ's redemptive work on Calvary, repentance toward God, confession, restitution, and forsaking of sin.

The word conversion itself means "to turn about", or "revert". Such language helps us understand the distinct difference between one path and another. As Jesus taught, there is a road to destruction and a road to everlasting life (Matt. 7:13-14). One who is truly converted is on the road to eternal life. These paths differ dramatically—one is wide, the other narrow—and they lead in opposite directions. It is impossible to straddle them or to go in both directions at once.

The teachings of Jesus and the Apostles make very clear that the difference between the converted and the unconverted is as night and day. Or more to the point, one is dead and the other alive. Paul makes frequent reference to this change from being dead in sin to dead to sin and alive unto Christ:

"And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;" (Eph. 2:1)

"For ye are dead (to sin), and your life is hid with Christ in God." (Col. 3:3)

"How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Rom. 6:2)

"Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." (Rom. 6:4)

Jesus said to Nicodemus, *"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* (John 3:3). In our theme verse above (2 Cor. 5:17), Paul describes the passing away of "old things" and becoming a new creature. Likewise, he evokes the imagery of changing clothes when he writes, *"Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him:"* (Col. 3:9-10).

The phrase "be converted" describes this new birth. Although spoken in the negative about those in unbelief, Jesus describes an awakening and understanding, followed by healing when he says, *"...they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them."* (Matt. 13:15). He later describes the converted state as that of "little children", evoking their innocence and the humility needed to become like them (Matt. 18:3). Conversion involves a complete and utter change of attitude.

Peter connected conversion to repentance and the forgiving of sin when he taught in the temple that we are to *"Repent ... and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;"* (Acts 3:19). Likewise, in the preceding chapter he had answered the question, *"What shall we do"* (Acts 2:37) with *"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."* (Acts 2:38), connecting repentance to the sign of rebirth (baptism).

It is important to note that when both Paul and Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah, they were warning that conversion is closed to those whose hearts are hard and calloused, *"Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them."* (Acts 28:26-27). Similarly, the grace which is so necessary for salvation (Eph. 2:8-9) is unavailable to the

prideful, *“Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:”* (I Peter 5:5-6).

We should take warning against any lack of emphasis on true conversion in our time. Sadly, salvation has sometimes been taught solely as a moment of belief without real life change which must necessarily follow a genuine repentance and turning away from sin. Jesus warned about the seed of faith springing up but having no root and quickly falling away. *“But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.”* (Matt. 13:20-21). In this passage, the word “offended” means to relapse or fall into sin.

Both Peter and Paul warned strongly that the believer must take great caution that he does not revert to the old life, whether to the old law (Gal. 4:9) or to the “pollutions of the world” (II Peter 2:20). Once one has taken the road to eternal life, it seems that the traffic on “the other road” presents an ever-changing panorama of eye-catching sights. With eyes fixed on the road ahead and his heavenly goal, the converted soul will avoid veering off into the ditch and experiencing a spiritual wreck.

Paul described an “acceptable life” as not conformed to this world but rather as one lived as a sacrifice of “reasonable service”, fully and completely *“transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”* (Rom. 12:2).

Only through experiencing salvation through faith in Jesus’ shed blood and turning away from the old life of sin and serving self can we experience the vision set forth by the Saviour Himself when He said, *“I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”* (John 10:10).

Theme verse: *“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”* (2 Cor. 5:17).

The Faithful Church is Committed

O God, my heart is fixed; I will sing and give praise, even with my glory. (Psalms 108:1)

A commitment is an obligation or a pledge that we make to a person, a cause, or an organization. It evokes the concept of placing in trust, as Paul related to Timothy, *“I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.”* (II Tim. 1:12).

In our society, commitment seems to be conditional, based on how one feels at the moment. If one does not “feel” like enduring, it becomes easy to justify breaking a commitment. This may impact employers, employees, friendships, churches, families, and even marriages.

The marriage relationship is the oldest example of human commitment, beginning with Adam and Eve. Jesus’ instruction to those who were married was direct and clear, *“What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”* (Matt. 19:6). In light of this biblical imperative to be committed, Paul further commanded, *“Husbands, love your wives ... and wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands.”* (Eph. 5: 25, 22). Commitment and love are commands. Genuine commitment leads to genuine love.

This truth is directly opposed to the deception so rampant in our society. The world seems to think that one “falls in love” and then commitments are kept as long as the “feeling” lasts or “self” is benefited by the relationship. In reality, commitment is the foundation upon which genuine love is built.

Life requires commitment. Commitment to Jesus keeps us from going back to a life of sin after we are born again of water and of spirit. However, just as we can physically become sick and die, it is possible for a converted person to become sin sick and die. Failure to thrive spiritually can be from a lack of nutrition, lack of care and nurturing, or any number of other reasons.

Commitment means that nothing will deter us from following Christ, even if it involves suffering, shame and humility, time, or expense. It doesn't matter if it requires difficult, unrecognized or unrewarded work. A committed soul devotes whatever resources are needed to remain faithful until the end and places one’s personal pride aside completely.

Jesus answered those who excused their lack of commitment by saying: *“No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”* (Luke 9:62).

Our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus are the best examples of commitment. From the beginning, God has been committed to the redemption of His creation. He led the Israelites out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. Their redemption closely demonstrated God’s plan for mankind through Jesus and shows us His faithfulness in spite of the unfaithfulness of His people. God does not turn aside from his commitments. *“Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations;”* (Deut. 7:9).

Jesus’ commitment is perhaps both simpler and more difficult for us to understand. Simple in that we can grasp laying down our life for someone else. Difficult, because we do not understand what it would mean to be forsaken of God. Jesus’ commitment to us came *while we were yet in our sins*. He laid

down his life *before* we turned to Him. Commitment precedes gratification and may even precede love. Perhaps it is inextricably linked to love. We cannot say we love if we are not committed to maintaining that love, and we cannot say we are truly committed if we do not have love.

We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. (1 John 3:14-19)

Just as commitment and love are interwoven, so also is submission necessary to fulfill commitment's pledge. It is inevitable in any human relationship—and perhaps most keenly felt in the church—that there will be times when we do not see eye-to-eye. When we are faced with the test of commitment, we will be blessed when we find the humility and grace to prefer our brother above ourselves; yielding our preferences and “rights” to him for the well-being of the whole and the preservation of commitment's bond. “*Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another;*” (Rom. 12:10). “*Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth (good).*” (1 Cor. 10:24).

The faithful church draws on the graciousness of God to find strength to be committed. That commitment is first to the Lord as Head, then to the church as His body – inseparable from the Lord. Just as Jesus was committed to the cross for our sakes – while we were yet in our sins, the faithful church is committed to one another in spite of imperfections. The faithful church is committed to endure to the end. The faithful church overcomes by the blood of the Lamb and loves not her own life. The faithful church is not overcome with evil, but overcomes evil with good. Just as commitment is the linchpin of marriage, the faithful church commits, “...for better or worse, richer or poor, sickness or health ... until death do us part.”

Let's set our faces, surrender our hearts, and commit our spirit to be faithful in all things.

For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed. (Isaiah 50:7)

The Faithful Church: Biblical Unity

Theme verse: *“That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”* (John 17:21).

How important is unity? There are two areas where Christ emphasized the impact that the relationships between His followers will have on a lost and sin-sick world. In John 13:34&35, sometimes referred to as the Great Commandment, He said that we would be known by our love for each other. In very similar fashion, in His “High Priestly Prayer,” Jesus said that the world will know the love of God and that He was sent by God by the oneness (unity) shown by His disciples (John 17:21-23).

We can understand the meaning of unity in the Scriptures which call us to it. In 2 Cor. 13:11 we are enjoined to *“be of one mind.”* In Phil. 1:27, Paul exhorts, *“stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”* In the next chapter, he calls us to be *“in one accord”* (Phil. 2:2). And Peter writes, *“Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous...”* (1 Pet. 3:8).

Of course we know that we must clarify that it is biblical unity for which we must strive. The world has many areas where unity is sought around various things including political issues, business approaches, clubs, trade associations, etc. We are not called to seek unity around such earthly things but rather to follow the model of Christ who was one with the Father. *“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:”* (Phil. 2:5). Biblical unity will be directly related to our relationship (oneness) with the Lord Jesus. Thus the Word exhorts us to learn of His meekness and humility; to walk in the Spirit, in His love, in truth, and in sanctification (Matt. 11:28-30; Gal. 5:16; Eph. 5:1-2; 2 John 3-4; John 17:17).

The world is able to achieve unity by gathering people who are already of the same mind – in essence dividing into groups based on backgrounds, biases, perspectives, likes and dislikes. This is not the unity and oneness which Christ prayed would be our lot as God’s children. Rather He desired that those who were first united by becoming one with Him—in finding salvation through faith in His shed Blood—would grow together in spite of various differences which might otherwise serve to divide. Each of us has preferences, biases, opinions, and even personal convictions which can be strong and self-affirming.

When we are placed “in the Body” (1 Cor. 12:18), we lose our independence and self-possession. We gain an appreciation for Christ’s view of His church and learn to value all members of the Lord’s Body. We discover the benefit of the “foot, hand, ear and eye” that make up the Body; its “comely and uncomely” parts; those which seem more or less “honorable.” We realize our own lack of the fullness of what is needed in the Body and begin to abhor the thought that our flesh might say, *“I have no need of you”* to any of those for whom Christ died (1 Cor. 12:21).

God’s Word is clear that unity of the brethren is pleasing to Him; *“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”* (Ps. 133:1). Unity is not optional nor is it automatic. Indeed we will need to work at it. Paul uses the word endeavor, which evokes more than a mere “trying” but a diligent and ongoing striving and exertion to accomplish this biblical imperative. *“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (Eph. 4:1-3).

Unity and love are closely enjoined. Just as love is not simply an emotion but rather a conscious choice and action, our efforts to become of one mind and one accord require deliberate and ongoing

attention and discipline. Unity requires mutual submission. It realizes that one's own perspectives are limited and that we benefit by yielding our will to God and one another (Eph. 5:21; 1 Pet. 5:5). It is interwoven with commitment, humility, mutual submission, and self-sacrificing love.

Again, we understand through the teaching of Scripture that unity is not the same as uniformity. Paul recognizes differences in the church when he explains, "*Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administration, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all*" (1 Cor. 12:4-6). God did not create any two people exactly alike, nor can we become someone else. But we can yield our willfulness, dying to self and submitting to each other in love and for the furtherance of the gospel and the well-being of the brotherhood.

This will involve each of us realizing that the definition of unity is not ours to decide in isolation or as a particular group. There is a strong human tendency to divide into sub-groups around particular points of view, perhaps cooperating to influence others or even resisting God-ordained authority – whether in government, the workplace, families, or the church. Previous editorials have dealt with faithfulness in Commitment, Submission, and Love; all of which are needed to be faithful in biblical unity.

For a number of years, the Elder Body has been working to increase biblical unity in our brotherhood. Satan has not been sleeping and much turmoil and strife has arisen to frustrate those efforts. All too often resistance has come in the form of brethren taking too much upon themselves to determine the definition of biblical unity. The Word calls us to Christ-like love which reveals humility, and an avoidance of strife and division. It motivates and empowers us to a sustained, committed effort to grow in our understanding of each other and work for greater unity (1 Cor. 13:4-7; 3:1-4; 12:25).

"Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). Surely laying down our life would include honoring, preferring, and submitting to one another in love.

Paul recognized this ongoing and sustained work in the church in holding out the vision and standard of persevering in it until "*we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ* (Eph. 4:13).

Broken Heartedness: The Foundation of Humility

God has used many people throughout history. Is there a common thread of character which unites them? We certainly see a great diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and personalities. What do Joseph, Moses, David, Isaiah, Peter and the others have in common? What attribute did they possess that made them useful to God?

It was not their education, wealth, position, or specific gifts and talents, though God used those things. Indeed it was not that they had reached a state of perfection. We know that David sinned terribly with Bathsheba and in the murder of Uriah. Moses killed a man and later became so angry he struck the rock and was forbidden to enter the Promised Land.

Indeed we find in these examples, and Scripture teaches in principle, that it is not some inherent ability, skill, or talent which makes one useful to God. Rather, it is an attitude of heart, a posture toward God and others, which defines God's servants. God, the Maker of all things, is clear that He needs nothing from us except for humility of heart.

“Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word” (Isaiah 66:1-2).

God referred to David as “*after mine own heart*” (1 Sam. 13:14). Surely to possess the heart of God would be to walk in humility before Him and to obey Him as in Isaiah's entreaty to be contrite and to have respect unto the Word. When faced with great trials, such as before Goliath, David went “*in the name of the Lord*” (1 Samuel 17:45). These life lessons taught him faith and obedience which led him to later say, “*I will go in the strength of the Lord GOD: I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only*” (Psalm 71:16).

To be broken-hearted is to be humble, contrite, meek, and repentant. It stands in stark contrast to man's nature which is proud, self-assured, arrogant, and self-righteous. Humility is a prerequisite for grace (James 4:6) and begins with a right understanding of God and our relationship to Him.

God has revealed Himself in His Creation and through His Word. In faith, we learn that we are the creature and He is the Creator. He is all holiness and purity. In our free will, we have sinned and come short of His glory (Romans 3:23) and deserve death (Romans 6:23). We are wholly lost and undone and in need of mercy. God, in His great love and mercy, has made a way of escape for us who deserve judgment. He sent Jesus to pay our debt on the Cross, offering full pardon and redemption to all who believe upon Him. (John 3:16, Psalm 103:3, 2 Cor. 5:21, Romans 5:1).

What is the response of God's servants when they begin to comprehend the nature and work of God?

Joseph learned much through the trials he experienced; being sold by his brothers, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, forgotten by the butler to whom he prophesied in prison. The Psalmist describes this as being tried by God's word before Joseph's time came, “*Until the time that his word came: the word of the LORD tried him*” (Psalm 105:19). Then, when he was to be used by God, he could humbly say, “*It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace*” (Gen. 4:16).

Moses stood before the burning bush and “*hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God*” (Exodus 3:6), asking, “*Who am I*” to do the work which God asked of him (Exodus 3:11). This man, of whom it was said, “*Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth*” (Num. 12:3), led his people out of bondage, called manna from heaven, water from a rock, and much more. Only in his brokenness could he demonstrate God’s power.

David, the shepherd boy who became king, was entrusted with much power and influence after he learned to trust God. Yet perhaps his greatest test came when confronted by his own sin. Nathan weaved a story that broke through the pride which had crept into David’s heart and elicited the righteously angry cry, “*As the LORD liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die*” (2 Sam. 12:5). When the prophet’s condemning words, “*Thou art the man*” pierced his heart, he replied, “*I have sinned against the Lord,*” and later anguished, “*Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me*” (Psalm 51:1-3).

In contrast, Saul had justified and tried to cover disobedience with a self-righteous appeal to having sacrificed to the Lord. Samuel called him out saying, “*Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams*” (1 Sam. 15:22). Ultimately chastising him with the words, “*When thou wast little in thine own sight, wast thou not made the head of the tribes of Israel, and the LORD anointed thee king over Israel?*” (1 Sam. 15:17). Although God revealed lifetime lessons through Saul’s humility and pride, it was only in Saul’s humility that God’s grace had free course.

Isaiah, who stood before kings and whose prophecies guided the children of Israel for generations, could only say, “*Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts*” (Isaiah 6:5) when the glory and holiness of the Lord was revealed to him. He could then teach us that, “*thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones*” (Isaiah 57:15).

Peter, that bold disciple who denied His Lord in the hour of greatest need, was assured by Jesus, “*I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren*” (Luke 22:32), but only after being warned that, “*Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat*” (Luke 22:31). That “sifting” brought him to a place where he could make a humble and sincere expression of love toward Jesus (John 21:15-17). Only then could he be used by Jesus to “*Feed my sheep.*” And his boldness could be turned to a confidence in God which enabled him to say, “*We ought to obey God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29), when confronted by the same religious authorities before whom he had fled when relying upon his own strength.

May God grant that we can daily seek an attitude of brokenness as these servants of God. It will serve as the foundation of humility and the key to His grace.

Following God: Discerning God's Will

Key verse: *"And be ye not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God"* (Romans 12:2)

Though God has given us both the ability and the power of free choice, He fully desires that we seek and follow His will in every thing we do. *"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart: and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths"* (Proverbs 3:5-6). In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul describes God's will as good, acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2). In other words, His will is good for us, it will agree with us and will completely satisfy all our needs. The believer is instructed to prove (or test) whether our understanding and knowledge of God's will is correct in His sight.

We comprehend God's will more easily when we can read it directly from His Word. Important doctrines such as, *"...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish"* (Luke 13:3) and *"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"* (Matthew 22:39) are relatively easy to discern. Wherever we read God's Word with the intent that it will guide us in a specific matter, we should sincerely and earnestly pray that we *"rightly divide the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15). We are wise to seek the "whole counsel" of God and avoid concentrating solely on those Scriptures we personally prefer. Seeking wise, biblically-based counsel from church leadership or other faithful brethren is a safeguard: *"Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety."* (Proverbs 11:14).

Sometimes brethren will seek to discern God's will by opening the Bible at random with the belief that the resulting scriptures will reveal an answer to a particular question or issue. While it may not be wrong for us to use the Bible in this fashion, we would not want to do so in a casual manner or as our primary means of seeking God's will. Sincerely seeking God's blessing through prayer before opening the Bible has proven to be good practice. God's Word is holy, true, righteous, perfect and eternal, and *"rightly dividing the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15) will always be consistent with the whole counsel of God and the leading of His Holy Spirit. His purpose for His Word is to make us wise unto salvation, convert our soul, make wise the simple, rejoice the heart, and enlighten our eyes. (Psalm 119:160; 19:7-8; 2 Timothy 3:15). We certainly would not want to diminish the importance of the Scriptures by attributing the sacred words to something mundane or worldly or by pulling certain words or verses out of context. We would want decisions influenced by opening the Bible at random to be in agreement with the Holy Spirit's prompting and the biblically-based counsel of other believers. Nevertheless, many of us have had instances when random opening of God's Word spoke directly to our hearts in an unmistakable manner, perhaps fulfilling a special need during a crisis in our lives.

We are not always able to individually capture or apply the Bible's depth to specifically address all of our questions or concerns. In these incidents, be they common everyday issues, or life-changing events, we will need to apply additional methods of discernment.

We can apply the precepts of "Asking, seeking, and knocking" when praying to God for guidance (Matthew 7:7-11). When asking God for direction, we should include Christ's humble words from His prayer in Gethsemane, *"...nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done"* (Luke 22:42). In so doing, we not only express our submission to God but we acknowledge that He really does know what is best for us. Seeking and knocking imply some persistent effort on our part. However, we should not be so persistent that we frustrate God's true purpose for us. The Apostle Paul prayed three times that God would remove his thorn in the flesh before he received his answer, after which he apparently quit asking and accepted the will of God.

The Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth and will reveal God's plans for us. *"Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come"* (John 16:13). God has promised His Holy Spirit to those who ask Him. *"If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?"* (Luke 11:13). The Spirit will prove effective where the flesh cannot. *"It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life"* (John 6:63).

Knowing and understanding God's desire and purpose for us as individuals requires faith. We must have faith in God and His Holy Spirit, faith in the truth of his Word, and trust in those of whom we seek counsel and advice. When trying to discern God's will we will not necessarily receive an outward sign, *"For we walk by faith, not by sight:"* (2 Corinthians 5:7). Faith is a necessary component for all aspects of our spiritual walk, and discerning His will in our life is no different. *"But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him"* (Hebrews 11:6). The exercising of true faith will bring us an answer through the *"substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"* (Hebrews 11:1).

In Acts 15 we see an example of early believers exercising discernment of God's will. In this instance, a question arose as to whether circumcision according to the law should be required of Christians. The apostles and elders gathered to discuss the matter. After questioning and reasoning together, they submitted to one another, "giving audience" and considering one another's opinions. They examined the relevant scriptures surrounding the matter. Finally, inspired by the Holy Spirit, James offered his counsel that the whole group adopted and in due course carried out. Note the pattern of an initial struggle, during which they reached no decision. Through submission to the Word and the Holy Spirit and with the safety of counsel with one another a godly solution followed.

Learning from the teachings and examples in the Word will enable us not only to discern God's will in our lives, but more importantly, we will be equipped to actually carry out His will.

Marriage: God Ordained: God Defined

Key verses: “Husbands love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.” (Eph. 5:25) “That they (older women) may teach the young women to love their husbands...” (Titus 2:4)

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” (Gen. 1:1) He made everything perfect and designed His creation so that all parts of it would run in perfect harmony.

After each of the first five days of the Creation, when God saw what He had made, He said that it was good. After the sixth day, He said it was very good. Could it be that the reason He saw that it was very good was because on the sixth day His creation contained an image of Himself, and this image emphasized the perfection of His creation. On the sixth day He created man: “in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them.” (Gen. 1:27) The final act of creation reflected God’s perfect plan.

God took Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden “to dress it and to keep it.” (Gen. 2:15) After instructing Adam that he should not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He said “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.” (Gen. 2:18)

We might wonder why God did not make Adam’s help meet (mate, one suitable to be a helper) at the same instant that He created Adam. As always, God knew exactly what He was doing.

For all of the other creatures, He created them male and female, seemingly without the special relationship that He planned for man. At the time of the Creation, God foreknew that Satan would tempt mankind to sin. He knew that man would need a companion who would help him all of his life. Therefore, He created Adam’s help mate in a very special way, with the intent that this relationship would never be broken. Therefore, He “caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept: and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made He the woman, and brought her unto the man.” (Gen 2: 21-22) Adam seemed to understand how special God’s creation was for him because he said “...this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” (Gen.2:23)

To a world that too often relies on science and man’s reasoning rather than on God for answers, this account is often regarded as fantasy or myth. However, Paul put this in the proper perspective when he warned us to avoid “profane and vain babblings and opposition of science falsely so called.” (1 Timothy 6:20) The “wisdom” of this world would tell us that we can do things our own way and ignore God’s principles, including the fundamental principles relative to the relationship between men and women. Marriage was defined, ordained and divinely instituted by God to be a relationship between a man and a woman (Romans 1:26-27) and it is intended to be a mutual, lifetime, sacred commitment. (Matthew 19:6)

In any phase of our life if we ignore God’s design, there are consequences. God knew what would work and He knew what would not work, so He created a special bond between man and woman. God did not leave us without a clear explanation of His plan for marriage. He brought men and women together so they could help each other (Gen. 2:18) and to “Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth.” (Gen. 1:28; 9:1) God’s instructions to Noah after the flood were the same as his instructions to Adam after the Creation. He had a perfect plan and He did not change it.

Because families need structure, God gave mankind a plan that would result in strong marriages. God's order of authority and the importance of godly leadership within the family are clear: God, Jesus, man, woman (1 Cor. 11:3) and children (Col 3:20). Husbands must take the responsibility to be the loving, godly authority in the home.

God emphasized the importance of sacred faithfulness in marriage. It was not to be contaminated with divorce or unfaithfulness: "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." (Matthew 19:6) Many scriptural passages reinforce the need for godly leadership and humble submission that makes a marriage work.

"Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom..." (Col 3:16) Knowing and demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25) can mold us into a vessel that is useful to God.

The Bible offers much advice to husbands, wives and children: "... the head of every man is Christ; the head of the woman is the man; and, the head of Christ is God." (1 Cor. 11:3) "Wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord, For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church." (Eph. 5:22-23) "Children obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor Thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise." (Eph. 6:1-2) "Husbands dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honor to the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered." (1 Peter 3:7) "Likewise, ye wives be in subjection to your own husbands." (1 Peter 3:1)

Finally, we are instructed "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined to his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning the Christ and the church. Nevertheless, let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband." (Eph. 5: 31-33)

Just as God did not intend for a division between Christ and his bride, the church, He never intended for the marriage relationship to be destroyed by breaking it apart or by being involved in the one flesh relationship outside of marriage.

"But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed." (James 1:25)

Rewards of Faithfulness

Key verse “A faithful man shall abound with blessings...” Prov. 28:20

The Scriptures describe faithfulness as an unwavering performance of our duties and vows unto God based on a firmly held belief in Him and His Son, Jesus Christ: “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering (for he is faithful that promised;)” (Heb. 10:23). Being faithful requires commitment and dedication as a vital part of a personal and lifelong relationship between Christ and the believer. At a time when many of His disciples were leaving Him, Christ asked the twelve, “Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:67-69). A steadfast faith in Christ enabled the Apostle Paul to endure sufferings: “For the which cause 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 that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2 Tim. 1:12). Both Peter and Paul were able to make these beautiful expressions of faith and commitment because their belief in Christ went beyond this life to the eternal reward in heaven awaiting the faithful.

An important characteristic of faithfulness includes taking seriously the covenant which we made with God at the time of our baptism. God promises “To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; The oath which he sware to our father Abraham” (Luke 1:72-73). We in turn will “serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life” ((Luke 1:74-75). God’s reward to us for keeping our part of this covenant is to possess the “hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began” (Titus 1:2).

A steadfast faith in God enables us to withstand Satan’s temptations, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world” (1 Peter 5:8-9). “For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God” (1 John 5:4-5). Leading an overcoming life against the temptations of Satan has eternal benefits: “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him” (James 1:12).

Another important aspect of faithfulness to God as well as to others is to “Set a watch. O Lord before my mouth:” (Psalm 141:3). This includes being truthful at all times and avoiding gossip, as well as giving and taking sound advice. “A faithful witness will not lie: but a false witness will utter lies” and “A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter” (Proverbs 14:5; 11:13). Lying goes beyond not telling the truth. It includes being inconsistent in what we say and how we live, as it relates to our relationship with others and especially with God. “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen (1 John 4:20). “Who is a liar, but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22). Lying is a very serious sin which if left unchecked, will cause us to forfeit our salvation (Rev.21:8). Gossip can destroy friendships, and the wounds it causes are slow to heal (Proverbs 17:9; 18:8). Giving and taking sound advice will bring rewards already in this life. As an illustration, Abigail’s wise counsel was instrumental in calming David’s rage against her husband Nabal. Through exercising restraint, his victory over self was greater than wreaking a bloody vengeance upon his enemies. “And David said to Abigail, Blessed be the LORD God of Israel which sent thee this day to meet me: And blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from coming to shed blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand” (1 Sam. 25:32-33).

Faithfulness and good works substantiate one another when the believer exercises an active and sincere love for others (1 Cor. 13:2-3). The Apostles James and John challenge us to “show our faith” by our good works to both “brethren and to strangers” (James 2:15-17; 3 John 1:5). Jesus expands this list to even include our enemies, and that we should do so without expecting an earthly reward. “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest; for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil” (Luke 6:35). It is reward enough that we glorify our Father: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Doing kindness unto others out of a sincere love for them has the added benefit of helping us maintain our sense of priority and true purpose in life. For example in the parable of the rich fool, we learn that his real sin was not his possession of riches, but rather his presumptive and selfish attitudes towards them (Luke 12:16-21).

Though we might prefer to avoid them, afflictions and persecutions also bring rewards and blessings when faithfully borne by God’s children. Indeed, Paul’s counsel to Timothy was, “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” ((2 Tim. 3:12). While facing deep trials, many believers have experienced a wonderful nearness to God: “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee” (Isa. 43:2). God’s grace is sufficient that we “Fear none of these things which thou shalt suffer... be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Rev.2:10). By so doing we have fellowship with Christ’s sufferings and will bring glory to God (1 Peter 4:12-14).

Faithfulness to God necessarily extends over a wide area of the believer’s life, but God asks very little of us in comparison to the promised reward, “And he said unto him, Well, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities” (Luke 19:17). Indeed, Jesus tells us “He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.” (Luke 16:10). By God’s grace may we abide true and faithful to life’s end that “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6).

Serving the Lord as a Single Person

All of us should be serving the Lord as a single person ...

“But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; ...” (1 Corinthians 7:29)

The human mind is an amazing part of God’s creation. With our mind, we perceive and interpret the world around us. We take in signals sent by our five senses and attempt to make sense of them. We comprehend complex subjects by relating new ideas to what we already know. In order to make sense of the world around us, we categorize and label everything. Although those labels, distinctions, and categories can be helpful, we often can inadvertently place limits that hinder or even prevent true love and service. Jesus was a breaker of those barriers and distinctions like none other. The Apostle Paul expressed life in Christ like this:

“(We) have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.” (Colossians 3:10-11)

We could add, “Neither married nor single”. The transforming power of Jesus removes old labels earned through sin, breaks down the barriers of racism and prejudice, and eliminates distinctions of wealth, privilege, and class. In Christ Jesus, there is no elevated status due to any human-imposed classifications. Serving the Lord as a single person is neither better nor worse than serving the Lord as a married person. In Christ Jesus, we find no need to create order through labels, but rather we find order through Christ-like love unhindered by human distinctions.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, reminding them that just as our physical bodies need every part, so the body of Christ has need of each member. None of us should think any part is any more or any less important than another.

“... And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.” (1 Corinthians 12:12-21)

Although in Christ Jesus there are no distinctions in status, value, or worth, there may be differences in role and purpose. Certain roles are best accomplished by a single person, and some responsibilities are best fulfilled by a married person. Some duties are suited to an older believer and others to a younger. But, outside of such roles, perhaps we are not defined by singleness or marriage as much as we tend to think. Perhaps serving the Lord as a single person is really not much different than serving the Lord in any other state.

We are all called to work together to build up the body of Christ in love. (Ephesians 4:16) By each contributing according to his God-given abilities, we can all grow to spiritual maturity. Similar to any living thing, a primary purpose of maturity is to bear fruit and reproduce. Reproduction is not a solitary endeavor, among living things or in the spirit. In the physical world, it nearly always requires two elements, and in the spirit, growth cannot take place without an intimate relationship with the Lord. Physical marriage is compared to Christ and the church, so that the church is called the Bride of Christ. If we are *all* called to bear fruit through a spiritual union with Him, why would the physical distinctions of gender, race, marital status, and class be important to the believer?

So, how can one serve the Lord as a single person? (*Regardless of your actual marital status*)

First, acknowledge the good things that Christ has done in you. By acknowledging every good thing that is in us, we are able to overcome the self-imposed limits that are often masked as humility. If Christ has provided us with gifts and talents, they are for us to use willingly in His service – giving Him the credit – but never pretending that we have nothing to offer. If we are unable to acknowledge that the Lord has equipped us to serve Him, does it not demean Him? It truly is a false humility and keeps us from being fruitful.

“That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.” (Philemon 1:6)

Second, resolve to allow Jesus to break down any barriers in your mind that hinder you in effective service. Don’t label yourself. Resolve to be content with life whether you are Greek or Jewish, rich or poor, single or married, or whatever other category may limit you. With such barriers removed, you will find many opportunities to engage your God-given talents in a way that provides our Master with a great return on His investment. Allowing those talents to flourish will bring great joy as you recognize the work of the Holy Spirit accomplishing things that you could never do of yourself.

Third, die to self. Placing your own interests first will hinder your ability to serve the Lord. This is further complicated by a lack of experience when one is young in faith. Placing your own opinions above others who are wiser than you will lead to error. Having the humility to subject your understanding to those who are older and more experienced will save much trouble. Indeed, submitting to others who are sound in faith is good practice for submitting your thinking to the Lord. If you are willing to crucify your flesh and permit the will of the Lord to prevail in your life, then you will be fruitful. Even Jesus acknowledged that He could do nothing of Himself and subjected His will to that of the Father.

“I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me.” (John 5:30)

Perhaps we can all be content with what we have and who we are, and thus more effectively serve the Lord. Perhaps the emphasis on marital status is something that hinders us and we should all notice it less. Perhaps the time is short, and ...

“... it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away.” (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)

Special role of the AC Single Group

“That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.” (Ephesians 4:14-15)

The development of the “Single Group” in the Apostolic Christian brotherhood was most likely not planned, but rather a natural outgrowth of the application of biblical principles. The truths that bind the body of Christ together in fellowship also bind young believers together. The body of Christ is often referred to as a flock. Jesus affirmed, “*My sheep know my voice ...*” and referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd. Like sheep, believers find safety, comfort, and peace in staying together in range of the Shepherd’s voice. Like lambs, young believers enjoy all these benefits with the added exuberance of youth. The delight of watching lambs frolicking together is unique in this world, and undoubtedly the Good Shepherd delights in watching young believers share their joy together. As human beings, we are created to enjoy fellowship in one form or another. As believers in Jesus, we are called out of fellowship with the world and into a deep communion with other believers. The role of the single group is to provide godly rather than worldly fellowship.

“And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.”
(Ephesians 5:11)

The joy of Christian fellowship brings with it both benefits and responsibilities. Some of the benefits are obvious, but others may not be quite so apparent. True fellowship goes deeper than superficial relationships. It permits the believer to confidently share his questions, doubts, beliefs, victories, and defeats with others. It gives opportunity to learn how to respond to the tests of faith that life brings. It permits and validates encouragements to faithfulness. It elevates the bond of faith in the shed blood of Jesus above every natural barrier common to man. True fellowship seeks to bridge the perception of gaps between believers by experiencing relationships in the spirit rather than in the flesh. The role of the single group is to remove barriers between believers.

“Seeing that ye ... have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all. Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.” (Colossians 3:10-14)

These are not easy barriers to break. But once broken by the Lord Jesus, through the power of love, one experiences a tremendous freedom in loving without fear. John reminds us that perfect love casts out all fear. Love does not become complete (perfect) without practice. That practice often takes place in the relative safety of the single group. The grace of God enables us to learn from mistakes, reveals our pride, diminishes superficial differences, and brings our love to maturity. The role of the single group is to nurture a maturing love for God and the brotherhood.

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment... If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.” (1 John 4:18-21)

The responsibilities of fellowship include a call to esteem others higher than oneself, an exhortation to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice, a charge to pray for one another, an awareness that one's actions inevitably influence others, and an admonition that the strong should bear the infirmities of the weak. Few of these things come naturally, even to a soul that has been born again. The Apostle Paul reminded the Romans not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their mind. Time spent together in the young group gives opportunity to allow one's transformation to be tested by "real-life" relationships and experiences, in the safety of a moderated environment. The role of the single group is to provide a safe arena in which young believers can learn to put the love of God into practice.

It also gives opportunity to learn from those who are older and more experienced. Just as in a family setting, the younger children often learn much from the experiences of the older siblings, in the single group, new converts and younger believers learn much from their older siblings. Equally important, the wisdom of the parents is generally significantly greater than even the oldest sibling; it should not be thought that the older ones in the single group have greater wisdom than mature believers with many years' experience in the tests of life. Rehoboam made the great mistake of listening to the counsel of his peers instead of the wise old counsellors, and he lost a large portion of his kingdom. The role of the single group is to give opportunity for older single believers to serve as good examples, and when needed, point the younger to wiser counselors.

"But he forsook the counsel which the old men gave him, and took counsel with the young men that were brought up with him, that stood before him." (2 Chronicles 10:8)

Experience in the young group also prepares us for a life of service and hospitality, rather than a life of expecting to be served. We learn that the greatest joys in life come from serving. Whether by hosting other young groups from our brotherhood, or by participating in local opportunities to serve, young believers learn how to perceive others' needs and meet them with the love of Jesus. The mutual reinforcement that comes from sharing such times of service with believers from across the brotherhood is priceless. In a world that devalues the Word of God more and more, shared times in the single group are faith-building experiences that last a lifetime! The role of the single group is to teach godly service.

"...but I am among you as he that serveth." (Luke 22:26-27)

The Father Calls His Children to Sanctification

Key verse: *“But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth”* (2 Thess. 2:13).

Much could be written about sanctification. For this article the focus will be on definitions, the scriptural basis, the “source”, and the results of sanctification.

Sanctification means being set apart for and belonging to God, cleansed from sin and made holy. Thus we become separated unto God and away from the evils of the world. We are set aside for a sacred or holy purpose.

Our heavenly Father has no pleasure in anything less than the best for His children. In the beginning God created a perfect world and set man in the Garden of Eden. Satan destroyed the perfection that was in the Garden of Eden. However, Satan was not successful in destroying God’s perfect plan for eternity because God, in His righteousness, and mercy, provided a way to salvation through Jesus. So great was God’s love for His people that *“...he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved”* (John 3:16-17). *“Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God”* (2 Cor. 7:1).

One of the definitions of “call” is to invite. God has called His children to perfection. He has invited us to be restored to the condition for which He created us. An invitation requires a response. If we do not heed His invitation, we have rejected it.

Many scriptural principles direct us to sanctification. God separated the children of Israel from the Egyptians and said to them *“...ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy”* (Lev. 11: 45.) To help them understand holiness, God charged the priests with a high calling: *“And they shall teach my people the difference between the holy and profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean”* (Ez. 44:23). *They shall therefore keep mine ordinance, lest they bear sin for it, and die therefore, if they profane it: I the Lord do sanctify them”* (Lev. 22:9).

How is sanctification accomplished? It is accomplished through the work of the Father, His Son, the Holy Spirit, and by fulfilling the responsibilities that God has given us. We must allow God to work in our hearts and lives and keep His commandments.

Our heavenly Father and His Son have always been holy and pure, yet they sanctified themselves. *“Thus will I magnify myself, and sanctify myself; and I will be known in the eyes of many nations, and they shall know that I am the Lord”* (Ez.38:23). Jesus, the perfect example on earth, not only asked John to baptize Him to fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3:15), but as He prayed for His disciples (and ultimately for us), He said *“Sanctify them through thy truth: thy Word is truth...And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth”* (John 17:17 & 19). *“Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate”* (Heb.13:12). *“...even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word. That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish:”* (Eph. 5:25-27).

Paul reminds us of the importance of the role of the Holy Ghost in directing the lives of believers and enabling them to be sanctified “...for which cause he (Jesus) is not ashamed to call (us) brethren” (Heb.2:11). “That I should be the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Ghost” (Romans 15:16).

Finally, we must recognize that individually we have a responsibility in yielding to God’s work that we may be sanctified. After Israel was defeated by Ai, the Lord spoke to Joshua and said “Up, sanctify the people, and say, Sanctify yourselves against to morrow: for thus saith the Lord God of Israel, There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel: thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing from among you” (Joshua 7:13). Paul reinforced the importance of taking responsibility for our behavior when he wrote: “If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work” (2 Tim. 2 :21). Ph.2:13 exhorts us, in humility and faith, to walk in the power of God’s grace, recognizing “...it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure”.

What are the results of sanctification?

Sanctification relates directly to a son/daughter relationship with God, by grace through faith. It, by definition, calls us to love God and His Word, to a spiritual mind, and to yield or present our bodies a living sacrifice, consecrated and devoted to God, walking in the Spirit. Sanctification becomes evident through a born again experience in which we have been converted from the desire to serve Satan to the desire for total submission to the will of God. When we are sanctified, our actions and our attitudes will display the fruit of the Spirit. The absence of the works of the flesh should be apparent to those who observe us. Do we abhor sin? Have we allowed worldliness to reenter our lives? Do we fill our minds with evil thoughts by reading unwholesome material? Do we give Satan an advantage by allowing inappropriate thoughts to remain in our minds? Do we seek entertainment that will draw us closer to the world, or do we spend our time on activities that will edify us and those who are with us?

The children of Israel were separated from the Egyptians. In faith they made this separation obvious by obeying God’s instructions to prepare for the coming of the death angel. As a result of this separation, manifested by their obedience to God’s command regarding the Passover sacrifice, the life of their oldest child was spared. Likewise, we must also separate ourselves unto God and, in obedience to His Holy Word, walk in holiness, apart from the evils of the world. The death angel saw the blood of the lamb on the homes of the children of Israel and in mercy spared them from the judgment of sin. When we are called “...to give account to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead”, (1 Peter 4:5), our faith in the overcoming power of the blood of Christ will serve as a testimony for us so that the Lord in His mercy will “pass over” judgment of our sin and we can live forever with the Lord.

How strong is God’s love for His children? It is so strong that He allowed His Son to suffer so grievously for our sins that, in agony, Jesus cried “...My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me” (Mark 15:34)?

Therefore the Father calls His children to sanctification.

The Father Calls His Children to Strengthen the Things That Remain

Key verse: *“Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God”* (Revelation 3:2).

If we were to put ourselves in the place of the church of Sardis and concentrate solely on the negative aspects of the above verse, we might be inclined to take a defeatist attitude towards the future. However, if we embrace the entirety of the message, we see that Christ acknowledged the presence of good and worthy attributes which should be strengthened and He held out a wonderful promise to those who hearkened to His call to “hold fast and repent”. *“He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels”* (Revelation 3:5). As was true for the church of Sardis, a positive and submissive attitude on our part has much to do with pursuing a biblical outcome. Thinking of our church in the best possible light and having an unselfish concern for every brother, sister and friend enables us to be encouragers instead of skeptics, or worse, fault finders. Our church has many wonderful attributes that are well worth preserving and strengthening. In this article we will consider a few of them that deserve our attention: biblical unity, joy, fellowship, and serving one another.

Biblical unity is grounded in humility and love, and is centered on the grace and truth of Jesus Christ (Ro.12:10; 16; 1 Thes 3:12-13; John 1:17). The Disciple John records our Savior’s prayer for a united church: *“That they all may be one; as thou, Father art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us...”* (John 17:21) Further, Paul instructs us that Jesus *“...is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us”* (Ephesians 2:14). In the Old Testament, the division between Israel and Judah serves as an instructive example in preserving unity. 1 Cor. 3:9 speaks of the necessity of laboring together in fervent love and harmony in our daily Christian walk, certainly as spiritual leaders and as individuals (2 Cor. 3:9; 1 Peter 1:22). When grievances occur that bruise that harmony, the biblical prescription is proven to be the answer-speaking truth in love and with grace, and a willingness to correct our wrong and extend longsuffering and forgiveness to others (Ja. 5:16; Eph. 4:15, 32; Col. 4:6). Surely the shared desire of all believers is to be part of that united fold under the Great Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ (John 10:16).

Joy: Maintaining a true Christ-like joy can be difficult, especially when facing sorrows or other challenges in life. When the awful prospect of crucifixion was upon Him, Jesus sought His Heavenly Father in earnest prayer (Luke 22:42-44). God sent an angel to strengthen Him, and Jesus was able to experience joy even in such trying circumstances, *“... who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God”* (Hebrews 12:2). The joy that literally “lay before His view” was actually the cross that He was willing to endure, defeating Satan, and giving us the opportunity for salvation. When we find ourselves struggling with keeping a joyful attitude, we can begin by following Jesus’ example and beseeching God for help: *“Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full”* (John 16:24). Jesus shows us that our joy is greatest when we keep His commandments and abide in His love. *“These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full”* (John 15:10-11).

Fellowship, a spiritual companionship on equal and friendly terms, is a special blessing to those united in the love of Christ. Sharing experiences and listening to those of others will strengthen our relationships and is another way of cultivating true joy and unity. *“If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfill ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind “* (Philippians 2:1-2). Making a conscious effort to listen is an essential part of edifying fellowship, *“...he wakeneth mine ear to*

hear as the learned" (Isaiah 50:4). We perform a very important service when we listen with the sincere intent to identify with and understand one another's feelings or difficulties. With understanding and genuine compassion and regard for our brother, we can bear "... *one another's burdens and so fulfill the Law of Christ*" (Gal. 6:2).

Serving others: Performing loving humble deeds of service for our fellow believers and all mankind in the name of Christ requires an attitude of esteeming the welfare of others over that of our own, as evidenced by Christ's teaching, "*For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? Is not he that sitteth at meat? But I am among you as he that serveth*" (Luke 22:27). We have the opportunity to serve not only our fellow believers, but also anyone who needs our help, or anyone for whom we have an opportunity of doing good, "*Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him that fell among thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then Jesus said unto him, Go, and do thou likewise*" (Luke 10:36-37). Pride, selfishness, and spiritual idleness are timeless warnings and they compete against, or weaken, our willingness to serve, "*Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy*" (Ezekiel 16:49). Rather, we are to be motivated by unselfish love, "...*by love serve one another*" (Galatians 5:13).

If we at times find ourselves somewhat discouraged or pessimistic, we can pray as David did that God would "*Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit*" ((Psalm 51:12). May each one of us do his or her part to encourage and strengthen one another as we strive to walk in faith, grace and hope for our common goal, "*Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now; Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:*" (Phil. 1:2-6).

The Present Privileges of a Believer

We understand and experience privileges which are associated with certain aspects of life, e.g. occupations, offices, citizenship, etc. According to Webster, a privilege is a right granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor. A privilege is distinct from a possession, which is something we have and hold as property. In spiritual matters, our salvation is a possession we have as a result of believing in Jesus (John 5:24, Rom. 10:9-10).

Having gained the standing of a believer, saved by grace through faith, we are granted many privileges that accompany our newfound status as a child of God. What follows is a reminder and discussion of some of these blessings given to us by our Heavenly Father.

The blessing of having Christ as our Head: Having found the blessing of knowing Jesus as Savior we gladly yield to Him as Lord of our life. Paul writes that we are to “*grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.*” (Eph. 4:15). In submission to Him we find the safety of a loving Shepherd who protects, guides, and corrects. He is the undisputed Head of all things, granted all authority by God (Matt. 28:18).

The blessing of the Word as our foundation: the Apostle John, who walked with the Lord and was beloved by Him, writes that Jesus was the Word made flesh and that those who saw Him “*beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,*” (John 1:14). The very Word of God has been preserved for us in written form and the example of the life of Christ is given that we might pattern our lives after His, putting on His mind and obeying His commands. (Phil. 2:5-8, Matt. 28:19-20, John 13:34-35). We will find, as David the shepherd boy who became king, that, “*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.*” (Psalm 119:105).

The love and support of our brotherhood: having redeemed us, God grants us the privilege of becoming His child. “*But ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father*” (Rom. 8:15). He places us into His family, the church – also referred to as His Body and the Bride of Christ, terms of endearment and examples of closeness, intimacy, and covenantal relationship. Peter exhorts us to “*Love the brotherhood.*” (1 Pet 2:17). Paul gives action to that love in describing how the members relate to each other, “*And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.*” (1 Cor. 12:26). Thinking of our relationship with each other in the body we grasp our need for each other, as the eye, ear, hand, and foot rely upon each other in our physical bodies. And we learn to abhor the thought that we might say to another, “*I have no need of thee.*” (1 Cor. 12:15-21). Rather we delight in the opportunity to “*Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.*” (Gal. 2:2).

It is a myth, and unbiblical, to think that we can experience the full benefits of the brotherhood without the sacrificial love, commitment and mutual submission essential to its functioning. It makes no more sense to say the body has no need of us than it does to say that of another member. We should prayerfully guard against the influences of the world around us, including an insidious and detrimental focus on one’s own needs and the loss of the privilege of denying self for Christ’s sake and that of our brother.

The blessing of an emphasis on a sanctified life: having been forgiven of our sin debt by Jesus who became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), we go on to a life dedicated and consecrated to His service. We stand firmly on a foundation of belief that, “*by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.*” (Eph. 2:8-9). We are “*justified*

freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:” (Rom. 3:24) and understand that “*by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight:*” (Rom. 3:20).

Finding ourselves purchased with a price as precious as Jesus' blood, we gladly yield to the sanctifying process by which we are made “*his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*” (Eph. 2:10). Indeed, in light of what Jesus has done for us, we should submit joyfully each day to the “*washing of water by the word*” (Eph. 5:26) by which we are sanctified and cleansed.

A correct and complete understanding of God's redeeming grace and the terrible price paid by our Savior will never lead to a spirit of license or the justification of sinful behavior. Rather His suffering gives strength to our resolve to “*Abhor that which is evil; (and to) cleave to that which is good.*” (Rom. 12:9). Like Paul, we reply “*God forbid!*” when the suggestion is made that we might somehow “*continue in sin, that grace may abound*” (Rom. 6:1).

When tempted, we remember that there is always a way of escape (1 Cor. 10:13) and that we may need to say, “*Get thee behind me Satan,*” (Matt. 16:23), reminding ourselves “*How shall we which are dead to sin continue any longer therein?*” (Rom. 6:2). And having fled from “*the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life,*” (1 John 2:16) we “*follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.*” (1 Tim. 6:11).

We can be very grateful that we benefit from consistent teaching that emphasizes the critical importance of good works in a believer's life, understanding that “*faith without works is dead*” (James 2:26) and that Jesus commanded that we should “*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*” (Matt. 5:16).

In living an overcoming life, by the power of the blood of the lamb (Rev. 12:11), we bring glory to God – what a privilege!

The blessing of simplicity of worship: as believers we experience the need and the benefit of bringing glory and praise to God in worship. The Book of Psalms is filled with expressions of such praise, acknowledging God as Creator of all things, the giver of life, all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful...on and on. We experience a blessing of worship that has a focus on God and a de-emphasis of self.

Jesus taught the woman at the well that, “*God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.*” (John 4:24). Paul was concerned that the Corinthians would stray from the “*simplicity that is in Christ.*” (2 Cor. 11:3) and stated his own determination “*not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.*” (1 Cor. 2:2). Rather he hoped that his preaching, which was done in weakness, with much fear and trembling, not relying on man's wisdom, would be a “*demonstration of the Spirit and of power.*” (1 Cor. 2:4). How privileged we have been to experience such power through the blessing of worship. This calls all of us to be grounded in and committed to 2 Timothy 2:15.

May we ponder these privileges and let our hearts and minds roam beyond them as we consider the multitude of benefits of being a child of the King!

Relevance of the Old Testament

In a world that seems to change more rapidly every year, there are few constants. People change, the cultures change, patterns of life evolve and adapt – even to the point of changing social mores and customs. The good news is that God does not change! One of the great joys in knowing the Lord is the calm assurance of His unchanging nature. Although some may think that the God of the Old Testament is different than the God of the New Testament, His constancy is reflected throughout the Bible by many examples of His consistent message to creation. He has not changed, and He will not change.

“For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” (Malachi 3:6)

From the beginning, God has demonstrated a constant and consistent love for His creation. In the New Testament, we continue to observe that God is love. He hasn’t changed. We also read that Jesus was with God at the creation and that nothing was made without Him. We read that Jesus is the same today and yesterday and forever. Like the Father, He does not change.

“Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8)

Understanding that God does not change, helps us understand that His Word has not changed either. The entire Bible is more than applicable to our lives; it is given by the inspiration of God and is profitable to us in many ways.

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16)

When the Apostle Paul wrote this instruction to Timothy, the only scripture that existed was the Old Testament. We must conclude that the Old Testament is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness – just as the New Testament is profitable for these things. In fact, a thorough reading of both reveals that, like the Father and the Son, the Word has not changed. Some key points of consistency include: the enduring commandment to love, the richness of God’s mercy, and His desire that we walk humbly in His sight – circumcised in heart.

In response to Abraham’s faith and as a sign of His covenant with Abraham, God commanded Abraham to circumcise all males. He further instructed the Jews through Moses that God’s intent was to circumcise their heart. This circumcision of the heart indicates the Lord’s desire that we who live by faith would cut off every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us – in order to love God with all our heart – and live.

“And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.” (Deuteronomy 30:6)

“For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” (Romans 2:28-29)

Jesus quoted often from the Old Testament and in doing so, further reveals the major themes of mercy and love. As He spoke with a lawyer who asked what he must do to inherit eternal life, the lawyer answered, “*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.*” And Jesus confirmed this saying, “*Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live*” (Luke 10:27-28) In confirming this, Jesus validated the

primary commandment that Moses gave to the Israelites after they escaped Egypt saying, *“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)*

Jesus also confirms that the principle of loving one’s neighbor has not changed since the days in which it was communicated to the children of Israel. *“Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of the people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:18)* Again the New Testament affirms the Old, reminding us to love even our enemies. *(Matthew 5:43-45)*

As the Lord continued speaking with the lawyer, He gave the parable of the Good Samaritan and asked him who was neighbor to the man who fell among thieves. The lawyer answered, *“He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, “Go, and do thou likewise.” (Luke 10:37)*

Mercy is another recurring theme that God taught from the beginning, demonstrated by His own actions, and reiterated through His prophets. He responded to Abraham’s pleas for mercy towards Sodom. He responded to Moses when he pleaded for the children of Israel. He showed tremendous mercy towards those who repented of the sins they had committed – even those who were very evil such as King Ahab, and the people of Nineveh. Through His prophets, He reiterated that His desire for men is that we would live in mercy, justice and humility.

“He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Micah 6:8)

To receive God’s mercy has always required faith. Those who repented – even in Old Testament times had to believe in God in order to respond to Him. The New Testament teaches us that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness. As in all the previous examples, we see the unchanging truth of the Word – whether given before Jesus came, given by Jesus, or communicated by the Apostles as they quoted the prophets.

“Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4) ... and ... But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.” (Galatians 3:11)

In an ever-changing world, it is comforting to know that the Living God does not change and will not change.

Christ's Commands to the Church

Key verse: *“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world”* (Matthew 28:19-20).

When we love someone deeply, we want to do all we can to help them make good decisions and to avoid Satan's pitfalls. As parents, we try to teach our children to do God's will, we try to be good examples for them, and we give them clear, direct instructions either to do or not do certain things. We cannot always shield them from consequences for inappropriate behaviors. There are valuable lessons to learn from the consequences of mistakes. However, if a child faces a life-threatening or very dangerous situation, most parents would choose to take their place if it were possible. We want to help those we love.

Jesus loves us so much that He wants all of us to have a safe haven. He wants us to be a part of His Church, His body (Eph. 1:23), His bride: *“And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of Heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”* (Rev. 21:2). He loves us so much that He did all that was necessary to provide a way of escape from Satan's snares. Jesus did not spare us from all of the consequences of sin (Luke 6:17-27), but He did take our place when we were condemned to die for our sins. Having done all of this for us, Jesus certainly wants us to follow the path He left for us so we do not fall prey to Satan's evil temptations and be eternally separated from God.

In His intercessory prayer (John 17), Jesus prayed that His disciples would know God, that they would have God's Word, He kept them in God's name, He made so they could be sanctified, and gave them the truth. In addition to praying for His disciples, He also included each of us in His prayer. *“Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word”* (John 17:20). Jesus prayed for you and me!

The commands that He gave us are clear and direct. His instructions are especially powerful because He not only taught us what we must do to please God, but He lived a perfect life, giving us an example to follow. These commands are as relevant today as they were nearly 2000 years ago.

Jesus told His disciples that He was going away, but He added, *“I will come again and receive you unto myself”* (John 14:3). Jesus is coming again to claim His bride. He wants His bride to be ready, so He gave us a clear path to follow as we prepare for His return.

Our lives must reflect humble discipleship and obedience to His messages, which He summarized in two commandments. *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment, And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets”* (Matthew 22: 37-40).

Keeping these two commandments requires us to repent (Luke. 13:3 & 5), to become converted (Mt. 18:3), to be born again (John 3:3 & 5), and to faithfully *“abide in the vine”* (John 15:4). To help us abide in the vine, the Bible identifies a number of attributes that should be apparent to those who observe our lives.

If we take the whole counsel of the Bible, it appears that humility stands out above most other attributes as a required possession, if we want to please God. There are many examples in the Bible of

individuals who were useful to God as long as they were humble, but when they became proud they were no longer useful to the Lord. (See the September, 2014 editorial).

Jesus also commands us to have a servant attitude. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came, not to be served, but to serve. Greatness before God comes from serving, not from being served. *“For whether is greater, he that setteth at meat, or he that serveth? Is not he that setteth at meat? but I am among you as he that serveth”* (Luke 22:27). Jesus was willing to stoop down in front of His disciples and wash their feet! The Son of God was not ashamed to perform the humblest deed so we could have an example of what it means to serve.

Christ’s bride is to be meek: *“Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls”* (Mt. 11:29). Meekness is mildness of temper, gentleness, easily entreated, given to forbearance even when we have been wronged, submissive to divine will, not proud or self-sufficient, and not apt to complain about divine dispensations. Nicodemus went to Jesus by night and asked for clarity of His mission. Jesus took the time to kindly, clearly explain what Nicodemus needed to understand. The impact that this had on Nicodemus may not have been immediately apparent, but he later went to the foot of the cross and helped prepare Christ’s body for burial (John 19:39-42).

Jesus also asked that His bride be filled with righteousness. *“For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven”* (Mt. 5:20). Jesus is our justification, enabling God to declare and treat us as righteous because Christ bore our sin on the cross. We are justified by believing, by faith in that redemptive gift. By His grace and the indwelling Holy Spirit we abide in Him and bear fruit of righteousness, and rejoice in hope which is an anchor of the soul. Therefore we are called to be holy, pure, submissive to what God wants for our lives, and to avoid entanglement in those things of the world that would pollute our lives. (Ro 5:1-2; Gal 5:22-25)

Perhaps most importantly of all, the bride of Christ is to be filled with love. God showed us perfect love. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16). This was further emphasized in a beautiful discourse by Paul on how we can put that love into action as he explained the importance of charity in the life of a child of God. (I Cor. 13).

Christ’s commands to the Church are intended to bring us together as one in Christ.

“And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them” (John 17:10). *“...that they may be one; even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one:”* (John 17:22-23).

If we love Jesus and keep His commandments, we can be united with His bride for all eternity.

Knowing That We Are Christ's Disciples

How can one know if he is a disciple of Jesus Christ? What are the marks of a true disciple? While we recognize that this is ultimately a deep matter of the heart, and the result of our trust in the shed blood of Christ for our salvation, we also know that the heart is revealed in our lives. “*A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.*” (Luke 6:45).

In its most basic definition, a disciple is one who follows the master. He mimics him and learns from him. He accepts instruction and grows to be more like him. Just as an apprentice is taught by the journeyman, the disciple is becoming fully conformed to the example and image of the one under whom he is in subjection.

The Christian's master is Jesus Christ. And He has left us with both instruction and example from His life upon this earth.

Perhaps foremost among the things Jesus said would mark us as His is our love for the brethren. The familiar words of the “new commandment” to love one another contain the convicting reminder that, “*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*” (John 13:35).

Further, God has given us the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit as a Comforter, Guide, and “earnest” (down payment) of our salvation – a token of His acceptance of us as His own. Jesus assured the disciples that the Holy Spirit would come and that “*at that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you.*” (John 14:20).

Again, at the most basic, the disciple is known by his obedience to the lord and master. Jesus taught, “*He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.*” (John 14:21). To love Jesus is to follow Him. To follow Him is to keep His commandments. To keep His commandments is to gain victory over the world through faith, including the carnal mind and other fiery darts of the wicked (1 John 5:1-5; 1 Cor 3:1-4; Eph 6:16). Two examples revealing evidence of obedience to Jesus' commandments are to humbly acknowledge our errors (Ps 139:23-24; 1 John 1:9) and to forgive as Christ forgave us (Col 3:13).

The true disciple is not one who makes an expression of allegiance and lives in obedience for a while. Jesus taught the perseverance of continuing in His Word, even making it a mark of an authentic believer. “*If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*” (John 8:31-32).

Finally, the observable mark of the disciple is his bearing of much fruit to the glory of God. True fruit, born of a life surrendered to Christ and yielded to the guiding of the Holy Spirit, is seen of others and brings glory to God, not self. In the Sermon on the Mount, we are directed to “*let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*” (Matt. 5:16). And later John records, “*Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.*” (John 15:8).

It is evident from the “new commandment” to love one another that discipleship is not merely an individual or personal matter. Indeed we find that the vineyard in which we work is filled with other workers with whom we are blessed to relate. The Lord places us “*in the body*” (1 Cor. 12:18) as it pleases

Him and for His purposes. Those purposes are accomplished when we unite in true brotherhood; loving out of a pure heart fervently, yielding ourselves in submission one to the other, staying accountable, and bearing one another's burdens (1 Peter. 1:22, Eph. 5:21, Gal. 6:2).

Repentance is an essential aspect of discipleship. As we seek to continue in His word, we will find areas where we need to repent (to turn and change). Genuine repentance includes genuine self-denial, the absence of any rationalization, true sorrow for sin, open and full confession, complete restitution where possible, and restoration of joy and peace (2 Cor. 7:11). The one to whom God will look—recognize as His child through adoption and sonship of Christ's sacrifice—is the one who is broken, contrite, and trembles at (has respect for) His word (Isaiah 66:2).

As we have already considered, the disciple seeks to be like his master. As such, God has called us to holiness, commanding us to, "*Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be ye holy: for I am the LORD your God*" (Lev. 20:7). Further, Paul writes, "*According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love*" (Eph.1:4). This holiness must grow and expand to every aspect of our life, as Peter teaches, "*but as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation;*" (1 Peter 1:15).

True disciples are living in this world but are not "of it." They understand their citizenship is in Heaven and walk as "pilgrims and strangers" in a foreign land (Heb. 11:10, 13). Sanctification—being separated and set apart for a holy purpose—will necessarily involve a clear distinction from the world. "*Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,*" (2 Cor. 6:17). The separated disciple dies daily to the desires of the world, rather seeking fulfilment in the labor of the master. He is busy doing "*the Father's business*" (Luke 2:49) and knows both the duty and the protection of Jesus' prayer, "*I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil*" (John 17:15).

The becoming like Jesus will happen as we benefit from the example of the "cloud of witnesses" who have gone before us by faith and help each other in always looking to Jesus, the only source of righteousness. "*Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.*" (Heb. 12:1-2).

An Enduring Invitation to Repent

God has consistently called men to depart from sin.

From the beginning of time, men have done things that were hurtful to others and to themselves. God never intended for man to hurt (sin against) himself or others. Before Cain murdered his brother Abel, the Lord entreated him to resist sin and change his attitude, calling on Cain to repent. But Cain did not turn from his evil.

Through Moses, Joshua, and many Judges, the Lord patiently called generation after generation to turn from sin and choose righteousness. As the Israelites repeatedly rejected the Lord—worshipping idols, committing great evils, and justifying themselves in all manner of evil—the Lord sent prophets over and over to call them back to truth and justice.

“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord GOD. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye” (Ezek. 18:30-32).

This consistent call continued through John the Baptist and was amplified by Jesus. As He taught the ways of peace and righteousness, His call to forsake sin touched many hearts; moving corrupt bureaucrats like Zaccheus, promiscuous women like the “woman at the well,” and simple fishermen like James and John; to renounce sin and live transformed lives. When asked by his countrymen what they should do in response to the realization that Jesus was the Son of God, Peter replied, *“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:38).*

The Creator of all has consistently desired and invited His creation to turn from evil and choose good. From the beginning, God spoke of a Redeemer and had His prophets confirm the promise. As the first sin in history was discovered, God rebuked the deceiving serpent by prophesying of the coming Redeemer who would defeat the very root of evil. *“And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15).*

To Abraham, God promised, *“And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice” (Gen. 22:18).* As Abraham raised his son, Isaac, even in the middle of a great test of faith in God, Abraham prophesied of the coming Redeemer, saying, *“My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together” (Gen. 22:8).*

Hundreds of years later, John the Baptist proclaimed the fulfilling of Abraham’s prophecy. *“The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).*

Throughout the Old Testament, men of God spoke and wrote prophecies of Jesus that were fulfilled and witnessed by thousands who followed Jesus – hearing Him teach and observing the miracles He performed. David wrote of His crucifixion, Isaiah wrote of His suffering, and Joel foretold the coming of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps none linked redemption and repentance more clearly than Isaiah who wrote: *“And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the*

LORD” (Isa. 59:20). In writing their Gospels, Matthew mentions nine specific prophecies fulfilled by Jesus, and John mentions one. A careful reading of the Old Testament reveals dozens more.

The fulfilling of these prophecies about Jesus testifies both to the truth of the prophet as well as the truth that Jesus was sent by God to be the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. There have been many false prophets through the ages and many yet today. Moses told the children of Israel, “*When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him*” (Deut. 18:22). The clear fulfilling of so many prophecies is a powerful confirmation that Jesus is the Son of God.

Just as there were false teachers and prophets in the earliest days of the church, there are many false prophets and teachers who speak in the name of the Lord today. Some have falsely prophesied of Christ’s return, and others have declared various men to be “the Antichrist.” Some teachers err, subtly insinuating that sin is unavoidable, saying “it’s just human,” to excuse sin. Others more obviously and overtly declare that evil is good and good is evil. Others presume to declare that all men sin each and every day, “*having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof*” (2 Tim. 3:5). The Lord commanded John to write to the church at Pergamos: “*I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent ...*” (Rev. 2:14-15).

The truth is that we were not redeemed to go back to sin. Jesus became sin for us that we might be made righteous in Him. “*For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him*” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Those speaking by the Spirit of God will demonstrate the truth of their teaching by obedience and good works. Paul (The Apostle of Grace) warns Titus of such times and teachers, saying, “*They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate*” (Titus 1:16).

God’s call today is the same as it has always been: that men should repent, believe that Jesus is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, and live overcoming lives in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Presenting the Gospel – Supporting Small Churches

“The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house” (1 Cor. 16:19).

Small churches play a key role in presenting the Gospel to a lost and dying world. The scriptures call all of us to go to “... the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).

There are several Bible verses that refer to churches starting in the homes of believers (Rom. 16:5, Col. 4:15, Phlm. 1:2) just as many of our Apostolic Christian congregations have had their beginning. These early gatherings were likely intimate settings where the Word of God was being lived and taught in an intentional way. Many of Paul’s letters show the close relationship he had with these “house” churches. We know “The Lord is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). This is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit and the Lord’s goodness (Rom. 2:4). In the early churches, the gospel was readily spread. “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied” (Acts 9:31). Multiplication happened as the churches were edified, walking in the fear of the Lord, and resting in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. “And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily” (Acts 16:5). Small churches wherein the Gospel truth, grace and love of Christ are proclaimed and lived, provide unique opportunities for the Holy Spirit to work and transform lives, and to positively impact the community.

Benedict Weyeneth was sent by Samuel Froehlich from Europe to America in response to a call for the true gospel message. As a result of this effort, the seeds of the gospel were scattered. Ministers of the gospel were chosen to share the Word. Elders were ordained to help carry on the work. The churches flourished and the Word continued to spread. In the first 21 years after Weyeneth came to America, 24 congregations were established in eight different states. As these congregations grew, they spawned new churches in surrounding communities. These gatherings started small and grew into the churches we know today.

To better understand today’s needs and concerns, imagine yourself in the place of someone sent into the harvest at a small church. As you experience this new role, you find that you love reaching out to people and helping them see their need for a Savior. On Sunday as you worship, you are pressed into duty as a song leader even though you have never led before. Each Sunday a ministering brother comes from a different congregation to preach the Word. The co-worker you invited to church asks you why you don’t have a local minister. As you explain and try to help him connect with the visiting minister, your wife informs you that water is leaking under the sink and you realize as the only trustee you will need to find a plumber. Then, as the church treasurer, you need to ensure the plumber gets paid. At the end of the day you lay in bed exhausted and wonder about your “calling” and what it really means to support a small church.

While this example may seem exaggerated, it is being lived today in some of our small churches. Those called to support a small church can testify that God provides the grace to meet the needs where they themselves may feel lacking in skills and abilities. And the blessings do outweigh the labors (Gal. 6:9)!

What can you do to help? First, start with fervent intercessory prayer (James 5:16). Prayer helps us understand the needs of others through the Holy Spirit’s work. Prayer allows searching of our own hearts for an understanding of our motives and willingness to serve. “Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me” (Isa. 6:8). We often

focus on why we can't do something or assume we are not "gifted." However, Isaiah simply said "Here am I; send me." As you meditate on this verse, what thoughts does the Holy Spirit press upon your heart? When you pray to God to send you, where do you sense His leading? Is He calling you to the local fields of harvest or to the fields in a small church? Fear can prevent us from fully surrendering our desires, will, and life to the Lord. After you have prayed and surrendered your heart, be willing if called to help support and serve small churches.

Additionally, encouraging others is a powerful tool for the Lord's work. "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works" (Heb. 10:24). Encouragement occurs most naturally through relationships. Work to build relationships with those in a small church. Visit small churches as often as possible. Repeat visits are especially helpful when trying to build relationships.

In summary, be prayerful about what God is calling you to do and counsel with your elder. Be willing to relocate if God leads in that direction. If you are a minister, pray for direction as to how God desires to use you to meet the need. There are many ways to support a small church. Small churches often have financial needs and may struggle to maintain the church property. "After these things the Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come. Therefore said he unto them, The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest" (Luke 10:1-2).

As you reflect on what it means to present the gospel through a small church, be encouraged to do your part to strengthen the body. Healthy small churches will facilitate growth into new areas and communities in America and beyond. "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Called to the Righteousness of Christ, Not Our Self-Righteousness

As we begin this next segment of topics under the heading of Nurturing the Believer, we want to return to first principles of a life lived in sanctification toward God. Just as the February article emphasized the critical aspect of God's call to repentance and its fundamental importance in Presenting the Gospel, God's Word calls the believer to be His disciples, bearing much fruit as we keep His commandments and abide in His love.

John the Baptist began his teaching by calling all to repentance in advance of the imminent coming of the Messiah Jesus. Many came confessing their sins and were baptized by John in the wilderness. "*John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins*" (Mark 1:4-5).

In his ministry, John was clear that he was only the forerunner, and that his role was to point people to the Master. He took his cues from Isaiah by being "*The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*" (Matt. 3:3-4, Isaiah 40:3). Although he often drew great crowds, and could have easily become caught by the lure of human popularity, he recognized and honored Jesus, saying, *there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose*" (John 1:26-27). And when time came for his earthly ministry to come to a close, he willingly yielded to God's plan, acknowledging, "*He must increase, but I must decrease. He that cometh from above is above all*" (John 3:30-31).

While we draw a positive example from John's humility, his interactions with the Pharisees also provide a contrasting reminder of the dangers of self-righteousness. When they followed the crowds to the Jordan River to hear John, he called out their insincerity with a stern, "*O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" (Matt. 3:7).

What was it about the Pharisees that led to John's warning? Evidently they were over-relying upon Abraham (their spiritual heritage) and neglecting to bring forth the fruit of a life given wholly to God's service. Romans 10:1-4 further clarifies this warning. As he called them to repentance, John had a special exhortation, "*Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father...(for) every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire*" (Matt. 3:8-10).

Jesus greatly expanded on John's condemnation of the self-righteousness of the Pharisees later in His ministry (Matt. 23). While He acknowledged their spiritual place (Moses' seat, v. 2) and that their teachings were to be observed, sadly, He had to warn against mimicking their actions. This stands in stark contrast to the model Jesus taught of the disciple following the master. And the pattern of the master is a servant, walking in faith, humility, and love. After noting that, "*whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted*, (Matt. 23:12), He went on to issue several "woes" of condemnation (v. 13-39) to give emphasis to the warning of these dangerous spiritual examples. He exposed their spiritual blindness and self-righteous living, calling them hypocrites.

How then must the believer walk if he is to avoid these pitfalls of self-righteousness? God speaks through Isaiah that He will look "*to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word*" (Isa. 66:2).

This contriteness of heart leads to an honest appraisal of one's brokenness before God. It springs from a respect and honor of His holiness and recognizes that we are only made righteous through faith in

the crucified and resurrected Lord who shed His blood for our justification and our sanctification. It understands that the Christian is to reject sin—indeed that we must abhor the exceeding sinfulness of sin—and if a believer sins, he acknowledges it and applies the Scriptural remedy. *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us”* (1 John 1:9-10, 2:1-2).

David’s example of this is summarized in the beautiful Psalm 51. He makes no excuse for his sin, confessing it readily and taking responsibility for it before God (v. 3). He most of all regrets his sin as an affront to God (v. 4) and mourns the resulting loss of relationship with Him; desiring for it to be restored (v. 12). He throws himself at the mercy of the righteous God, trusting in His loving kindness and forgiving spirit (v. 1).

God’s call to holiness is rooted in the nature of God. We are taught, *“as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy”* (1 Pet. 1:15-16). Indeed, we are called to bear fruit that will be observed by others, as Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount: *“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven”* (Matt. 5:16). There is a stark contrast between an ostentatious display of self-righteousness and the humble fruit-bearing through which God is glorified.

As followers of Christ and true disciples, to truly *“grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ”* (2 Pet. 3:18), we must become more like the Master. We do this by *“looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God”* (Heb. 12:2). Day by day we put on the mind of Christ, who *“made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross”* (Phil. 2:6-8).

Following the authentic and genuine example of Christ we will *“be found in him, not having (our) own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”* (Phil. 3:9).

Righteousness by Faith

Theme verse: *“The righteousness of God...is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.”* (Rom. 3:21-22).

One comes to God in faith. *“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him”* (Heb. 11:6). This faith in the redemptive gift of Jesus Christ on the cross is also manifested (made known) as we bring forth fruits of repentance such as humility, contrition, confession of faith and sin, and a forsaking of sin. These works, often referred to as spiritual fruit in the Bible, give evidence to our faith (James 2:17-26). Through faith in the propitiating sacrifice of Jesus, God deems us right (justified) in His eyes and we receive His imputed righteousness.

God imputes (credits to our account) His righteousness unto the believer. *“And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed (had faith in, reliance upon, and adherence to) God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God”* (James 2:23). For us to share the same blessing of righteousness based solely upon our belief in Him might seem somewhat incongruous to us. Indeed, grace has often been referred to as “amazing!”

The essence of the gospel is that a lost sinner who repents and believes in the power of the shed blood of Christ is saved for eternity. Paul repeatedly preached, “that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). *Truly, we are amazed at the profound simplicity of the promise, “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation* (Rom. 10:9-10).

As we study the Scriptural teachings regarding righteousness by faith, per the definition of faith noted above, we see that we are called to walk in faith and love, and by His grace we earnestly seek to keep His commandments (1 John 5:3). Indeed the soul who has grasped the glorious gift of salvation—and its incredible cost on Calvary’s cross—must truly desire to give his whole life to Christ, to love Him with heart, soul, mind, and strength (Luke 10:27). To do this is to *“yield (ourselves) unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and (our) members as instruments of righteousness unto God”* (Rom. 6:13).

We see that the righteousness which is by faith is not a matter of our works but rather the exact opposite. The fruit of a Christian life is a result of the faith that one has in his heart towards God. Just as Abraham believed God—long before the law was given, or even before he was circumcised as evidence of his belief—so our faith precedes the converting of the heart which results in fruit as evidence of faith (Rom. 4:1-8, Eph. 2:8-10, Gal. 3:6-18, James 2:17-26).

As was addressed in the April issue, we know that the righteousness of man (self-righteousness) is condemned in Scripture. The children of Israel had *“a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth”* (Rom. 10:2-4). We must avoid the deception of self-righteousness, and rather follow the pattern of God’s Word which describes various characteristics of a righteous person: such as walking in faith and the love of God (Gal. 2:16; John 3:23; Matt. 22:34-40), being an overcomer of sin (1 Cor 6:12-14), being a bearer of spiritual fruit, (Eph. 5:9; Gal. 5:22-23); and having the breastplate of righteousness as an essential part of the armor of God, (Eph. 6:14).

As with faith, fear also serves as a motivation to obedience and righteousness. However, our fear of God should be of the type that causes us to “*serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear*” (Heb. 12:28). The Apostle John put it simply, “*There is no fear in love*” (1 John 4:18). A healthy fear is born out of a genuine love and reverence for God. It leads us to abhor anything that offends or displeases Him (Prov. 8:13), causing us to strive for consecrated obedience to Him.

Just as there is a balance between fear and faith, there exists a proper understanding of the relationship between the truth of God and His mercy. We know that a holy and righteous God in the person of His Son will determine our eternal destiny based upon the absolute truthfulness of His Word. “*Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead*” (Acts 17:31). “*Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation*” (John 5:28-29). We know also that blood is the only remission for all sin (Heb 9:22). Because of Christ’s perfect sacrifice upon the cross, God is able to remain righteous and still extend His grace, mercy and peace towards fallen and sinful mankind to those who believe.

The Psalmist of old eloquently expressed the promise of our hope: “*Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven. Yea, the LORD shall give that which is good; and our land shall yield her increase. Righteousness shall go before him; and shall set us in the way of his steps*” (Psalm 85:10-13).

Obedience

Theme verse: “*For it is God which worketh in you both to will **and** to do of his good pleasure*” (Phil. 2:13).

Throughout His ministry, Jesus taught obedience to God’s commands. In the Sermon on the Mount, he spoke of the need to keep the least of the commandments, and as He ascended from the Mount of Olives, He instructed His disciples to teach all nations to observe (obey) all things that He had commanded them. In His words: “*Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 5:19-20).

One of the great deceptions throughout history is the notion that the fact that Jesus is the “end of the law for righteousness”—which He is—means that there are no “rules” in a Christian’s life. This clearly contradicts Jesus’ teaching which included many commandments. In addition, if we understand that the Gospels do not contain all that Jesus did, (*as John said in the last verse of his Gospel*), and understand that the disciples undoubtedly carried out Jesus instruction to teach all things, we can also embrace the teachings of the Apostles as the fulfilling of Matt. 28:20, wherein they teach us to observe all things that Jesus commanded.

“*And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen*” (Matt. 28:18-20).

The clarity of Christ’s last words on earth should call us to a great awareness of His instruction and a great willingness to put it into practice in our life.

Why is it so easy for those of us who are believers to dismiss some of Christ’s commandments? Perhaps validate one’s faith while we may be neglecting the Lord’s commands to love, forgive, be merciful, etc. Is it possible that the hypocrisy of self-righteousness in some has caused others to overreact? Perhaps some have rejected the importance of obedience by embracing “grace alone” as the key to salvation, while failing to remember the very *purpose* of that redemption.

The Apostle Paul writes that we are saved by grace through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God. Yet, as is often the case with our finite human minds, it is difficult to grasp the fullness of “all the counsel of God.” We are also taught by Jesus that our righteousness should exceed the righteousness of the law. Righteousness is right living—not just right thinking.

What are some of the key commandments that Jesus taught?

In the Sermon on the Mount alone we find many: Love your enemies, resist evil, don’t swear an oath, don’t take revenge, don’t judge, be merciful, make things right with your brother before you approach God, don’t do good things for show, and love God and your neighbor. The Lord taught us to go above and beyond the Law of Moses rather than dismiss it. The Gospels emphasize that we are to love God with our whole being, love our neighbor as our self, and love one another as Christ loved us. The Epistles expand on these and teach application for daily living.

The Apostles conveyed more specific teaching as they wrote to young churches and helped them understand the fullness of the Gospel. Perhaps we can summarize it like this:

God's commands are not simply random rules.

God commands us to do good unto others and abstain from actions that harm others.

He recognized that as humans, we are incapable of this on our own.

From the beginning it was planned that Jesus would shed His blood to redeem us – to reconcile our disobedience to Himself – and to carry that load for us.

He did not pay that price so that we can freely continue pleasing self. We are bought with a price and are not our own anymore.

We are purchased by the blood of Jesus for the express purpose of obeying God's commands and demonstrating the love of God to all men.

His commands are both broad and specific. Grand instructions to put off obvious sins such as lying, adultery and the like are followed by very specific instruction to encourage each other with hymns and spiritual songs. Magnificent entreaties to abound in mercy and love are followed by a very specific instruction that fathers ought not to provoke children to wrath. The Holy Spirit moving in the Apostles brought to their remembrance *all* that Jesus taught them. They shared it with the early church (*and us*)—demonstrating that God understands the big picture and also sees the details that make up that big picture. As God's children, we are called to obedience in both great commandments and small.

We can do none of this without the graciousness of God providing us with the overwhelming power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish these things. Nobody can do these things of their own strength. But if we have been “born (again) of our Father,” we will love to be like Him. If we have His Spirit, we will love to act like Him. If we spend time in His presence, we will love to imitate Him, just as a little boy picks up a tool and tries to imitate his father. He calls us both to have confidence in His ability and to be diligent in our personal efforts.

“For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

“Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless” (2 Pet. 3:14).

Put quite simply, He calls us to both Trust and Obey—in the great commandments and in the small.

Doctrinal Principles

Theme verse: *For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.*¹

There exists no other religion, doctrine or system of beliefs such as contained in the Christian Bible, God's Holy Word. God's Word is true, eternal and perfect.² It provides us with all the information we need to find our salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.³ Even though His Word is so complete and comprehensive, a relatively few fundamental truths or doctrinal principles make up its basis. An understanding of these doctrinal principles provides the believer with *a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.*⁴

The first principle is our belief in the existence of one eternal God, the Creator of all things. *Thou, even thou, art LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee.*⁵ God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁶ His perfection and Holiness are complete. *Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.*⁷ God's crowning achievement was to create man in His own image for the express purpose of bringing Him pleasure through the fulfillment of His will. God fully intended that mankind would *be holy as He is Holy.*⁸

Sadly, the next doctrinal principle is our inheritance of a sinful nature when our first parents succumbed to the temptation of Satan in the Garden of Eden; *wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.*⁹ It is not possible for a perfect and Holy God to tolerate any sin; and the result is that our sin separates us from Him; *but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.*¹⁰

Because of man's sin, God introduced His divine Law, and commanded Moses and Aaron to *go unto the altar, and offer thy sin offering, and thy burnt offering, and make an atonement for thyself, and for the people.*¹¹ Specifically, it was the blood of the sacrifice that appeased God; *for the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.*¹² The Law provided a means of forgiveness for the sins committed by God's people, but the indwelling sin nature remained which resulted in man's repetition of sin. *For the law...can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect.*¹³ *The true desire of God has always been steadfast obedience to His Word; and Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.*¹⁴ While the Law defined sin and served as our schoolmaster, it clearly aroused the need for a better Sacrifice through a new and better covenant or testament. Jesus Christ became the *mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises.*¹⁵ However, in order to become effective a testament (will) requires the death of the testator, and Christ the perfect Lamb of God willingly gave His life's blood on the cross as a worthy sacrifice for our sins. Faith in the shed blood of Christ on Calvary results in repentance, which is the beginning of a true Christian life. The blood of Christ covers the sins we have committed and allows our sinful nature to be changed. He freely gives us His enabling grace and seals the Holy Spirit of promise in our hearts, allowing us to overcome the sin that would otherwise reign in our lives.

The second coming of Christ to claim His own is the final doctrinal principle we will consider. At this time the resurrection of the just and the unjust will occur. *Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.*¹⁶ *Scripture is clear that man will either receive the mercy or the judgement of God in eternity depending on the choices we make in this life. Those who believe and live an overcoming life are not condemned but will pass from death into life.*¹⁷ How regrettable is the plight of the unbelieving, unrepentant sinner at this time! The bodies of the lost are resurrected, but only to hear their judgment at the great white throne and to be cast into the eternal lake of fire to be tormented with the Devil and his angels.¹⁸

On the other hand, the resurrection of the just is a wonderful event when our body lying in the grave will change and become a new body and rejoin with our living soul. *In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.*¹⁹ Those believers who are still alive at this time will *be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.*²⁰

A wonderful and indescribable culmination of faith and hope accompanies this miraculous event as the redeemed look forward to an eternity of *joy unspeakable and full of glory with our risen Lord and Savior in heaven.*²¹ Only then, will we truly comprehend the depth and fullness of God's love: "Oh, love of God, how rich and pure! How measureless and strong! It shall forevermore endure--the saints and angels' song."²²

(Footnotes) ¹ Rom. 5:17 ² Psa. 119:160; 19:7-8 ³ 2 Tim 3:15 ⁴ 1 Tim. 6:19 ⁵ Neh. 9:6 ⁶ 1 John 5:7 ⁷ Isa 6:3 ⁸ 1 Pet 1:16 ⁹ Rom. 5:12 ¹⁰ Isa. 59:2 ¹¹ Lev 9:7 ¹² Lev 17:11 ¹³ Heb. 10:1 ¹⁴ 1 Sam. 15:22 ¹⁵ Heb. 8:6 ¹⁶ John 5:28-29 ¹⁷ John 5:24, John 3:18, Gal. 6:7-8, Rom. 8:1, Rev: 2:7,11 ¹⁸ Rev. 20:11, 13, 14, Mat. 25:41 ¹⁹ 1 Cor. 15:44 ²⁰ 1 Thess. 4:17 ²¹ 1 Pet. 1:8 ²² Hymns of Zion #289

Contending for the Faith

“Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”¹

The first question to consider is what is “faith” as used in the biblical text? A brief definition is provided in, *“Now faith is the substance [the confirmation, the title deed] of things hoped for, the evidence [the conviction of their reality] of things not seen.”²* Faith is perceiving as real fact what is not revealed to the senses.

The Greek word for faith used in the New Testament is “pistis”; a noun meaning firm persuasion, moral conviction, especially reliance upon Christ for salvation. Another word often used is believe and the Greek word is “pisteuō”; a verb meaning to have faith in, upon, or with respect to, a person or thing; to entrust especially one’s spiritual well-being to Christ. Most of the references for faith (noun) or believe (verb) point to our relationship with Christ.

Another question is what is *“the faith which was once delivered unto the saints”³* as also in the passage, *“to them that have obtained like precious faith with us...?”⁴* And how do these commandments relate to our salvation and/or our Brotherhood? That is, what is meant by the term “like precious faith” or “the faith?” Does it refer to our Brotherhood or is it meant to be deeper than that? While “faith” is never used in Scripture to refer to a church or denomination, believers are exhorted to “continue in the faith,” “contend for the faith,” “stand fast in the faith,” etc. In these instances, Scripture is exhorting the believer to continue to abide in biblical doctrine, to abide in Christ.⁵ It is essential for us to understand that “the faith” refers to the doctrines of Christianity of salvation through faith in Christ.

Using the term “like precious faith” to refer to our Brotherhood is not supported in Scripture and can diminish our focus on Christ as the object of our faith. It can elevate our Brotherhood too highly even though it is important and is precious; but not equal with our saving faith in Christ or the Word. It might even lead to an attitude that Jesus warned against in a parable where a Pharisee said, *“God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are.”⁶*

On the other hand, treating the Brotherhood too lightly can be dangerous too and is also unbiblical. It may encourage individuals to come to Christ but not seek to be committed or spiritually accountable to a church body. They may be attempting to maintain flexibility or autonomy in their spiritual walk. But this comes at the cost of missing the blessings of community—accountability, a covenant relationship with other members, discipline, submission, etc. And there is a particular danger in adopting a pattern of switching churches as a response to personal preference or a focus on one’s felt needs. Our faith in Christ will flourish in community as we labor together in Him.⁷

Consider the comment by a now-departed retired elder in reference to the Bible and our Brotherhood, *“I just want to urge you, press on in the same right spirit of Paul and Titus, with a healthy loyalty to the good paths of our precious heritage and an unwavering, unwavering allegiance to the whole counsel of God.”*

The next question to consider is what is meant by the exhortation to *“earnestly contend for the faith.”⁸* When we look at the context of this verse coupled with the account in 1 John 2:18-27 we are exhorted to preserve the pure Gospel as delivered by Christ and counter the advance of false teachers who would distort truth, diminish the value of Christ’s finished work, and even deny Him. It is important to contend for “what we believe” not just to focus on “how we project” that belief. Jude and John give the

call for all Christians to contend for truth—for the whole and pure Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to be rooted in the Word.

From that point the manifestation of what we believe should be a natural progression as we practice our faith or belief. Our faith may begin as the size of a mustard seed but that seed is meant to grow into the mustard tree.⁹ Consider the sequence, “*And beside this, giving all diligence, add (exercise) to your faith virtue ... knowledge ... temperance ... patience ... godliness ... brotherly kindness ... charity.*”¹⁰ It seems that Peter is encouraging us to grow our faith. The terms “earnestly” and “giving all diligence” suggest maximum effort or strenuous effort is to be expended as we “add to” (or grow) our faith.

Paul states that we are to “*work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling.*”¹¹ From the account in John 15:5 and Gal 2:20 (and numerous others) it is apparent the “work” is not done through our own efforts or strength but only through God’s empowerment. “*For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.*”¹²

We often get confused on what is God’s part and what is our part. It appears significant that Paul uses the terminology to “work out” not “work for” our salvation. This seems to suggest we are to allow that which God imputed in us (true saving faith) to work its way out to be seen of men that “*they may glorify God*”¹³ and “*draw all men unto Me.*”¹⁴ As we “work out” or exercise our faith we help preserve “true faith,” the biblical faith of our fathers. Our faithful example will reveal the validity of our faith, be a reflection of Christ to others, help advance His kingdom, and bring God glory.

Paul gives further direction when he says “*Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended, but this one thing I do ... I press toward the mark for the prize...*”¹⁵ Paul is not fearful of his position in Christ but rather stating he has work to be done as he pursues the goal of conformity with the image of Christ. That should be our focus as well as we earnestly contend for the faith; that we may also be conformed into His image. Any focus other than the pursuit of Christ-likeness can and often does lead to a spiritual leanness centered on pride, the deception of self-righteousness and/or doctrinal error.¹⁶ Without a Christ-centered focus empowered by the Holy Spirit we may lose the inner vitality of our first love as did the Ephesian church.¹⁷

What motivated Paul in his pursuit of Christ-likeness; as he faithfully contended for the faith? He answers that question by writing, “*For the love of Christ constraineth [compels] us ...*”¹⁸ Paul was driven to seek God with all his heart by the “agape” love planted in his heart.¹⁹ We also should seek that motivating factor (love of God) – He is worthy of our best!²⁰

(Footnotes) ¹ Jude 1:3 ² Heb. 11:1 ³ Jude 1:3b ⁴ 2 Pet. 1:1 ⁵ John 15:4-5 ⁶ Luke 18:11 ⁷ Heb. 10:23-25; 2 Cor. 6:1 ⁸ Jude 3 ⁹ Luke 13:19 ¹⁰ 2 Peter 1:5-7 ¹¹ Phil. 2:12 ¹² Phil. 2:13 ¹³ Matt. 5:16 ¹⁴ John 12:32 ¹⁵ Phil. 3:13-14 ¹⁶ Rom. 10:1-4 ¹⁷ Rev. 2:2-4 ¹⁸ 2 Cor. 5:14 ¹⁹ 2 Cor. 5:17 ²⁰ Matt. 22:36-40

Loving Discipline

“Every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.”¹

As believers, we are grafted into the true vine, and as such, we should reflect the life of the Savior and thereby, His fruit. This is a daily process of growing in grace which includes self-denial and taking up our cross, whereby we are refined into His image each day of our life.

“And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.”²

As we are called to be ambassadors for Christ³, we represent not ourselves, but our Father, as we walk in the world, but are not a part of it.⁴ To that end, biblical principles of self-discipline and brotherly correction should be evident in a believer’s life, as we grow to be more like Him and possess His mind.⁵

We realize that—while each day we battle against Satan and his devices—there are times that we fail, and subsequently experience the chastening of the Lord and call to repent. Sometimes, depending on the seriousness of the sin, the church may also have a role to help the erring soul regain a right relationship with God and a restoration of peace, as well as to keep the Church holy and without spot. This can result in various forms of church discipline. As the return of the Holy Spirit’s fruit, a restored relationship with God and an overcoming life are observed, reinstatement of these privileges can be considered. We will discuss these topics in more detail in this article.

Through the working of the Holy Spirit, self-discipline is evidenced by the submission of our will to the Father’s and the transformation of all aspects of our life, e.g. our thoughts, attitudes, speech and walk.

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”⁶

This self-discipline, directed by the Holy Spirit, instructed by the Word, and empowered by His grace, is manifested within an individual’s life in the form of temperance—the ability for the Spirit to govern the mind, motives, appetites, and passions in light of Jesus Christ, the perfect example. Paul encouraged the Corinthian church and us to examine ourselves and our faith.⁷ Some introspective questions that could be helpful are:

1. Are we thankful in all things, knowing that God is in control and will provide?
2. Do we have the same love for and are willing to show it to all of God’s children, as well as our enemies, or have we justified why we can’t love or forgive someone?
3. Do we save time for ourselves to do only “what we want,” or are we earnestly about the Father’s business?

Discipline in all of its forms is intended to be an expression of God’s love, so that the believer will be a faithful ambassador and child of God bearing more fruit.

*“For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.”⁸
The Father’s love is also expressed within the church body, with God using the body to help us become more Christ-like, “for the perfecting of the saints.”⁹ This happens in many ways, including pulpit*

teaching, Bible Study, instruction from older, mature brethren, and through mentoring and accountability within the brotherhood.¹⁰

When a believer sins, they will experience a measure of judgment in the form of conviction, suffering, or guilt. It is God's sincere expression of love to warn and chasten such a soul, so that humility will result and repentance can occur. While we are reminded that the mark of the believer is the perfection of Christ, we are grateful that, if we come in faith and repentance, Christ is the propitiation for our sin through His blood and advocacy. "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."¹¹

As believers, we have our individual responsibility to help keep the Church body without spot, holy, and blameless in preparation to meet Christ and as a healthy witness to the lost.¹² This leads to Holy Spirit-inspired correction, which calls us to go to our brother/sister alone with our concern, wrapped in charity. The desire to help each other in the grace of our Lord Jesus will allow one to receive a confession of fault, establish accountability, and provide a deep commitment to pray for a Spiritual healing.¹³

In an effort to help an individual who cannot see his error, the Scriptures instruct us to express loving concern through the mouth of two or three witnesses.¹⁴ At those times when self, individual, or small group discipline have not been fruitful, the church has the responsibility to exhibit loving correction, through public discipline, to help the erring soul.¹⁵

Even if a broken and contrite confession exists, which is necessary for God's forgiveness, it may not eliminate the necessity of public church discipline. Rather, it can be helpful to confirm a sincere repentance, aid in breaking the pattern of sin through transparency, and reinforce the seriousness of sin.¹⁶ This aids in a breaking of pride so that humility can again allow for God's grace to be granted.¹⁷ Additionally, it has benefits for the entire body of believers, warning the body of its need to remain sober and vigilant against Satan's devices and tactics.¹⁸ Often, the sooner that awareness of sinful patterns can be realized and needed assistance provided, the less spiritual damage and risk of hardness of heart will occur.¹⁹

Restoration of peace and a right relationship with God is always the goal after a believer has sinned and has been helped through discipline in its various forms. When an individual has experienced a separation from God due to sin and then repentance occurs, this individual can again possess a "present hope of salvation."²⁰

Restoration to a right relationship with God will not be possible without genuine repentance. A believer who has sinned and has an unrepentant heart is deceived and can become hardened to the point²¹ where he would fall away and reject his faith in Christ (become apostate) and in that condition be unable to find repentance.²² Thus, an individual can forfeit his salvation.²³

When individuals resist the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, the church extends its love in various forms, including reprimands, withdrawing company, and severing membership. The desired response is repentance toward God, reconciliation of the damaged relationship with Him, and the return to a dependency and living faith in Christ for grace and advocacy.²⁴

The scripture is clear that the eternal judgment of a soul to heaven or hell is left to God the Father and Jesus His Son.²⁵ When there is evidence of the destroyed flesh, restored relationship, return of

His Spirit of peace, and clear, sustained, overcoming living, reinstatement of membership within the church for the purpose of confirming His restorative work can be considered. While God is the final judge regarding one's salvation, the church and elder have a role in these situations. This includes the instruction of erring souls, based on the Scriptures, concerning the principles of repentance, self-denial, an overcoming life through the power of God's grace, with discernment through the Holy Spirit and the Word.²⁶ In addition, the church can reassure the individual and confirm to the world, the evidence of God's renewed working in the lives of the repentant soul, based on the manifestation of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible explicitly teaches examples where authority is given to the church, including to bind and loose.²⁷ This authority is limited by the totality of the Scriptures²⁸ as well as the discernment and leading of the Holy Spirit.²⁹ This authority was administered through church leadership throughout the New Testament, including cutting off false doctrine, restoring those that had committed sin,³⁰ turning individuals from darkness to light,³¹ and forbidding, for a time, the company of the overtaken individual with the local church.³² Each of these examples fulfilled the church's role in aiding God's work to convert those that had erred from the truth.³³

When considering reinstatement, a number of principles are relevant in balancing the welfare of the individual soul who fell into sin and the welfare of the church body and other impacted souls. These include the fruit of repentance, evidence of the spiritual nature, including the Fruit of the Spirit, and restitution with others.

The fruits of repentance and evidence of a restored relationship with God are evidence of God's power to heal and convert – such as godly fear, vehement desire to serve God, acknowledgment of the hurt or reproach to the body of believers, and faith and trusting in Christ's mercy and His grace to gain victory over sin and over one's deserved judgment for sin.³⁴ True repentance is also expressed as an absence of rationalization, in a true sorrow for the sin, with an open and full confession, by complete restitution where possible, resulting in the restoration of joy and peace. When such repentance has occurred and has been observed by others, reinstatement can be an encouragement to the individual, the church, and the community, as it is a public acknowledgment of the restoration and return of the work of the Spirit. Reinstatement without such fruit would create a false sense of hope in the individual and confusion within the church and community.

We know that judgment of heaven or hell is ultimately reserved to God. The local elder with assistance from other brethren and the ministry (and often other elders), is expected to make a discerning judgment (or binding/loosing) regarding the heart of a convert before acceptance into the Body, which is a discerning of the evidence of dying to sin and a spiritual rebirth, led by the Spirit and living in faith and grace. Likewise, as part of the consideration for reinstatement within the church, a similar discernment is expected to determine if sin still reigns and membership should continue to be withheld, or if Christ again reigns and membership could be reinstated. An important part in this discernment is observing the fruit in a believer's life from the chastening of the Lord.³⁵ Discerning the correct timing of reinstatement of some or all privileges is required to avoid cutting short the benefits to the individual of the Lord's loving chastening or extending to the point of creating overmuch sorrow.³⁶

The church plays a key role in the discipline of an individual through prayer, love, withdrawal, accountability, encouragement, etc. When such an individual repents and the fruit of God's presence is again evident, there is rejoicing and embracing that can strengthen the individual and the church. This is also manifested where sin has created hurt and/ or conflict, but true repentance results in peace and forgiveness.³⁷

Where sin has damaged the cause of Christ within the church or community due to its public nature, or sin has damaged the faith of others, the resulting complexity may require a more deliberate and cautious approach to any reinstatement to avoid hindrance to the Gospel. While an individual may repent and experience the mercy of God in restoring peace to his soul, the impact of his sin on others (including those possibly involved in the actual sins) deserves special consideration. Luke 17:1-4 emphasizes both the seriousness of another soul being damaged or offended (caused to stumble spiritually) and a call to forgiveness by the offended.³⁸

Binding and loosing will need to be revisited from time to time as the fruit of these decisions can be observed. The fruit will be evidence of God or flesh.³⁹

We have so many reasons to be thankful to God, for the peace we have through faith in the Atoning Blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ, for the gift of grace to help us live an overcoming life, for the Holy Spirit and His word, which is a lamp unto our feet and our constant guide, and for His boundless mercy and love which is expressed to us in so many different ways. May each one of us strive daily to deny self, humbly receive His pruning to bear more fruit, walking as His disciples.⁴⁰

(Footnotes) ¹ John 15:2 ² Luke 9:23 ³ 2 Cor. 5:20 ⁴ John 17:16 ⁵ 1 Pet 4:1 ⁶ Rom. 12:1-2 ⁷ 2 Cor. 13:5 ⁸ Heb. 12:6 ⁹ Eph. 4:11-13 ¹⁰ Titus 2:1-8 ¹¹ 1 John 2:1-2 ¹² 1 Cor. 5:6-7; Eph. 5:26-27 ¹³ Matt. 18:15; James 5:16 ¹⁴ Matt. 18:16 ¹⁵ Matt 18:17, Rom. 16:17-18 ¹⁶ 2 Cor. 7:10-11; 1 John 1:9 ¹⁷ James 4:6-10 ¹⁸ 1 Tim. 5:20; 1 Pet. 5:8; Rom. 12:21 ¹⁹ Heb. 3:13 ²⁰ Gal 6:1; Titus 3:3-7 ²¹ Heb. 3:13 ²² Rom. 1:28; Heb. 6:4-6 ²³ 2 Pet. 2:20-22 ²⁴ Gal. 6:1; Heb. 7:24-25; 1 John 1:7-9; 1 John 2:1-2 ²⁵ John 5:22-27 ²⁶ John 14:16, 26 ²⁷ Matt. 16:19; Matt. 18:18 ²⁸ Acts 20:27; 2 Tim. 3:16 ²⁹ John 20:22-23 ³⁰ Gal. 6:1 ³¹ Acts 26:18 ³² 1 Cor. 5 ³³ James 5:19-20 ³⁴ 2 Cor. 7:11 ³⁵ Gal 5: 22-23 ³⁶ Prov. 3:11; 2 Cor. 2:6-9 ³⁷ Rom. 12:12, 15; Heb. 12:14 ³⁸ Rom. 14:13, 16-20; Phil. 1:9-11 ³⁹ 1 John 4:1; Heb. 6:7-8 ⁴⁰ John 8:31-32; 15:4, 8-12

Choosing a Career

“And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men”¹

Perhaps it seems a little out of the ordinary to think of offering deeds of service through the work we choose to do. But for the typical American adult working a full time job, it is likely that a minimum of 35% of waking hours are spent at work. With a willing heart, that many hours can be an outstanding opportunity to show the love of Christ through service to others.

Attitudes about work differ from culture to culture. Some view work as a necessary evil and attempt to diminish it as much as possible. Others honor work as a noble endeavor and build their life around it. Typical hours worked vary by nation from a low of less than 1400 hours per year to a high of over 2200 hours per year. The U.S. falls roughly in the middle at just under 1800 hours per year. If one’s attitude is that work is a joy and therefore to be performed with energy and passion, it will likely feel natural to work with an attitude of service towards others. However, if one believes that work is a necessary evil and not to be enjoyed, it will seem difficult to have an attitude of service. In similar fashion, if one’s God-given gifts match well with his career, it will be easy to serve others. If, however, one’s work does not mesh well with the talents and abilities that God has given them, it will likely be no small task to cheerfully serve others.

What does the Bible say about work? First and foremost, as is often the case with God’s instructions to men, there is a balance in the Bible that directs us away from extremes. We are taught by Jesus to, *“Take no thought for the morrow,”*² as He encouraged the disciples to trust God to provide food and raiment.³ Jesus also made God’s work a priority in His life— even when He was just 12 years old.⁴ In Proverbs we are taught to observe how the ants work and to be diligent when it is a time of plenty so that we will have in time of need.⁵ We are also encouraged in Proverbs to first build a barn and prepare for winter and afterward build a house⁶—prioritizing preparation for the future over comfort. Paul the Apostle made it clear to the Thessalonian church that working was a duty of each one and if one would not work, neither should he eat.⁷ He exhorts all to work so that we can walk honestly before the unbelievers and that we would lack nothing.⁸ He notes that he labored and travailed (worked) night and day so that he would not have to depend on anyone⁹ and that while fulfilling his God-given mission to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. (Note: Paul also made it clear that he took a stipend of other churches in order to avoid being a burden on the Corinthian church.¹⁰)

In assessing the whole counsel of God, we find that it is: appropriate to work, to be diligent in that work, but not to worry and fret about the future. Beyond that, we find that we are to serve in our work with the mind of Christ.

“Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God: And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.”¹¹

Thinking as Jesus did is not natural to the human mind. Only if we are walking in the Spirit can we hope to have the mind of Christ. These Scriptures and this truth call us to avoid the common scenario in which work is compartmentalized and our life of faith is kept separate—to be practiced at church and at home. To the contrary, we are called to incorporate our willingness to walk in the Spirit into our work in singleness of heart, fearing God. We are called to demonstrate our faith in God by working heartily as to the Lord and not to man. And we are called to do it without concern for whether we are being compensated fairly or not; for we serve the Lord Christ.

This meshing of faith and work may be a new perspective to some believers. One may wonder, “How can I accomplish this?” There are some simple ways to demonstrate the pureness of heart that a believer has because of Jesus and through the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit includes; love, joy, peace, gentleness, meekness, kindness, etc.¹² Working with joy will immediately give us opportunity to serve others. Coworkers and customers alike will gravitate toward a cheerful person. Serving with a gentle and meek spirit will quickly assure coworkers that we are not there to run them down or climb over them in a race up the “corporate ladder.” Seeking peace and being peaceable will serve to calm a workplace and provide those who are not peaceful a source of inspiration and help. The primary way to serve in the workplace is to reflect the nature of God through the reality of the Holy Spirit living in us.

When we consider the freedom that we have today, it raises questions that would never have been raised in ancient times. Many throughout history had no options. They were born to a trade, or born to the farm, or perhaps to tend livestock. It was difficult to find other opportunities because survival was much more important than finding fulfillment in a career. In our time, we have many more options. Finding a career that meshes with our talents and abilities is a good thing. However, whether one finds himself in a job that is not fulfilling, or in a job that is extremely gratifying, the way in which we do the job is much more important than which job we have.

Preparing oneself for service through the power of the Spirit of Christ is the most important ingredient in serving others through work. What we do for a living may not be as important as how we do it—heartily and honestly, with the mind of Christ.

(Footnotes) ¹ Col. 3:23 ² Matt. 6:34 ³ Matt. 6:25 ⁴ Luke 2:49 ⁵ Prov. 6:6-8 ⁶ Prov. 24:27 ⁷ 2 Thess. 3:10 ⁸ 1 Thess. 4:11-12 ⁹ 2 Thess. 3:8 ¹⁰ 2 Cor. 11:9 ¹¹ Col. 3:22-24 ¹² Gal. 5:22-23

The Church and Singleness

The Sanctity of Singleness

“But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:12-13)

For a long time, the Church has diligently taught and held high the “sanctity of marriage” – the unity of a man and woman reflecting the Oneness of God. Such a precept is worthy of weight and attention. Marriage speaks to the union of Christ and His church and creates an environment where loving, believing parents can disciple and encourage their children toward faith in God. However, we see in John 1:12-13 the teaching of the new covenant of a spiritual family, the increase of the kingdom of God through spiritual regeneration and not just growth through childbearing. This is a critical shift to consider. It calls us to ponder the value we place on marriage and the lesser value sometimes placed on singleness. In the spiritual sense of God’s new covenant, singleness and marriage have equal standing in His sight. His focus is on His spiritual family (Mark 3:31-35). In this context then, it is good to consider for a moment not just the “sanctity of marriage” but also the “sanctity of singleness.” Similar to marriage, the sanctity of singleness can celebrate oneness, fidelity and covenant – not with man, but with God. Singleness therefore has great value in God’s eyes.

Scripture abounds with examples of believers who were single. Paul, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Anna, Jeremiah, Elijah and Daniel are a few individuals who were likely single. Jesus Himself chose to live a single life, building a family of brothers and sisters in the Lord versus building an earthly family. Living life singularly for God should be seen as a great honor, not something to be dreaded or avoided. Similar to marriage, Satan has attacked God’s design for singleness. Without careful Biblical attention being paid to the sanctity of singleness, some inaccurate views can be propagated. Included in these inaccuracies could be:

Singleness is something to be feared.
Singles have less value than their married counterparts.
There is something wrong with the individual that doesn’t receive a marriage proposal.
Singleness is a phase of life and should be temporary.

This article will endeavor to encourage us by asking eight self-reflecting questions regarding how we view the singles in our lives.

Does my attempt to encourage singles have the opposite effect? The comment “You’ll be next” when directed to a single at a wedding reception may have the opposite effect, leaving the individual feeling hurt or discouraged. The single may be:

content in his/her current state of life.
currently in the marriage proposal process and thus feel undo pressure.
desiring marriage but feeling little control over their marital status.

Have I kept up with my single friends? In a new couple’s excitement of engagement and beginning a different phase of life, single friends can sometimes feel left behind. Oftentimes, single friends are excited for the new couple but can feel disappointed as their relationships change. While a

degree of change is inevitable, it is important to maintain communication as much as possible with single friends, taking a continuing interest in their lives.

Do I overlook mature, gifted singles for church responsibilities? Church offices, Sunday school, committee membership, and other aspects of church all can benefit from capable single involvement. We should strive to see the value and potential in our singles.

Do I relegate certain responsibilities only to singles? Babysitting, running errands, visiting elderly, and service projects can frequently be delegated as responsibilities to be fulfilled by singles. Assuming singles have more time and fewer responsibilities can often be a false generalization. Without the support of a spouse, single individuals often lead very busy lives as they balance work, family obligations and household responsibilities on their own.

Do I overthink my invitations to singles when I host gatherings? Will they feel comfortable? Do I invite only an even number? Do I invite people for the sole reason they will inevitably bring blessing to the gathering, regardless of marital status? Invites to singles can be a great encouragement to all those involved.

Do I view all singles as the same? Singles hold many different titles and exist in many different life stages. Some are doctors, mothers, executives, college students, et al. Singles vary in maturity, responsibilities, and life callings just as widely as everyone else. They are no more a homogeneous group than married couples. We should remember singles in our church family are not one and the same, realizing the life of a 40 year old working single may vary dramatically from a 20 year old single college student or a 55 year old widow. We should be careful to not have the most defining label in one's life be "single."

Am I sensitive to the general support singles need? Singles go through periods of loss, questioning and needing affirmation. They also have a need for support, just like married individuals. And often singles can feel alone during these times without the benefit of a spouse or close confidant to truly share their heart with. One example is our church's proposal by faith process. While this has been a blessing to many, the proposals usually discussed are those that have led to engagement. Confidentiality around this process is critical, but it can also create an environment where individuals who have given or received a "no" can feel shame or confusion if they try to reconcile these disappointments on their own. There is the hope this would draw an individual closer to the Lord, but unfortunately, this is not always the case. The individual may feel like they are the only one to have this experience and could develop bitterness toward God for not following through on the dream or expectation of having a spouse. Being able to openly share emotions with elders, parents, mentors or close friends while trusting that confidentiality will be maintained can be very helpful. Be willing to help create this environment of friendship and sharing as God gives opportunity.

Does the term "single" mean anything more to me than marital status? The word single occurs twice in the Bible (Matt. 6:22, Luke 11:34) and is derived from the Greek word *haplous*, which means "clear, sound and whole." Both 1 Cor. 7:32-35 and Matt. 6:22 speak to having a spiritual vision that is fully fixed on God, not divided by other cares or concerns. It is good for all of us, married or single, to consider how focused our lives are on God and His purpose in our lives.

If we do not take time to reflect, the sanctity and blessings of singleness can all but be lost. We need to hold on to a healthy view of singleness which is laid out for us in the New Testament covenant with our Lord Jesus Christ. We understand like none other what and how God's family is grown, "*But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*"

(John 1:12-13). Our spiritual relationship with Christ as His brothers and sisters will last into all eternity in a fashion our earthly relationships as husband, wife, and single do not (Luke 20:34-35). Where then is the place which the single should be able to truly turn for encouragement, support and value in this world? Only the Church. May we do our part together to make this a reality.

ACCFS continues to develop resources to help singles in their walk with the Lord. These resources can be found on our website at www.accounseling.org/singleness. If you would like more information or have requests/comments, please contact ACCFS at (309)263-5536 or singleness@accounseling.org.

Serving Those Closest to Us

*“By love serve one another.”*¹

Our church’s fourth mission pillar, to offer humble deeds of service, is well grounded in Scripture. In addition to the theme verse above, we read, *“as we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.”*² Further, our Lord and Master Himself said, *“I am among you as he that serveth.”*³ He demonstrated a life of service to those around Him. In fact, He who was and is God, did not worry about making a reputation for Himself, but rather came to earth as a man and became a servant.⁴

We serve in the great and marvelous context and reality of our eternal salvation purchased through Christ’s shed blood on the Cross. The receipt of this undeserved gift humbles God’s children and helps us see our complete lack of worthiness or claim before God and to rejoice in His forgiveness, mercy, and grace as the undeserved gifts of love which they truly are. With that recognition, even the “chiefest” among us *“shall be servant of all.”*⁵ In the light of God’s gift and in the shadow of the Cross, the Christian realizes that the greatest, most tireless and selfless acts are *“reasonable service”*⁶ in the Lord’s Vineyard. And at the conclusion of such service is prompted to conclude, *“we have done that which was our duty to do.”*⁷

When Jesus charged His disciples to proclaim the gospel message, He gave them a clear vision to follow: *“ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”*⁸ This outwardly expanding geographical reference can help us frame the context in which we are called to serve. We might conclude that service begins at home—wherever that is and in our present capacity—and expands outwardly, as far as God may lead.

Beginning at home, those who are married are called to love and serve each other in mutual submission.⁹ Opportunities abound to be of service to each other in our marriages. A husband who works to provide for his wife is serving the Lord in so doing. A wife may keep the home with diligence and find countless ways to serve in that place. Life’s circumstances can bring the need to care for one’s spouse in times of great need such as chronic illness or disability. Singles, whether in an immediate family or within their immediate communities, can likewise offer humble deeds of service that witness of Christ’s love and grace. While the more obvious and seemingly significant areas of service are important, we should not miss the daily opportunities for small acts of service. Helping with the dishes, taking out the garbage, running an errand, or other acts of service are all “cups of cold water”¹⁰ which can bring joy and ease life’s challenges.

As the circle expands, most of us find ourselves in some form of family relationships. When parents are raising small children, there is much service required—the needs seem unending as diapers are changed, mouths are fed, noses are wiped and much more. These little ones are unable or unaware of the need to offer thanks, but God is glorified by all service which is done *“heartily, as to the Lord.”*¹¹ The needs change as the children grow and become more independent of their parents, but the Lord provides new and different ways in which service can be given. Likewise, siblings have opportunities as children and then later as adults to love and support one another as life progresses through its inevitable stages.

At some point, the balance begins to tip a bit and grown children may find themselves in a place to serve their parents. This really begins in the home as responsibilities increase and a heart of willing service is cultivated and nurtured. As parents grow feeble and infirmed, many have found a blessing through helping in ways which seem to mirror the care for a small child—though difficult, this can be a wonderful time of serving those who did so much for us. To sit at the side of a dying parent—perhaps

providing the smallest act to ease some physical pain or to whisper encouraging words of hope from God's Word—is to be close to Heaven and to feel the Savior's love in a special and unique way. All of this is being done in His Name and for His Glory.

Finally, and still within the realm of those closest to us, we have our precious church family and brotherhood. God has granted many ways in which we can by love serve each other. There are those among us who have lost their spouses. Some are without parents or without secure family situations. We are taught that visiting these—which might include a variety of ways to love and serve them—is “*pure religion and undefiled.*”¹²

In the church, each takes his turn with life's joys and hardships. We are called to “*rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.*”¹³ Our church has a rich history and pattern of fulfilling this verse as we live in close fellowship with each other and can act on our awareness of these needs. Yet we live in an age of increasing material wealth and self-sufficient lifestyles which can create the perception that needs are not present or have already been met. May we resist the tendency toward independence which can at once rob us of the blessing of serving and being served in the Lord's name.

We know how easy it can be to step past a need which is right at our doorstep—in our marriages, our families, and our church—on our way to serving in what may be perceived as bigger and more important ways. Let us remember the Acts 1:8 model of evangelism and service which makes it clear that such service stands on the foundation of first serving the needs of those closest to us, being a witness for Christ where we are at the present time and trusting Him to guide and prepare us for the future.

Footnotes: ¹ Gal. 5:13 ² Gal. 6:10 ³ Luke 22:27 ⁴ Phil. 2:7 ⁵ Mark 10:44 ⁶ Rom. 12:1 ⁷ Luke 17:10
⁸ Acts 1:8 ⁹ Eph. 5:21-33 ¹⁰ Matt. 10:42 ¹¹ Col. 3:23 ¹² James 1:27 ¹³ Rom. 12:15

Serving Those Who Cannot Repay

“But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest.”¹

The words of our Savior remind us how our lives should be: in service to others, patterned after the life of the Good Shepherd; who not only spoke the truth, but exemplified it by His life. He lived a life of self-denial, giving His life as a ransom for each one of us, who could not repay the debt of sin that we owed, so that we could live eternally with Him in Heaven. This “mark” helps us put into a perspective what it means to serve others who cannot repay.

The story of the Good Samaritan teaches us some critical aspects of serving others.

“But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.”²

First, we read that the Samaritan was on a journey. It is a good reminder that each of us is also on a journey. Our purpose is not for ourselves or to seek our own will, but rather to serve others. This requires us to change our natural course, leave our normal path, and focus on the needs of others. We read in Matthew, *“And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.”*³ Our lives cannot be so entangled with the affairs of this world that we would be oblivious to the gentle nudges of the Holy Spirit or blinded to those in need along the way. As we start each day, may our prayer be both *“not my will but thine be done”*⁴ and as the apostle Paul said, *“Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?”*⁵

With a desire to do God’s will, we must also be willing to put aside our own thoughts and biases, and be willing to help, with no respect of persons. Paul wrote in Corinthians, *“to the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.”*⁶ Our willingness to submit our own thoughts, desires, and earthly wisdom to the Lord—so that we can be easily entreated, quick to hear, and open to trusting in God’s wisdom—is a critical part of our ability to truly serve others.

Next, our ability to truly “come to others” is dependent upon our spiritual vision. The Good Samaritan saw the one in need. His vision was not to look at what was in it for himself, as we see often in the world. Jesus taught, *“And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again.”*⁷ Rather, our hearts must be as the Savior, who always saw those in need, whether they were little children, the sick, the halt, those in sin, or those of a different nationality. He saw them as scattered sheep in need of a Shepherd.

Experience teaches that it takes time and effort to get to know someone, to understand their situation, and to truly know how to help them. Having patience, as Christ did with us, is often necessary. Our ability to have the mind and heart of Christ, unclouded by “earthly scales,” will allow us to see the true need in others, enabling us to help them by God’s grace.

Third, He had compassion on him and took care of him. We read in Romans, *“Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink.....be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”*⁸ It is clear throughout Scripture that God expects His people to help those in need. One aspect of compassion is to alleviate the suffering of the individual. As God reveals the needs of others, our feelings

of compassion are translated into deeds of kindness, which are just reasonable service in light of what we have received.

As we serve others, we are reminded that we are being good stewards of the gifts God has given us. These are not our own, rather they have been given to us to occupy or use for His kingdom, until He comes again. Our measure is not as the world would take an accounting, e.g. the size of our “barns,” or other earthly fames that can come and go. Rather, the measure is “cups of cold water,” that will be reflective of a converted child of God. Since we realize that our reward is in heaven, we don’t focus on bringing focus to self, rather we “*let not thy left hand know what thy right hand*”⁹ is doing. At the same time, we don’t gossip about those individuals in need, but speak the truth in love.

Fourth, our service is to be on-going. It is a part of our daily life, not just an item on a “bucket list” that is marked off and forgotten. We read that the Samaritan made ongoing provision for the man in need: “*on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence... and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.*”¹⁰ Our lives should be patterned after the Savior—who was always about His Father’s business, willing to give all He had, even His life for those in need—just as He has done and is doing for each one of us.

As we daily serve Him, we will learn more about the love of Christ, our hearts will be filled with the fullness of His Spirit and we will become more like Him, one day to be with Him in Heaven.

Footnotes: ¹ Luke 6:35 ² Luke 10:33-35 ³ Matthew 20:27-28 ⁴ Luke 22:42
⁵ Acts 9:6 ⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:22 ⁷ Luke 6:34 ⁸ Romans 12:20-21
⁹ Matthew 6:3 ¹⁰ Luke 10:35

Walking in the Strength of Christ's Sacrifice

*"For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us: for after that he had said before, This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more."*¹

Sin

Sin has separated man from God ever since the days of Adam and Eve. Any disobedience towards God is sin. Contrary to popular belief, God commandments were not arbitrary. Nearly all actions that God calls sin hurt others, and are the result of loving oneself more than one's Creator or one's neighbor. We have all been corrupted by our own selfishness and weakness.

A Partial Remedy

Although the sacrifice of animals took place in ancient times to provide atonement for disobedience, those sacrifices were simply a pattern of things in heaven and could never make men perfect. In much the same way as the physical things of the Temple were to be made according to the pattern of things in heaven, the form of atonement provided by the Law of Moses was simply a pattern of better things to come. The Law defined how man sinned, but had no capability to change man's behavior. The Apostle Paul writes that, "The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law."² And in Hebrews we read, "*And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission. It was therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the heavens should be purified with these; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.*"³

The Better Sacrifice

The sacrifices given under the law could make atonement, but could never make men perfect⁴. They had no power to convert men's hearts and they were retroactive, only applying to sins that had already been committed. Knowing that our bodies are the temple of the Living God helps us understand that we are the "heavenly things" to which the author to the Hebrews refers. It was necessary that the heavenly things themselves be purified with a better sacrifice. In sacrificing His own life, freely giving it up and shedding His blood on the cross, Jesus atoned for sin proactively for all men in all times. Following the atonement, He promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to all who would believe.⁵

The strength of His sacrifice is demonstrated by the fact that Christ came in the flesh, but walked in the Spirit. He showed that man in the flesh did not need to be subject to the flesh, or more bluntly, no longer needs to be slave to sin. Scripture teaches that the converted life is no longer one in which sin has dominion—sin does not continue as if grace were license, it no longer reigns in ones' life, and it need not be yielded to when the power of Christ's blood is present in that life⁶. Through this better sacrifice – sin, in its various forms⁷—can be overcome. This can never happen by a nominal faith that denies the power of Christ, but only by faith that comprehends that the power of Christ can rest upon those who believe.⁸ Through His prophets, God spoke of the time when Jesus would provide the missing strength to consistently defeat sin on a personal level. For example, Isaiah reminds us, "*Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.*"⁹

Those who wait on the Lord will experience the fullness of Christ's sacrifice and be able to walk in strength.

Walking in the Strength of Christ's Sacrifice

Trusting in His covenant, we will have God's royal law of love written on our hearts and in our minds. With this transformed attitude, we are called to live as Jesus did; loving all men, forgiving those who mistreat us, and submitting our will to the Father's will—all by the grace and power of God. Through Him we can rejoice as Paul did, saying, *"I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."*¹⁰ By faith in His name, we can be endowed with power from on high—the Holy Spirit. Through His grace, our weakness can be empowered by His strength.

Undoubtedly, many of us feel our human weakness and struggle with these concepts, feeling inadequate or unable to put such faith into practice. We struggle to love the unlovable. We tend to wish ill on our enemies instead of praying for them. We lean toward sanctioning war instead of praying for peace. We want to defend our rights instead of turning the other cheek. When the Apostle Paul struggled with his weakness, Jesus told him, *"My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."* Paul confirmed to the Corinthian church, *"Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."*¹¹

Whatever our weakness may be, we can freely acknowledge it, call on God to give us the power of Christ, and trust that He will enable us to overcome. We ought not to think that the power of Christ permitted Paul to succumb to the weakness that he admitted. In the strength of His sacrifice, God is able to put an open door in front of us which no man can shut. Walking in the strength of Christ's sacrifice, we are promised the power to overcome our selfish nature and, like Jesus, live righteously to the glory of God.

*"But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."*¹²

(Footnotes) ¹Heb. 10:14-17 ²1 Cor. 15:56 ³Heb.9:11-25 ⁴Heb. 9:11-25 ⁵Acts 2:38-39 ⁶Rom. 6:1-18 ⁷Mark 7:21-23 ⁸1 John 1:7-2:2, Rom 1:16 ⁹Isaiah 40:28-31 ¹⁰Phil 4:13 ¹¹2 Cor. 12:9 ¹²1 Peter 5:10-11

Walking in a Living Faith

“Now the just shall live by faith”¹

In our Apostolic Christian Church culture, we use the word faith in many different ways. In this article, we will consider three common usages: our saving faith in Jesus Christ, walking by faith as believers, and the practice of referring to our church denomination as “our faith.”

A true saving faith in Jesus Christ is the basis of our salvation. *“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”²* This faith—“wherein we stand”—is based specifically in Jesus Christ’s shed blood as the sacrifice for sin. *“Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe...Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation (atoning sacrifice) through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.”³*

This saving faith must necessarily precede our repentance and conversion as we begin our Christian walk. Works alone, even when accompanied with our best intentions, will never bring us salvation. *“But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away”⁴* *“For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.”⁵* Our works (often referred to as spiritual fruit in the Bible) will follow as the result and evidence of a saving faith. *“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”⁶* Many other scriptures expound upon the proper relationship of faith and works.⁷

This saving faith must grow into a living faith that becomes an integral part of our lives from beginning to end. *“For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith (from beginning to end): as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”⁸* We live for Christ, we trust and obey Him, and we cling to His promises through whatever blessings, tests, or trials may come our way.

Abraham’s strong faith was greatly tested when God commanded him to offer his only son Isaac as a sacrifice. God told Abraham to go to Moriah, a journey of three days, to carry this out. On the way, Isaac asked a question that must have increased the heaviness of Abraham’s burden, *“behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”⁹* Abraham relied solely on his faith in God to reply that He would provide a lamb for the sacrifice. Abraham’s faith and obedience were rewarded, but not until he reached the ultimate point in his trial. God told him, *“By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.”¹⁰* We read in Hebrews that Abraham believed that God was able to raise his son from the dead. *“By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.”¹¹*

Another Old Testament figure, the woman Rahab, was a wonderful example of living by faith and is listed in the “honor roll of faith” in Hebrews 11.¹² Her faith journey began when she first heard of the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea some forty years before they arrived at her hometown of Jericho. Though she was once a prostitute (harlot) in that pagan city, she became a believer in God. She had the

faith to tell the Israelite spies, “for the LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath...And that ye will save alive my father, and my mother, and my brethren, and my sisters, and all that they have, and deliver our lives from death.”¹³ Rahab and her family agreed to stay in the house—located on the city wall—and remained there even when the walls came crashing down all around them. Because of her faith and obedience, she and her family were spared from the destruction of the city.¹⁴ She subsequently married into the lineage of Joseph, Jesus’ earthly father,¹⁵ evidence of her living and sustained faith in God.

From these and other examples in the Bible, we see that a living faith brings a strong belief that what God has promised will certainly come to pass. Faith is a present day confidence of a future reality. Living faith, demonstrated by works, is empowered by God’s grace, which ultimately brings glory to His name.

At times, we might find ourselves using the term “our faith” when we are actually referring specifically to our Apostolic Christian Church brotherhood. No doubt, this occurs because of the closely linked experiences in the church as we live out our life of faith here on earth. However, the expressions “the faith” or “our faith” in the scriptures never refer to a denomination or to a specific group of believers. Consider the following scriptures where confusion between “church” and “faith” could take place: 2 Cor. 13:5; Eph. 4:5-6; Eph. 4:13; Col. 2:7; 1Tim. 4:1; 2Pet. 1:1; Jude 3. The term “faith” in these scriptures always refers to a firm persuasion of the truthfulness of God, and especially reliance upon Christ for salvation. The intent is certainly not to diminish the importance of the church, which is the body of Christ,¹⁶ nor do we wish to reduce our love and appreciation for our beloved brotherhood. Rather, we desire to increase our understanding in order to avoid confusion and to encourage a scripturally accurate use of the word “faith.”

May God grant grace that we may grow in our faith and trust in Him.

Footnotes: ¹Heb. 10:38 ²Rom. 5:1-3 ³Romans 3:22, 25 ⁴Isaiah 64:6 ⁵Romans 4:2-3 ⁶James 2:26 ⁷Romans 4:1-8, Eph. 2:8-10, Gal. 3:6-18, James 2:17-26 ⁸Rom. 4:2-3 ⁹Gen. 22:7 ¹⁰Gen. 22:17-18 ¹¹Heb.11:17-19 ¹²Heb.11:31 ¹³Josh. 2:11, 13 ¹⁴Josh. 6:23 ¹⁵Matt. 1:5 ¹⁶Col. 1:24

Walking in Peace

“And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”¹

What is Peace?

In the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, peace is often referenced in the context of war or conflict among people—as the absence of such conflict. War is nearly always a result of one nation, (*or leader*) desiring what belongs to another – territory or power. It may be motivated by envy, greed, or even because of a perceived insult, which is pride. War is a costly effort that saps the economy of both attacker and attacked. It is a destructive force that kills and maims the innocent as well as those who are pressed into service as soldiers. Often, it depletes a nation of a generation of young men. Those who instigate war—and other forms of conflict among people—indulge their selfish interests, expecting that others will pay the price to benefit them. And though innocents are drawn into the conflict and often strive valiantly to put an end to it, the loss is often incalculable.

The spiritual conflict that Satan is waging against God is war. In an effort to elevate himself to the throne of God, the devil attempts to entice men into his service. When we walk in sin, we are taking up arms with Satan against God.

In many ways, sin is a form of spiritual terrorism, propagated by Satan, the enemy of the soul. The purpose of terrorism is to induce fear and create a climate of mistrust. Although it may not be the conscious intent of a sinner to induce fear and create mistrust, it is often the unintended consequence and has the same result. Those who have been the victims of lies or slander learn to guard against being deceived again—making it difficult to trust anyone. Those who have been the victims of greed learn to become protective of their goods – resulting in distrust and a hardened heart. The effects and harm from sin often reach far beyond the initial transgression.

Although the victims of sin are other human beings, on a spiritual level sin is also an act of rebellion against God. If we deliberately and habitually sin, we become active participants on Satan’s behalf in his war against God.

Walking in peace with God

The first step in walking in peace means that we no longer take up arms in Satan’s war against God.

God has done more than His part to make peace. He has offered terms of peace that are unheard of in the world. He has paid the price Himself. In many wars, the victors claim reparations from the conquered—money to repair the damages caused. In the spiritual war, God—although the victor—has accepted the costs and the responsibility to repair the damages, by accepting the blood of His own Son in payment, and by offering to heal the brokenhearted in order to repair the damage that was caused. God has provided pardon, healing, and liberty to those who are willing to trust Him. He has promised peace.

“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”²

Peace with God is the certain result of genuine faith in the shed blood of Jesus. This saving faith, which enables us to cease walking in sin, is the first step toward walking in peace. As a soldier laying down his arms in surrender, the new believer forsakes the life of sin that he once led and by faith has

peace with God. However, it is essential to not only cease from sin, but also to pursue righteousness. Peter quotes Psalm 34 and teaches us to seek peace and *pursue* it.³ Walking in peace with God means that we will no longer participate in Satan's attacks against God. We will depart from evil and do what is good. Perhaps this pursuit of peace and active righteousness is what was missing from the man whose house was reinhabited by seven evil spirits worse than he had been before?

*"Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it."*⁴

Walking in peace may not always be a peaceful feeling

As we walk in peace with God and actively pursue righteousness, we can expect Satan to include us in his attacks. Walking in peace does not mean that life will be without temptation, trials, or attacks. Indeed, it may mean that such difficulties increase. Peace with God is not the absence of inner turmoil and conflict. It is not an emotional feeling of peace—although we may occasionally experience such feelings as a result of peace. It is the calm assurance that in spite of the spiritual attacks of the devil that the Lord is near us and hears us when we cry for help.

Jesus confirms this by His last words to His disciples before His trial, calling us to keep His commandments, and promising that the Holy Ghost will bring His words to our memory. He reminds us that in this world we will have tribulation, but to be of good cheer because HE has overcome the world.⁵

Walking in peace with others

In a similar fashion, although we cannot control how others respond to our actions, whenever possible, we are called to walk in peace with all men.⁶ Loving those who wish our harm is a challenge for the human spirit. By following Christ's example, we can pray for our enemies, forgive those who mistreat us, and offer peace to a troubled and broken world. This pursuit of peace is worthy of our time and effort and perhaps more than anything else testifies of the peace of Christ in us.

The Good News that Jesus brought to the world is that God has made peace with man by offering the blood of His only begotten Son in sacrifice and payment for sin. The invitation is given to believe and embrace that peace. Walking in peace with God will motivate us to pursue peace with all men—which provides evidence to others of the reality of the Lord's offer of peace and bears fruit by propagating righteousness and peace in others ... and so it continues.

Walking in peace is sowing the seeds of righteousness to the salvation of souls.

*"But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace."*⁷

Footnotes: ¹Phil. 4:7 ²Romans 5:1 ³1 Peter 3:10-11 ⁴Psalm 34:14 ⁵John 14-17 ⁶Romans 12:18-21 ⁷James 3:17-18

Walking in Submission to Correction

“He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding.”¹

When done biblically, submission to correction is one of the sincerest proofs of our love for our brother or sister. It is one of the ways God demonstrates His love for us, *“For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.”²* He does this that we might be more fruitful in this life³ and that we receive the gift of eternal life in the end: *“He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.”⁴* Likewise, we ought to love our brother or sister enough to give and receive correction, *“Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.”⁵*

Correction can come in the form of advice, warning, admonition, or even a mild rebuke. However, the goal of correction must always be spiritual restoration. When done according to the scriptures, both parties will benefit from giving and receiving correction. Chastening will likely feel somewhat uncomfortable for all concerned, but it is for our benefit. *“Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.”⁶* Submitting to correction requires a truly humble attitude, much grace, and a Christ-like love one for another, *“Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him. Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.”⁷*

Since correction can create a potentially sensitive situation, effective communication is vital. The prophet Isaiah instructs us how God gives us both our tongue and our ears to speak and to hear as one who is “learned” (taught or disciplined). *“The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned. The Lord GOD hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back.”⁸*

For correction to be successful, one must never be judgmental or give it in anger or harshness: *“O LORD, correct me, but with judgment (fairness and justice); not in thine anger, lest thou bring me to nothing.”⁹* Sharing our concerns with others indiscriminately or spreading gossip will poison the biblical process of correction: *“Debate thy cause with thy neighbour himself; and discover not a secret to another.” “The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.”¹⁰*

Correction done anonymously, with a note for example, is ineffective and unscriptural. Doing so removes the potential for apologizing or offering an explanation—and it eliminates accountability on the part of the one attempting the correction. When we are aware of our duty and purposely avoid it, we could be guilty of the sin of omission, *“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”¹¹*

Before offering advice or correction to our brother or sister, we should examine our own motives and assumptions carefully and sincerely.¹² We can easily misunderstand the true nature of a situation. For example, the Jews criticized Peter after he preached to Cornelius, the Roman centurion. Peter patiently rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and the Jews realized their presumption and acknowledged, *“God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.”¹³* In another instance, Joseph and Mary became very anxious when they missed Jesus after leaving Jerusalem. In her haste, Mary admonished Jesus when they finally found Him in the temple, *“and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.”¹⁴* Jesus reminded them whose Son He really

was, “How is it that ye sought me? wist (knew) ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?¹⁵” Jesus subjected Himself to Joseph and Mary, even though He knew they did not fully understand His words. As a result, “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.¹⁶”

When we receive correction, humility and submission on our part is necessary in order for it to be effective. The Biblical instruction is clear: “Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.¹⁷” If the matter seems inconsequential to us, or even a little foolish, we do well to consider the danger of self-deception. “Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.¹⁸” Receiving correction can be difficult, especially if we were not aware of our error. We must be honest with ourselves and willing to do a humble self-examination, “Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the LORD.¹⁹”

Justifying our actions based on comparison to others is unwise and dangerous, “For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.²⁰” Popular opinion or numbers alone do not determine what is right, “Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil; neither shalt thou speak in a cause to decline after many to wrest judgment.²¹” The Holy Scriptures remain our sole source of truth: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.²²”

Footnotes: ¹Proverbs 15:32 ²Hebrews 12:6 ³John 15:2 ⁴Revelation 21:7 ⁵1 John 4:11 ⁶Hebrews 12:11
⁷Leviticus 19:17-18 ⁸Isaiah 50:4-5 ⁹Jeremiah 10:24 ¹⁰Proverbs 25:9, 18:8 ¹¹James 4:17 ¹²Matthew
18:15-17 ¹³Acts 11:18 ¹⁴Luke 2:48 ¹⁵Luke 2:49 ¹⁶Luke 2:52 ¹⁷1 Peter 5:5 ¹⁸1 Corinthians 3:18
¹⁹Lamentations 3:40 ²⁰2 Corinthians 10:12 ²¹Exodus 23:2 ²²Timothy 3:16-17

Walking with Thankfulness

“And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.¹”

A dictionary definition of “thankful” is feeling or expressing gratitude, appreciative. The end of year holidays afford many opportunities to feel or express gratitude. Our country allows us the privilege of celebrating a holiday that has Thanksgiving as its central theme. But very little of the cultural focus of the Thanksgiving holiday is directed toward our Holy God and Savior. And this subject is not one to limit to a particular time of year.

Let’s reflect on what the scriptures say about thankfulness and thanksgiving. The purpose of this exercise is to further discern if the Bible portrays thanksgiving and thankfulness as an action, an event, a way of life, or a mix of each. Is there an underlying theme in the biblical discussion of thanksgiving? If so, how should it affect our daily walk of life?

“And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.²” Here the children of God gave praise and thanks unto the Lord by singing together. When Noah and his family left the Ark after the flood waters abated, he built an altar to the Lord.³ This was an act of worship and thanksgiving to God for sparing them and giving them a new start. Deut. 8:10 makes it clear that when we have eaten and are full that we should bless (give thanks to) the Lord our God for the good land he has given us.

These scriptures and many others demonstrate that there are times when our thankfulness expresses itself in thanksgiving. This is usually true when we experience a wonderful event or very special time in our lives. It is also clear that we are called to thanksgiving as an action and expression of our heart. Not only are we called to it, but in fact thanksgiving is the will of God. *“In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.⁴* As we dig deeper, we see not only that God wills that we give thanks, but also that it is in fact our duty. *“But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you.⁵”* The word “bound” in this context is the same as “duty.”

A bigger challenge for us is giving thanks when things are not going well and when we are faced with great disappointment or discouragement.

How did Job respond when he experienced nearly total loss of all but his wife and life? *“When Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, and said, naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.⁶”* We see that his thankfulness poured out even in his despair. James 1:2 calls us to count it all joy when we are tested and tried. Likewise, 1 Thess. 5:18 (*“in every thing give thanks”*) does not distinguish between “things,” which implies that we are to give thanks when life is good and when it is difficult.

Giving thanks when things are difficult is quite possibly the mark of whether we just give thanks on occasion, or whether we are truly walking in thankfulness. The Psalmist pleads for the Lord to lead him to the *“rock that is higher”* than himself.⁷ If our eyes and heart are fixed on the things of life, we can more easily be thankful when good things occur. But such a focus makes it very difficult—if not impossible—to give thanks when we are faced with hard times. So how could Job worship even after losing everything? How can we *“count it all joy”* when facing all kinds of tests and temptations?⁸ How can we *“give thanks in all things?”*⁹

One answer lies in the object of our thankfulness. When our hearts are thankful for who God is—the sovereign Creator, precious Redeemer, perfect loving Father, the great I AM—we are able to have a thankful heart even in the midst of very difficult things. Knowing that His desire is for us to be conformed to the image of Christ gives us the freedom to express thankfulness when there is no earthly reason to do so. This will lead us into a pattern of living where our hearts are filled with thankfulness. When we no longer depend on circumstances or things in order to be thankful, we are able to express sincere and genuine, “unfeigned,” thankfulness in our hearts, attitudes, and with our lips.

Another area for us to resist is the feeling or attitude that we are entitled to something. This is a battle that is raging in the world today. The world’s message is often that: you deserve the best, the good things in life. If they are not coming your way, go out and get them. If it feels good, do it—this mentality is a tremendous threat to thankfulness. It robs us of joy, leads us to envy and jealousy, and creates in us discontentment and an unthankful spirit.

It is little wonder that the Spirit moved the Apostle Paul to write that, “*Godliness with contentment is great gain.*”¹⁰ That passage shows that having a discontented or entitled attitude is not new to our generation. And not only is it not new, the consequences are very much the same as they have always been. Two accounts in Deuteronomy reveal the heart of God on this matter. “*Because thou servedst not the LORD thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things; therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies which the LORD shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things: and he shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until he have destroyed thee.*”¹¹ “*And it shall be, when the LORD thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not, And houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full; then beware lest thou forget the LORD, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.*”¹² As evident from these accounts and other scriptures, an attitude of entitlement brings us into a form of bondage that is not easily broken. In Luke 17, we read the account of the ten lepers who were healed. When one realized he was healed, he turned back and gave thanks. Jesus said “*but where are the nine?*”¹³ Does He care if we have a thankful heart? He surely does.

Let’s each do an inventory of our lives to see if we are walking in thankfulness. Ask for honest feedback from a spouse or trusted friend: do they see us walking in thankfulness? Even more importantly, we should ask the Holy Spirit to search our hearts.¹⁴ If we have been truly redeemed and understand the great sacrifice Christ made for us by dying and shedding His innocent blood, it should lead us to a life of thankfulness. From the scriptures we can conclude there is a time to give thanks. However, it is also clear that our thankfulness should be a way of life and not just an event or time of year. Not for our glory, but for His.

Footnotes: ¹Col. 3:15 ²Ezra 3:11 ³Gen. 8:20 ⁴1 Thess. 5:18 ⁵2 Thess. 2:13 ⁶Job 1:20-21 ⁷Psalms 61:2
⁸James 1:2 ⁹1 Thess. 5:18 ¹⁰1 Timm. 6:6 ¹¹Deut. 28:47-48 ¹²Dut. 6:10-12 ¹³Luke 17:17 ¹⁴Psalms 139:23-24

Walking Cheerfully

*Christian, walk cheerfully thro' the fierce storm,
Dark tho' the sky with its threat of alarm.
Soon will the clouds and the tempest be o'er,
Then with the Saviour thou 'lt rest ever more.¹*

The hymn writer's words to the believer to walk cheerfully are timeless—and especially relevant in the world today with its wide array of storm clouds and new “threats” that appear almost every day. In this time where nothing seems certain, voices are always being raised, and morality is promoted by some as relative; the answer remains Jesus Christ. He alone is the One who never changes. He provides shelter in the time of storm and a place of refuge and peace. We are encouraged to be cheerful each day and to have the faith of Paul who knew God was with him and said, “*Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me.*”² Our reason for a cheerful walk is not based on trust in self, but in a loving Father who knows our “*downsitting and uprising*”³ who protects us in adversity,⁴ and promises us grace and peace⁵ in this life and eternal life in heaven. As believers who hear the voice of the good Shepherd, we have many reasons to walk cheerfully.

Our ability to walk cheerfully is not of ourselves or our own nature, but arises from what Jesus Christ has done for us. Matthew 9:2 teaches, “*and, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.*” Each of us were once in this lost condition; “*for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.*”⁶ and were condemned eternally. But thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift:⁷ that Jesus shed His blood for the remission of our sins and for the whole world, that all who believe on Him shall not perish but have eternal life.⁸ We who were dead in trespasses and sins are now quickened and made alive in Christ.⁹ That should give us great cheer!

“Christian, walk *cheerfully* thro' the fierce storm, Dark tho' the sky with its threat of alarm,” is a good reminder to us that believers are to be cheerful in all situations, both in the actual storms of life, as well as times where we perceive that a threat exists. Proverbs 24:19 reminds us, “*Fret not thyself because of evil men, neither be thou envious at the wicked;*” Our human nature often becomes overly concerned with everything that is happening – but Paul reminds us that we should “*be careful (anxious) for nothing.*”¹⁰ How is this possible? Jesus told his disciples, “*These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.*”¹¹ I Cor. 1:13 gives us additional reasons to be cheerful, “*There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.*” What a wonderful Savior who has walked the way before us, won the victory, and now is willing to help us so that we also can overcome.

The believer is never alone. We see this in a number of accounts, including Mark 6:50, where Jesus told them, “*Be of good cheer, it is I; be not afraid.*” Jesus' birth was foretold with the words, “*they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.*”¹² We are reminded that He is one who “*shall neither slumber nor sleep,*”¹³ but that He knows our “*downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off.*”¹⁴ What a beautiful promise to know that He knows all of our situations, but also as our high priest, “*He is able to succour them that are tempted.*”¹⁵ The only thing that gets in the way of all of the promises that He has for us is self and pride. We are reminded that God resists the proud, but in the light of His glory and grace, the things of this world grow strangely dim,¹⁶ and the sweet, still, small voice of the Holy Spirit guides us into all truth.

Others are watching as we face the battles of life. In Old Testament times, there were “watchers on the wall” waiting to hear of the battle. We read in 2 Sam. 18:27, “*the watchman said...the running of the foremost is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok. And the king said, He is a good man, and cometh with good tidings.*” How does our walk appear to the world? Are we a cheerful giver of our time and talents or do we keep these “possessions” for ourselves? Is our speech full of grace, seasoned with salt, or is it indistinguishable from the noises of the world? Do we look for opportunities to do good for others or do we hold back because of fear? Do we have a godly contentment in all things, no matter the situation, whether we are “abased or abound?”¹⁷ Are we thankful in all things, knowing this is God’s will for us?

We have a profound choice to make every day as we interact, knowingly and unknowingly, with many different people – at home, at work, and on vacation. The world observes our lives, whether the focus is on ourselves or rather if we are dead to self and alive in Christ, showing the world Jesus, the only source of good cheer. May our cheerful walk be our testimony wherever we are, as Paul was encouraged, “*be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.*”¹⁸ May we cheerfully share with all people the promises of hope and cheer that are found in Jesus Christ, our Savior, Redeemer and Lord!

Footnotes: ¹Hymns of Zion, #198 ²Acts 27:25 ³Psalms 139:1 ⁴Luke 21:18 ⁵John 14:27 ⁶Romans 3:23
⁷2 Cor. 9:15 ⁸John 3:16 ⁹Ephesians 2:1 ¹⁰Philippians 4:6 ¹¹John 16:33 ¹²Matthew 1:23 ¹³Psalms 121:4
¹⁴Psalms 139:2 ¹⁵Hebrews 2:18 ¹⁶“Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus,” Helen H. Lemmel ¹⁷Philippians 4:12
¹⁸Acts 23:11

Walking in Humility (Part 1)

“Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.”¹”

To understand humility, we should consider its opposite. It is clear from the very beginning of Scripture that humankind struggles with pride. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, were lured by and succumbed to the same pride of life that caused Satan to be cast from Heaven.² Eve was tempted with the one thing that God had forbidden—partaking of the tree of knowledge of good and evil—and in her (and our) desire to gain knowledge and *“be as gods, knowing good and evil,”*³ she ate the fruit—forever changing the course of history.⁴

Pride is listed among the things God hates⁵ and is always referenced in a negative sense in the Bible. This fundamental human flaw is revealed by teaching and example throughout God’s Word. *“Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the LORD pondereth the hearts...An high look, and a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked, is sin.”⁶”*

Pride is sin and we know that sin separates us from God—and will eternally if we are not justified through faith in Christ’s shed blood.⁷ Isaiah records the judgment of God upon pride, *“For the day of the LORD of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low.”⁸”*

What is it about pride that is so wicked and leads to such destruction? While there are many effects of pride—and all sin—perhaps the most basic problem with pride is its affront to the very Person of God. He is unequivocal that there can be no substitute for Him in our hearts. *“I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.”⁹”*

Pride is a swelling of one’s image in our own minds. It’s a worldly condition, listed along with *“the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes”* in John’s description of that which is *“not of the Father, but...of the world.”¹⁰”* It comes out of a man and defiles him.¹¹ It presents a stumbling block to others and the work of God,¹² and is ultimately resisted by God, *“Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.”¹³”*

There are many scriptural examples of the downfall of men through pride. Israel’s first king lost the kingdom through his pride and self-focus. Saul became jealous of David¹⁴ and took things into his own hands, even that which should have been left to the prophet of God. Samuel’s rebuke spoke of Saul’s former humility and subsequent fall into pride and rebellion against God, *“When thou wast little in thine own sight, wast thou not made the head of the tribes of Israel, and the LORD anointed thee king over Israel?... For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king.”¹⁵”*

Given Saul’s example, it’s ironic that David’s own son fell prey to that same pride and lust for power and position. Absalom plotted against his own father to win the hearts of the people over to himself; using worldly ways of craft, artfulness, and deceit, he maneuvered in a political sense to overthrow David.¹⁶ In the end he was caught in a tree by his head—evidently he was also very proud of his appearance¹⁷—and slain by Joab and his men.¹⁸

What then is humility? While answering that question involves a lifetime of learning and growth through experience, at its simplest, humility is lowliness of mind. Scripture describes it as similar to clothing,¹⁹ something we can put on. *“Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of*

mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.²⁰

Humility arises from a sense of who God is and who we are in comparison to Him. He is the Creator, we the created.²¹ He is omnipresent and sovereign, we are constrained by time and place. He is eternal, we are mortal (though we possess an eternal soul which may live eternally with Him). He is all righteousness and holiness, we are born in sin²² and likewise have sinned in our own right.²³ As sinners saved by grace, we find no worthiness of our own—only Christ can justify men. But also, as those who have had our redemption purchased by Christ, we recognize that we are “*bought with a price: (and) therefore (we desire to) glorify God in (our) body, and in (our) spirit, which are God's.*”²⁴ We are not worthy but, by God’s grace, we can “*walk worthy of the vocation wherewith (we) are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.*”²⁵

And in all of this, we have Christ as our example, in his stunning pattern of humility—as God Himself came into this world to save mankind. “*Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God (did not consider equality with God as something to cling to selfishly or to use for his own advantage): But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.*”²⁶ Humility, indeed.

Note: in the next issue, we will look at how humility affects our relationship with God and others as we are called to walk in broken-heartedness.

Footnotes: ¹1 Peter 5:5 ²Isaiah 14:12-15 ³Genesis 3:5 ⁴Genesis 3:7-24 ⁵Proverbs 6:16-19 ⁶Proverbs 21:2,4 ⁷Romans 3:23, 6:23 ⁸Isaiah 2:12 ⁹Isaiah 42:8 ¹⁰1 John 2:16 ¹¹Mark 7:20-23 ¹²1 Timothy 3:6, 6:4 ¹³James 4:6 ¹⁴1 Samuel 18:7-9 ¹⁵1 Samuel 15:17, 23 ¹⁶2 Samuel 15:1-6 ¹⁷2 Samuel 14:25-26 ¹⁸2 Samuel 18:8-15 ¹⁹1 Peter 5:5 ²⁰Colossians 3:12 ²¹Romans 9:20 ²²Psalms 51:5 ²³Isaiah 53:6 ²⁴1 Corinthians 6:20 ²⁵Ephesians 4:1-2 ²⁶Philippians 2:5-8

Walking in Broken-Heartedness (Humility Part 2)

“Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.¹”

Having considered the nature of pride and humility last month, we will now look at how these attitudes of the heart affect our relationship with God and others.

God has made it clear that humility is a condition for serving Him. Both Peter and James—disciples of the Lord—record in no uncertain terms that God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.² And Paul’s teacher—the great Pharisee, Gamaliel—warned of the grave consequences of fighting against God.³

This key to God’s heart is valued above any sacrifice we can bring to Him. As in the theme verse from Isaiah, we see in David’s beautiful prayer of repentance just how much God values humility above any other offering. *“For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.⁴”* And again from David, *“The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.⁵”*

A literal definition of the words broken-hearted or contrite is to be crushed. In biblical usage, the crushing comes from the burden of sin—our awareness that we have sinned and the crushing realization that sin separates us from God and condemns us eternally.⁶ As redeemed believers, we rely in faith on the shed blood of Jesus Christ to cleanse us from sin.⁷ And we heed the words of Paul which remind us of our flesh and the ongoing battle to live free from sin, *“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.⁸”* Mindful of the great price with which we have been purchased⁹ and realizing our need for daily grace to overcome, we are convicted to walk humbly before our God.

There are beautiful examples of humility and broken-heartedness in the Bible. David is described as being a man after God’s own heart.¹⁰ We know he was not a perfect man. Sadly, he sinned greatly in the affair with Bathsheba, even committing murder to cover his sin. No one—and David least of all—would excuse his sin. But in crying out to God for mercy and pleading for His forgiveness and the renewal *“of a right spirit within (him),¹¹”* David brought a sacrifice to God that was acceptable in His sight.

Isaiah the prophet, when given a vision of God and the work He had for him, responded with great humility of heart. *“Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.¹²”* In that vision, a heavenly being symbolically cleanses Isaiah with a hot coal pressed to his lips. In gratitude for deliverance, Isaiah offers himself for any service his Savior might ask, *“I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.¹³”*

Likewise, Peter, came to a point of brokenness after denying his Lord. The cock’s crowing reminded him of Jesus’ words, *“which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly.¹⁴”* Was it of this time that Jesus spoke of Peter being sorely tried in preparation for the work before him? *“And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou*

*art converted, strengthen thy brethren.*¹⁵” Peter’s faith did not fail—undergirded by the prayers of the Lord Himself!—and he was of great use in God’s kingdom. But only after being broken.

Humility and meekness of heart is of benefit as we interact in this world as well. Pride is off-putting and repulsive—it can create resistance in others against the very things we are trying to accomplish. And as with God, men tend to be gracious to those whose hearts are soft and humble. Sadly, when we are lifted up in pride we are quite unable to approach either God or men for help.

A heart of humility towards others is also rooted in the ongoing recognition of the sinful state out of which we were called to His marvelous light.¹⁶ In light of how much we have been forgiven, we remember the extent to which we are called to forgive.¹⁷ In the depths of the mercy which we have received, we discern the limitless mercy we are called to extend.¹⁸ In the shadow of the Cross we behold the love of the One who calls us to love as we are loved.¹⁹ Indeed, when Jesus taught His disciples (and us) to pray, He included these words, *“And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us.”*²⁰

Evidence of our broken-heartedness will include our esteem one for the other, *“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.”*²¹ Humility will cause us to *“condescend to men of low estate,”* readily associating with anyone regardless of their wealth or social standing.²² We will never be “puffed up²³” or *“think of (ourselves) more highly than (we) ought to think.”*²⁴

Rather, the humble man or woman will rejoice to follow the words of Paul to be, *“kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”*²⁶

Footnotes: ¹Isaiah 66:1-2 ²1 Peter 5:5, James 4:6 ³Acts 5:38-39 ⁴Psalm 51:6-17 ⁵Psalm 34:18 ⁶Romans 6:23 ⁷2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 John 1:7 ⁸Romans 7:18 ⁹1 Corinthians 6:20 ¹⁰Acts 13:22 ¹¹Psalm 51:10 ¹²Isaiah 6:5 ¹³Isaiah 6:8 ¹⁴Matthew 26:75 ¹⁵Luke 22:31-32 ¹⁶Ephesians 5:8 ¹⁷Matthew 18:23-35 ¹⁸Luke 10:30-17 ¹⁹John 13:34 ²⁰Luke 11:4 ²¹Philippians 2:3 ²²Romans 12:16 ²³1 Corinthians 13:4 ²⁴Romans 12:3 ²⁵Ephesians 4:32

Walking Carefully and in Holiness – Part 1

But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.¹

As we read this Scripture (as well as other related verses), we might ask what is “holiness” as it relates to God? Bible dictionaries define holiness in two main strands, with the primary meaning being “transcendent, totally other, set apart, without equal.” The secondary meaning relates to “purity, absence of moral impurity, etc.” With respect to God the Seraphim cry out continually “*holy, holy, holy,*” praising God for Who He is.² It seems words are insufficient to describe God’s holiness—the use of the word “holy” three times in succession demonstrates that His holiness is above all.

This description is not just one of His many attributes, but rather it describes His essence as “wholly” holy; without equal and totally transcendent.³ We find ourselves, like the Seraphim, struggling to fully understand, let alone articulate the holiness of God; Notwithstanding our inability to comprehend the fullness of God’s holiness, we are called to seek “*to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge*” and that we “*may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height.*”⁴ As we begin to comprehend, in our limited ability, the distance between the holiness of God and our unworthiness, we are driven to our knees in worship.

We can get a better picture of God’s holiness and its impact on us when we reflect on encounters with God by the patriarchs of the Old Testament. Look at Moses’ interaction with God in Exodus where he said “*show me Thy glory*” and how God could only give him a view of His “*back parts.*”⁵ After that encounter, to protect the people, Moses had to cover his face due to the glow that resulted from that backward glance of God’s glory. Look also at Isaiah when he saw the “*Lord high and lifted up*” and the impact on him caused him to respond, “*Woe is me, I am undone.*”⁶ Job stated, “*Behold, I am vile ... I will lay mine hand upon my mouth.*”⁷ And the list goes on.

These were godly men who, when exposed to the holiness of God, saw the depths of their depravity. There is a beautiful circular dynamic when we begin to see and understand the holiness of God. We are exposed to His holiness; this opens our eyes to our sinfulness and need for redemption; leading to our cry of brokenness and His cleansing; which leads to a deeper love for God and a willingness to serve; leading to a deeper relationship with God and a more complete understanding of His holiness. Isaiah’s humble and repentant response led to the seraph placing a hot coal to cleanse his iniquity. In a cry of thanksgiving and praise, Isaiah answered God’s call, “*Here am I, send me.*”⁸

Does it really matter if we have an appropriate understanding of the holiness of God and Christ? What we really believe about God, and especially about Christ’s work of salvation, will work its way out into every aspect of our lives. Every attitude/motive will be shaped by what we think of Him. If our thoughts are out of sync with regard to His holiness and his mercy, then our lives will reflect this imbalance. “*But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.*”⁹

The theme verse above is a quote from Leviticus¹⁰ and is mentioned by Peter as a direct command to each of us as Christians to be holy for God is holy. The call to holiness comes very early in Peter’s letter and is a dominant theme throughout. The grammar includes an imperative verb to begin this action immediately. It is not a suggestion, but a command; not optional, but an expectation. The significance of this imperative is more poignant when we consider the inspired statement by the writer of Hebrews “*Follow peace with all men and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.*”¹¹

It does not say be ye holy as God is holy but rather for He is holy. Peter well understood that we are unable to attain the level of holiness inherent in God or Christ, but we are to reflect His character in our lives. Our holiness is perfected in Christ “*who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.*”¹² So Jesus meets the requirement for positional holiness, but we have the obligation/responsibility for practical holiness as we are empowered by His Spirit.

Is holiness merely a matter of doing what is right and not doing what is wrong? If that was the case the Pharisees would have had an edge on everyone as they approached “holiness” in their walk. Christ had some very stern words to those spiritual leaders of Israel who put more emphasis on “doing” and “appearance” than on real heart change and submission to God. He said “*For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*”¹³

Holiness is first a matter of “*Whose we are*” (positional) and then a matter of what we do or don’t do (practical). The fact that the positional comes first does not negate the need for the practical; as the practice is the expected fruit of the position. To truly glorify God with our lives we need the practical to be an outflow of the positional. We are called to be a “*living sacrifice*” to God, totally abandoned to Him and set apart for His glory.¹⁴ Holiness is a real and abiding relationship with Christ that will reflect the character of God and manifest the fruit of the Spirit. By the empowerment of the Spirit, we will “*work out*” that which is within.¹⁵

In this first part of a two part series we have considered some aspects of the “what” and the “why” of holiness. In part 2 we will consider the “how” or the more practical application of this command “be ye holy.”

Footnotes: ¹ Peter 1:15-16 ² Isaiah 6:3 ³ Isaiah 40:13-14, 25 ⁴ Ephesians 3:18-19 ⁵ Exodus 33:18,23
⁶ Isaiah 6:5 ⁷ Job 40:4 ⁸ Isaiah 6:6 ⁹ Jeremiah 9:24 ¹⁰ Leviticus 11:44 ¹¹ Hebrews 12:14 ¹² Corinthians 5:21 ¹³ Matthew 5:20 ¹⁴ Romans 12:1 ¹⁵ Philippians 2:12

Walking Carefully and in Holiness – Part 2

“For I am the LORD that bringeth you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”¹

Called to be like God

The Word of God calls us to be holy, for He is holy. Living up to God’s instruction to be holy may seem overwhelming at times, but equipping us to be holy was the very purpose of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Certainly these characteristics and actions can only become real in our lives if the Holy Spirit lives within us.² It is also apparent that we are called to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in obedience. Peter admonishes us not to fashion ourselves according to the former lusts in our ignorance, but by obedience, to be holy as God is holy.³

If He is holy, then the key to becoming holy is to become like Him.

The Holiness of God

Learning to know God in His breadth, width, height, and fullness, will give us the best opportunity to understand holiness and to be able to know how it should be manifested in our lives.

God is truthful. We need not say more. To be like God we must live and speak truth. Anything less is ungodliness.⁴

God is faithful. He will never fail to follow through on his commitments. A key element of being holy is keeping commitments, though it costs us greatly. The Father kept His commitment to send a redeemer, even though it cost Him His only begotten Son. Commitment takes many forms in our walk of faith, but includes faithfulness in marriage, faithfulness in our work, commitment to our brotherhood, and commitment to our local congregation. A practical application of holiness is to be faithful in our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ, especially in times of testing and conflict. If we experience conflict, it may seem easier to avoid that conflict by assembling with another congregation—whether in our brotherhood or another denomination—but the principle of holiness through faithfulness will motivate us to love our brethren with the love that Jesus has for the church and strengthen rather than break our commitment to one another.⁵

God is consistent and without variation. As humans, it seems that we are too often subject to inconsistency in our walk of faith. Human nature justifies different standards when it suits us, and has the potential to lead us to become inconsistent or even false witnesses for Jesus. Holiness will motivate us to live consistently righteous lives without self-justification.⁶

God is love. Quite simply, we cannot hope to be holy if we are not filled with the love of God. Love is what enables us to be always truthful, always faithful, filled with righteousness and peace. Love for God draws us to Him and gives us the desire to be like Him. Love for others motivates us to put His love into action—which is the essence of holiness.⁷

God is righteous and judges righteously. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for omitting judgment, mercy, and faith. He calls us to, “*judge righteous judgment*”—to discern with a pure heart and not with an intent to pervert the outcome. He also teaches us not to judge one another. We see that God alone is able to judge people because He alone knows the thoughts and intentions of the heart. However, good decision-making requires the indwelling of the Holy Spirit—and is an essential part of being holy as God is holy.⁸

God is merciful. It is easy to be harsh with others and hold them to a high standard, perhaps even a higher standard than we hold for ourselves. Our Father in heaven is rich in mercy and has treated us with much patience and kindness. If our hearts are holy, we will likewise be full of mercy towards others.⁹

What is Unholy?

A good understanding can come from examining the alternatives. What are characteristics that God does not have, or even despises? What is unholy?

God abhors covetousness. To covet is a form of discontentment. As His children, we are called to be content with such things as we have and not desire more. This can include an inordinate desire for money, goods, or even for friendships or marriage. Contentment is holy.¹⁰

God holds some actions as abominable. Proud looks, lies, wicked imaginations, a tendency to mischief, false witness against others, shedding of innocent blood, and the sowing of discord among the brethren are all unholy and must not be a part of our life.¹¹

God forbids any worship or acceptance of idols. We are called to destroy them utterly from our lives. In our culture, the worship of images is thought to be rare. However, we should honestly acknowledge the idolatrous nature of covetousness, self-righteousness, and many of the aspects of the entertainment world in our time. The cult of celebrity is very much a substitute for idol worship. Adoration by “fans” exceeds attendance in churches many Sundays. Holiness rejects the worship of these pseudo-gods.¹²

God is not a respecter of persons. Prejudice of any kind is unholy.¹³

Seeking holiness involves both the putting off of all forms of unrighteousness and putting on the positive attributes of God. Thus we are called to not only abstain from sinful behaviors—such as fornication, pollutions of idols, fleshly lusts, and every instance of evil—we are to abhor them.¹⁴ Abstain means never; abhor means hate. Holiness is a full-time occupation.

Conclusion

If one has learned to know the Lord, understanding the difference between holy and unholy is almost intuitive. It would be difficult to imagine God as a liar or unjust in His dealings with men. It should be just as difficult for men to imagine ungodliness in us. By faith, let us draw near to God and learn to know Him in truth. Empowered by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, let us love God with all we have and thereby become holy as He is holy. Because of His love within us, let’s discern righteously and choose to live in peace with our brethren and with all men. Through holiness, let us look forward to that time when we shall see Him as He is and know Him as we are known.

*Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.*¹⁵

Footnotes: ¹Leviticus 11:45 ²John 15:5 ³1 Peter 1:14-16 ⁴Hebrews 6:18 ⁵Hebrews 10:23 ⁶Malachi 3:6 ⁷1 John 4:6-21 ⁸Isaiah 5:16 ⁹Psalms 116:5 ¹⁰Psalms 10:3 ¹¹Proverbs 6:16-19 ¹²Deuteronomy 12:29-32, 16:22 ¹³Acts 10:34-35 ¹⁴Acts 15:20, Romans 12:9, 1 Thessalonians 5:22, 1 Peter 2:11 ¹⁵Hebrews 12:14

Walking with Wisdom/Circumspectly

“See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.¹”

Paul’s encouragement to the early Church in their daily walk is as timely for us today as it was for the believers in Ephesus. We will focus on two areas; a wise vs. foolish walk and being considerate vs. inconsiderate of others. And as Paul reminds us, our daily walk begins today, not tomorrow or the next day.

Let us start with some definitions of knowledge vs. wisdom. Knowledge is data or information; something that is learned over time. It is something that we can memorize, but yet not know how to use it appropriately. Wisdom acts upon the knowledge in a proper way. For example, knowledge understands that the light has turned red; wisdom is expressed by stopping our car. Knowledge memorizes our favorite verse; wisdom allows it to be manifested in our lives, bringing forth spiritual fruit. Knowledge helps us learn of God; wisdom constrains us to love Him more and more.

How do we know who is a wise man and endowed with knowledge? James writes, *“let him show out of a good conversation, his works with meekness of wisdom.”²* We know that our world is not full of meekness, but rather often focuses on self, fulfilling our own wants and desires. Why would that happen?

It can happen if we allow the actions of our lives to be governed by earthly wisdom, which is sensual and devilish.³ It would happen if we were striving for earthly gain—for example: the best job, the biggest house, or the most earthly possessions. Our vision would be on earthly things, a carnal battle for these pleasures for a season, leading to covetousness and envy in our hearts. The scripture teaches us, *“for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”⁴* This kind of earthly wisdom will ultimately lead us to destruction.

How do we first gain this godly wisdom and then have it manifested in our lives? Throughout scripture we are reminded of those who in faith inclined their ear to God, realizing their need. God liberally grants wisdom to those who seek Him.⁵ We grow in wisdom when we realize that we can do nothing of ourselves,⁶ but rather ask Him for direction through reading the Bible or through prayer. As we read and meditate, God’s Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our paths.⁷ It is amazing how many times the scripture provides us the answers or teaching that we are in need of in our daily walk of life. We are also blessed by our fellow brothers and sisters, blessed by God with wisdom, who can also be a help to us—if we are willing and humble enough to ask. We have the promise that when we lean not to our own understanding, but trust Him in all of our ways, He will direct our paths on the more excellent way, which will lead us to Heaven.⁸

With godly wisdom guiding our lives, the things of the world grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.⁹ And while we are in the world, we are aware that we are living in a society in which moral values are continually being degraded. We must not become desensitized by a culture which no longer calls sin, sin. When we are walking in wisdom, we need to be aware that just because words change, it does not change the Word of God. It was once said that what we used to call an itch, we now call an allergy, but we scratch just the same. The same concept is true that no matter what words are used; the consequences of sin do not change. As wise children of God, we are called to *“put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.”¹⁰*

And just as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister,¹¹ God’s wisdom not only makes us wise unto salvation, but also compels us to fulfill the Great Commission.¹² Our reasonable

service is to use each day God gives us to help those that are without¹³ and to learn more about Christ living within us.¹⁴ God's wisdom directs the appropriate response, "*and of some have compassion, making a difference: and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.*"¹⁵ His wisdom causes us to always be about His business; being easy to be entreated, full of mercy, without partiality to all that God places in our paths.¹⁶

This wisdom also ensures that we don't allow this liberty of walking in Christ to become a stumbling block to those that are weak.¹⁷ We have a Christ-like love in our heart, reflected in such a way to our neighbor that we "*follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.*"¹⁸ In contrast to the world, where the focus is so often on self, God's wisdom causes us to consider and esteem each of His creation of such value that we would desire to provoke one another to a greater love and good works.¹⁹

In a world where knowledge is ever increasing, leading to the puffing up of man's hearts and minds, may we ever look to the school of the Cross for our teaching, allowing us to be the salt of the earth. May we be wise enough to realize that this world is not our home—that we are just passing through. We are His ambassadors—our lives are to be lived for His service and we are to be doing His business. May we be grounded enough in His Word and directed by His Spirit to prove all things, holding fast to that which is good, that we would not get caught up in the deceitfulness of the evil adversary. May we be wise enough to have a Christ-like love for one another, being a help and support, not a stumbling block, that by our lives more can come to know Him and His perfect will. And may we understand that each day is a gift from God, having hearts and minds willing to go, willing to stay, wise enough to know His will is best.

Footnotes: ¹Ephesians 5:15-16 ²James 3:13 ³James 3:14 ⁴Matthew 6:21 ⁵James 1:5 ⁶2 Corinthians 3:5 ⁷Psalms 119:105 ⁸Proverbs 3:4-5 ⁹"Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus," by Helen H. Lemmel 1922 ¹⁰Romans 13:14 ¹¹Mark 10:45 ¹²Matthew 28:19-20 ¹³Colossians 4:5 ¹⁴Colossians 3:3 ¹⁵Jude 22-23 ¹⁶James 3:17 ¹⁷1 Corinthians 8:9 ¹⁸Romans 14:19 ¹⁹Hebrews 10:24

Walking Hopefully, with Confidence in His Promises and His Provision

*“For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?”*¹

As believers, we know that God is almighty and has promised to provide for all of our needs while we live here on earth.² Most importantly, based upon our faith in the shed blood of His Son, He has forgiven our sins and has promised us an eternal home in His heavenly kingdom.³ As wonderful as this knowledge is, do we ever find ourselves doubting any of His promises or His provision? If we are honest, most of us have at one time entertained such thoughts, even if only temporarily.

As an illustration, many of us have accepted an invitation to spend a weekend with fellow believers in another of our congregations. As we are traveling, what words would describe our emotions and feelings? Do we for one moment entertain thoughts that we will go hungry because supper will not be provided as promised? Do we have any misgivings that there will be no singing afterwards as planned? Do we think that for some reason we will not go to church on Sunday? On the contrary, we more likely are guilty of taking such blessings for granted. We have no doubt in our brother or sister’s ability and desire to provide for us, nor do we just wish for these blessings. We have learned to expect them!

This confident expectation defines exactly what our hope in God should be in much more important and eternal matters.⁴ We anticipate with confidence that He will fulfill His promises and that He really will provide for all our needs, both earthly and spiritual. Hope is an integral part and a result of the faith we put in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.⁵

Doubt reduces hope into a mere wish. Abraham rose above what seemed a doubtful situation when God promised him a son at a time when both he and Sara were well past normal childbearing age: *“Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara’s womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.”*⁶ In this verse, we see that hope was an enabling force behind Abraham’s faith.

The widow of Zarephath is an example of walking hopefully, with confidence in God’s promises and provision. She was not an Israelite, but lived in what is modern day Lebanon. In the midst of a grievous famine, God instructed her to give provision to the prophet Elijah, a man whom she had never met. She was in the process of gathering a few sticks to cook what she thought was to be the last meal for herself and her son when the prophet suddenly appeared at her home. Elijah first asked her for a drink of water, which she was willing and able to provide. However, he then insisted that she bake a cake for him, even after she protested that there was only enough food for one last meal. Yet, when Elijah told her, *“For thus saith the LORD God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the LORD sendeth rain upon the earth,”* she believed God, and did as the prophet requested. Because of her obedience, God provided for her in a miraculous way, and her oil and meal lasted for the duration of the famine.⁷

God then sent Elijah to deliver a public challenge to King Ahab and the Israelites: *“How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.”*⁸ The story of the Lord’s prophet with his servant on the one hand, and the 450 prophets of Baal on the other; the altars of stone drenched with water, culminating with the descending fire from God consuming both sacrifice and altar is one of the most inspiring accounts in the Bible. After this, Elijah commanded that the

prophets of Baal be slain on the spot—not one escaped. After his fervent prayer for rain was answered, a mighty storm arose followed by his furious race across the plain to Jezreel—a distance of over 17 miles!⁹

In spite of these astonishing victories, Elijah temporarily lost his hope. Infuriated at the defeat of her prophets, Queen Jezebel sent a chilling message to Elijah, *“So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.”*¹⁰ Afraid for his life, he fled into the wilderness of Beersheba where he became so despondent that he wished to die. The prophet’s perception that he was completely alone in his service to God was the major reason for his downward spiral into this feeling of hopelessness. *“And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”*¹¹ This statement was not completely true, and God encouraged him, *“Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.”*¹²

Hope is one of the saving elements in our life:¹³ it abides forever;¹⁴ it is the anchor of our soul;¹⁵ and it will cheer our dying hour.¹⁶ We gain hope by reading and believing God’s Word.¹⁷ Being *“instant in prayer”* will help us to *“rejoice in hope.”*¹⁸ Availing ourselves of fellowship at church will increase our hope.¹⁹ Most importantly, God’s desire for us is to have hope in His salvation. *“But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.”*²⁰

Footnotes: ¹Romans 8:24 ²Matthew 6:26 ³John 3:16 ⁴Philippians 1:20 ⁵Romans 5:1-5 ⁶Romans 4:18-21 ⁷1 Kings 17:14-16 ⁸1 Kings 18:21 ⁹1 Kings 18 ¹⁰1 Kings 19:2 ¹¹1 Kings 19:14 ¹²1 Kings 19:18 ¹³Romans 8:24 ¹⁴1 Corinthians 13:13 ¹⁵Hebrews 6:19 ¹⁶Proverbs 14:32 ¹⁷Romans 15:4 ¹⁸Romans 12:12 ¹⁹Hebrews 10:25, 1 John 1:3 ²⁰1 Thessalonians 5:8-11

Biblical Approach to Conflict - Part 1

“And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.”¹

Conflict

Why does conflict exist? Occasionally, it is because of a deliberate attack by a person of evil intentions. Sometimes, conflict occurs when selfish motives usurp concern for others. But in the family of God, perhaps conflict occurs most often because of misunderstandings and poor communication. When left unaddressed, such conflict may increase tension, diminish trust, and create barriers. The diminished trust often leads to further misunderstandings, greater tension, increasingly lower levels of trust, and ultimately broken relationships that can be difficult to mend. For this reason, it is important that believers learn to address conflict with humility, love, and courage—and to do so without delay.

Even with the best of intentions, it is likely that sooner or later we will experience conflict. The Lord instructs us clearly to overlook (forbear) the little things, make the effort to be reconciled in more serious cases, and seek help if and when necessary.² In this first part of a two-part series, we will look at several biblical principles to consider how we can prevent and diminish conflict. In the second part, we will consider how to resolve conflict that has advanced to a state of offense, responding through the power of the Holy Spirit with godly love.

Prevention

Who can judge righteous judgment? The infamous words, *“What is truth?”*³ which Pilate uttered to Jesus perhaps reflected Pilate’s cynical frustration with judgment. Limited by our five senses, each one of us struggles to judge righteous judgment. An unartfully spoken comment can be perceived as intentional. An experience shared and repeated by the listener often changes with each telling as details are misremembered. Such misstatements soon become fact to the listener and are repeated as truth. Reliable research shows that even the most well-intentioned eyewitness testimony is often erroneous. Stress can degrade our ability to remember accurately, previous experiences may bias our interpretation of an event, and suggestions or biases expressed by others may influence how we recall events.

All of these factors are exacerbated when the experience is related to us secondhand rather than experienced directly. Every retelling of a tale increases the likelihood that it is inaccurate, and paradoxically increases the probability that the incorrect details are perceived to be truthful by the teller of the tale. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Lord, since the days of Moses, teaches us of the sinfulness of repeating “stories.”⁴

Refusing to be either provider or receiver of false information is the first preventive step in dealing with potential conflict in a Christ-like manner. The Apostle Paul’s observation that, *“Charity thinketh no evil”* not only recognizes that charity refuses to pass on malicious gossip, but also teaches that true Christ-like love refuses to believe the tales that are told without firsthand proof. True Christian love consciously and by nature refuses to believe ill of one another without clear and unequivocal evidence. Putting love into preventive action is perhaps the best method of addressing conflict.

“It is not good to accept the person of the wicked, to overthrow the righteous in judgment. A fool’s lips enter into contention, and his mouth calleth for strokes. A fool’s mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul. The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.”⁵

Forbearance

At times, a brother, friend, or neighbor may fail to exercise discretion, and we experience the early symptoms of emotional pain or anger in response to the offense. In such cases, our next line of defense against an escalation of conflict is to forbear with our brother.⁶ To forbear with someone is to overlook and tolerate things that would have the potential to be offensive if we were unwilling to tolerate them. Forbearance is an expression of graciousness toward others, demonstrating an awareness of just how gracious God has been with us. If we are mindful of the depth of God's patience and mercy toward us, then we cannot help but be patient, understanding, and tolerant of others. Even then it can be a challenge to feel tolerant and we must instead choose to be tolerant.

How is it possible to overlook offensive behavior? Perhaps the first question should be, "Why do I feel hurt by the words or actions that I perceive to be offensive? Is there perhaps some element of truth to the words? Do I know all the facts about the perceived action? Have I ever done or said something similar and been misunderstood? Asking the right questions can often lead us to a point of understanding that our perception was incorrect. Forbearance gives us the opportunity to examine our role in the conflict honestly.

Self-examination

Why is this such a crucial step? The Lord teaches us the folly of thinking we can see clearly to address issues in our brother if we have obstructed vision ourselves.⁷ How can one honestly examine oneself? It is critical to see ourselves as God sees us. That cannot happen if we do not pray for wisdom and clarity of vision. It can't happen if we are proud and unwilling to acknowledge that perhaps we played some role in the offense. In addition, we ought to ask ourselves whether perhaps some previous offense or hurt is being brought back to memory because of this current event. All too often, past hurts amplify minor events and the effect is compounded in our current perception.

According to the Jewish Law, parents who had an incorrigible rebellious son were to bring him before the council of the village elders as a key step in resolving the conflict. Perhaps the purpose in this step was to impel the parents to examine themselves before asking the elders to get involved. Certainly, a wise elder would have inquired about the parents' role in provoking the rebellion. If the parents were not wise enough to examine themselves, it would have fallen to the elders to hold them accountable to examine their own role in the rebellion. Similarly, we are taught by Jesus that we should examine ourselves before any attempt to confront or correct an offense against us.

The Apostle Peter teaches us that charity covers a multitude of sins.⁸ By the grace of God, these steps of charity—prevention, forbearance, and self-examination—will eliminate or diminish most sources of conflict. In the second part of this series, we will look at the biblical steps to take when our best efforts to prevent and forbear are insufficient to keep conflict from disturbing brotherly love.

Footnotes): ¹1 Peter 4:8 ²Rom. 12:18 ³John 18:38 ⁴Lev. 19:15-18 ⁵Prov. 18:5-8 ⁶Col. 3:13, Eph. 4:2 ⁷Matt. 7:3-5 ⁸1 Peter 4:8

Biblical Approach to Conflict - Part 2

“Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him.”¹

In the first part of this topic, we discussed the dangers of gossiping; the need for forbearance and self-examination. This second part will focus on our duties in approaching our brother or sister, and the role of the church vs. the individual in matters of serious conflict (the word trespass is from the same word also translated as sin and is not a matter of mild disagreement or conflict sometimes referred to as offense).

Seeking godly counsel is often advisable in such matters since *“every purpose is established by counsel and good advice.”* Seeking advice could apply in cases where the matter is sensitive or for other reasons where we feel the need for guidance. But it should never be a cover for what is actually gossip and tale-bearing—such counsel should be sought from those who will provide grounded, biblical advice; perhaps a minister, elder, or other seasoned, mature believer who will hold the matter in confidence.

Approaching our brother or sister alone

If, after humbly conducting a thorough self-examination,³ we believe the Spirit’s direction is to approach our brother or sister,⁴ we should continue to be very prayerful. We can ask God to give us a genuine love in our heart for our brother or sister. When motivated by a true love, our attitude towards them will be such that we are acting out of concern for them, and not simply being critical. Ananias, when commanded by God to lay hands on Saul (Paul), protested, *“...I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name.”⁵* However, God reads the hearts, and He knew Saul was in sincere repentance, *“The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.”⁶* Ananias was obedient and found that God had gone before him in the matter.

Likewise, we should remember that God is aware of the shortcomings of our brother and that He knows the true condition of their heart as well as He knew that of Saul. In other biblical examples, sincere prayer coupled with love and humility ultimately brought about reconciliation, not only between those involved in the conflict, but more importantly with God. Moses interceded many times for the children of Israel after they had not only wronged him, but had sinned against God.⁷ Job prayed for his friends even though they had falsely accused him.⁸

Our choice of words should reflect this heart-felt love and a genuine desire to understand and help. The prophet Isaiah described it like this: *“The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned.”⁹* In this scripture, *“to speak a word in season”* literally means that our words will bring aid to those who are weary. Are our thoughts and words such that we are truly trying to help, or are we simply venting our feelings? To *“hear as the learned”* means to receive instruction. Do we really know all the facts about the situation? Are we interested in hearing the viewpoint of our brother or sister and honestly trying to see things from their perspective? Simply talking with a smile and not a frown is something that anyone can do, and will go a long ways in resolving conflict. Not everyone possesses a natural eloquence, nor is this necessary. People can readily detect sincerity and often remember their feelings much better than the exact choice of wording, long after a conversation is over.

Taking one or two others

When, in spite of our best efforts, our brother or sister does not hearken to us; we have the obligation to approach them with one or two witnesses¹⁰—with one of the purposes being to establish truth with accountability for what is spoken.

Any perception (however erroneous) of pettiness or narrow-mindedness in our attitude will greatly hinder the Lord's work. The Samaritan woman at the well knew that Jesus was a Jew and was skeptical towards Him until she understood that He really did care about her and had her best interests at heart.¹¹ Whenever a small group approaches someone in such circumstances, we want to avoid giving the impression that we are combining forces to attack them. One way to avoid this is to have one person be the spokesperson while the others listen quietly, providing input only where necessary. Note that while the disciples had their own ideas concerning the Samaritan woman, they kept their silence while Jesus talked with her.¹² Our desire should be the restoration of the erring one and that our conversation is in "*the spirit of meekness*".¹³

Bringing the matter to the church

If during any of the previous steps we are able to come to find healing and renewed relationship in Christ, we have "gained our brother."¹⁴ This is truly a matter for rejoicing: "verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray."¹⁵ However, in the event that the conflict remains unresolved, the matter becomes the responsibility of church leadership to administer further biblically based care and accountability for the brother or sister still struggling with sin.

It is clear from the context of Jesus' teaching that certain aspects of dealing with such matters are to be accomplished by the church and not individual believers.¹⁶ That this authority does not apply to an individual member or even a subset of them becomes apparent when we note these verses apply to the "church" in Matthew's gospel and to the "disciples" (as a group of church leaders) in John's gospel. We must be careful not to misinterpret verses such as Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, "*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.*"¹⁷ It may be tempting for us to take a verse such as this out of context and to avoid or ignore someone when we have strong feelings about them or even disagree with decisions that church leadership has made regarding them. To do so simply creates more conflict instead of resolving it. On the other hand, following the scriptural commands to resolve conflict by having love and respect for one another will bring us peace.

God gives great importance to peace between one another as brethren, "*Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. Now the Lord of peace himself give you peace always by all means. The Lord be with you all.*"¹⁸ Indeed, He who has reconciled us unto Himself has given us a ministry of reconciliation with each other.¹⁹

Footnotes: ¹Luke 17:3 ²Proverbs 20:18 ³Matthew 7:3-5 ⁴Matthew 18:15 ⁵Acts 9:13-14 ⁶Psalms 34:18 ⁷Deuteronomy 9:18-20 ⁸Job 42:8-10 ⁹Isaiah 50:4 ¹⁰Matthew 18:16 ¹¹John 4:9 ¹²John 4:27 ¹³Galatians 6:1 ¹⁴Matthew 18:15 ¹⁵Matthew 18:13 ¹⁶Matthew 18:18 ¹⁷2 Thessalonians 3:6 ¹⁸2 Thessalonians 3:15-16 ¹⁹2 Corinthians 5:18

Confidence in the Finished Work of Christ Jesus

*“Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:”*¹

Fundamental to the gospel message is the truth that we are saved by grace—no works of our own can accomplish that miracle.² No human effort can pay the debt of the sin load we bear. The hymn writer put it this way:

“Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law’s demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.
Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling.”³

If we are honest, grace seems almost too good to be true. Much of life’s experience teaches that we don’t get something for nothing. Surely man must do something to deserve God’s forgiveness. Yet Scripture is clear, God is *“good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon (Him).”*⁴ In fact, it is God in His goodness that leads us to repentance!⁵

To be sure, there are many warnings in Scripture—the Christian is called to a life of watchfulness, prayer, and perseverance in the service of the Lord.⁶ But right along with that are many promises of God that give us confidence in our salvation. This article is intended to highlight the assurances—without in any way minimizing the warnings—rejoicing as we do in the Lord’s mercy and faithfulness. We do well to focus on the promises as we earnestly strive to bear fruit unto goodness, righteousness, and truth; which is powerful against Satan’s attacks of doubt and fear.⁷

We have been taught that scriptural hope is a noun, not a verb. It’s something we possess, not an action on our part. Many scriptures provide assurance that our salvation is provided by Christ’s finished work on the cross and accessed through faith in His shed blood. As we consider just a few of them, notice the strength of wording associated with our faith and standing in Christ: *“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.”*⁸ *“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”*⁹ *“I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.”*¹⁰

Our statement of faith puts it this way, *“the gift of eternal life is the present possession of every true believer.”*¹¹ Great comfort and assurance is found in Paul’s words to the Romans, *“For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*¹²

Further, the Lord gives us multiple assurances that our life in Him is to be one of full abundance, not walking in fear but in the joy of the Lord: *“I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”*¹³ *“For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”*¹⁴ *“Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.”*¹⁵

“Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”¹⁶

As we walk this abundant life in Christ, we rest in the promise that He will be with us and will strengthen us throughout life and to the end. *“And, lo, I am with you alway(s), even unto the end of the world.”¹⁷* *“Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.”¹⁸* *“They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”¹⁹* Indeed, Jesus promises strength to help us do that which we have promised in the covenant of baptism.

Our Christian walk is in the fear of the Lord, recognizing both his goodness and His severity.²⁰ In fact, we will never fully appreciate the mercy of the Lord if we don't first recognize his justice. But it is in this recognition of our complete need for a Savior and utter inability to save ourselves that we begin to grasp the gospel message. As we consider—ponder, reflect upon, come to appreciate—the absolute contradiction of sinners against our Lord Jesus,²¹ we grow in our love for and dependence upon Him. And although we truly marvel that he *“saved a wretch like me,”²²* we do not confuse our good works, which spring forth as a response to this amazing grace and the clarion call of Christ, with anything that would add to or detract from the finished work of Jesus on the cross.²³

Rather, we rejoice in the Assurance of True Faith when we sing such blessed words as:
“My faith gives joy and sweetest rest,
Leads me to heaven and the blest,
To Thee, my God and Father.
The comfort of mortality
Preserve with steadfast faith in me;
I'd follow Thee forever.
Salvation is the noblest part;
Impress this deeply on my heart.”²⁴

Footnotes:

¹ Phil. 1:6

² Eph. 2:8-9

³ “Rock of Ages,” A.M. Toplady

⁴ Psalm 86:5

⁵ Rom. 2:4

⁶ Matt. 10:22

⁷ Eph. 5:8-9

⁸ John 5:24

⁹ Rom. 10:9-10

¹⁰ John 10:9

¹¹ Apostolic Christian Church Statement of Faith, #19

¹² Rom. 8:38-39

¹³ John 10:10

¹⁴ 2 Tim. 1:7

¹⁵ Rom. 15:13

¹⁶ 1 Peter 1:8

¹⁷ Matt. 28:20

¹⁸ Isaiah 41:10

¹⁹ Isaiah 40:31

²⁰ Rom. 11:22

²¹ Heb. 12:3

²² “Amazing Grace,” John Newton

²³ Eph. 2:10, Matt. 5:16, Rom. 10:1-4

²⁴ “The Assurance of True Faith,” Zion’s Harp #102, v. 1.

Philemon: Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Editor's note: this month begins a four-part series of teachings from some of the shortest books of the Bible; Philemon, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.

“Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.”¹

The Apostle Paul ends the letter to Philemon with a blessing, desiring that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ would be with the spirit of Philemon. This key element of a Christ-led born-again spirit is essential to understand the concepts that Paul addressed in his epistle, and was essential to Paul's confidence that Philemon would be obedient. Paul's instruction encourages us along with Philemon to make our faith more effective, respond to reasonable requests from brethren, and to receive those whom the Lord has forgiven. Paul's example teaches us to request rather than demand, to intercede on behalf of others, to work together in mutual esteem, and to see the potential for good in others. These Spirit-led actions foster reconciliation and have the power to restore the most damaged of relationships.

The soul that has been redeemed by the mercy and grace of Jesus has a perspective that influences every relationship. One who comprehends the profound forgiveness extended by Jesus is not only able, but compelled to extend profound forgiveness to others. One who finds himself served by the Lord and Master of all is able to in turn serve others. One who experiences the joy of reconciliation is willing to offer reconciliation to others. Knowing that Philemon was born again, Paul was confident that he was willing to be reconciled to Onesimus.

Who was Onesimus? Paul makes it clear that he should be received no longer as a servant (literally, a slave), but also as a brother—both in the flesh, as well as in the Lord. Although we don't fully understand their relationship, it is clear that Philemon could have rightfully felt justified in holding Onesimus accountable in the flesh. In calling on Philemon to elevate his spiritual relationship over his physical rights and relationship to Onesimus, Paul confirmed the perspective taught by Jesus, that social norms and barriers are insignificant,² and that differences between brethren should be respectfully resolved in His truth, love, and grace.³

It is no small task to overcome one's biases and prejudices. Perhaps for this reason Paul began his exhortation to Philemon by challenging him to acknowledge every good thing that Christ had instilled in him.⁴ If he would have relied on human nature, this extra dimension in their relationship may have made it even more difficult for Philemon to reconcile. Paul was confident Philemon would respond in the Spirit.

What good things has Christ put into your heart, soul, and mind? As with Philemon, those good things are the ingredients of restored relationships. A follower of Jesus must receive the Holy Spirit⁵ in order to be born again. This new spirit places the nature of Christ within the believer, replacing a self-centered perspective. It replaces condemnation with mercy,⁶ apathy with love,⁷ and a demanding nature with a servant heart.⁸ These key truths are the foundation of Paul's confidence in Philemon.

Paul demonstrated these attitudes before requesting them from Philemon. He acknowledges that he could require compliance from Philemon, but chose rather to beseech him—to gently, but earnestly, ask Philemon to respond in the love of Christ.⁹ He continues on to assure Philemon that he would not do anything in this matter without first seeking Philemon's understanding and discernment on the matter so that Philemon would feel no pressure to conform to Paul's desires, but rather, willingly let the nature of Jesus guide his response.¹⁰ The Holy Ghost working in Paul enabled him to see the potential in an unprofitable servant, share the Gospel with him, and then intercede for Onesimus with his master, Philemon.

We are the recipients of these same actions through Christ Jesus, who saw our potential, brought the Good News of salvation to us, and then interceded on our behalf to our Master, the Living God, to whom we were unprofitable servants. Just as Paul would do nothing without Philemon's consent, Jesus does not demand anything of the Father, but rather entreats Him on our behalf. Just as Onesimus had to carry the letter from Paul in faith to Philemon, we must appear in faith before our Creator trusting in the relationship between the Father and our Lord.

Can you hear Jesus asking the Father to receive us as those created in His own image, as brothers beloved to Jesus, in the likeness of the Father as well as in the likeness of His Spirit? So, Paul entreated Philemon to receive Onesimus, as a brother beloved, not only in the flesh, but also in spirit. Just as Jesus hung on the cross before God, paying our sin-debt, Paul placed himself in debt to Philemon, averring that he would pay anything that Onesimus owed Philemon.¹¹

In contrast, we are reminded of the Lord's parable of the unjust servant, who was unwilling to forgive the extremely small debt owed by his fellow servant, and was condemned by the Lord. If we have any awareness of what Christ has done for us, we must have merciful hearts, willing to forgive.

"So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses."¹²

Having confidence in Philemon's obedience, Paul wrote this letter of intercession as a prisoner himself. He was not in any position to enforce a response in Philemon. He relied on the Holy Spirit to accomplish the work that he was unable to do himself. But he did not shy away from provoking Philemon to love and good works.¹³ Following Paul's example, we can also demonstrate our love by gently nudging one another toward reconciled relationships. Not demanding, but rather beseeching one another to receive all whom Christ has purchased with His shed blood. If we have the need to receive an estranged brother, we will be blessed if we do more than we are asked.

Do you have a relationship that has been damaged? Are you willing to surrender to the Lord's urging to be reconciled? Have you been approached by someone seeking reconciliation, only to turn them away because it seemed too difficult? Could you serve in a mediator role, as Paul did with Philemon?

The freedom of reconciliation is within reach through the love of Jesus and the power of the Holy Ghost.

Footnotes

¹ Philemon 1:21

² John 4:27, Rom. 2:11

³ Matt. 5:23-24

⁴ Philemon 1:6

⁵ Acts 19:1-6

⁶ John 3:17

⁷ 1 Peter 1:22

⁸ John 13:14

⁹ Philemon 1:8-10

¹⁰ Philemon 1:14

¹¹ Philemon 1:16-18

¹² Matt. 18:35

¹³ Heb. 10:24

2 John: Rejoicing in the Truth

Editor's note: this month continues a four-part series of teachings from some of the shortest books of the Bible; Philemon, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.

“I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father.”¹

Throughout Scripture God entreats and instructs his children to willingly obey his commandments. We are reminded of the examples of Noah, David, Daniel, Joshua, Deborah, and many others who, in the midst of a world focused on fulfilling its own desires, denied self and their own will and were submissive to God's commandments. Each of these patriarchs and matriarchs of faith had to make the critical daily decision not to love the world, or the things that are in it,² but rather to trust in God with all of their heart, not relying on their own understanding, allowing God to direct their path,³ walking in truth.

While thousands of years have passed since the times of the Israelites and two thousand since Jesus walked on earth, Christ's teachings still ring true, *“If you love me, keep my commandments.”⁴* Jesus taught his followers how to fulfill the purpose of the Levitical law—which had hundreds of laws for many different situations—when He taught his disciples: *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”⁵*

We are encouraged in 2 John, to know of the great rejoicing of our Heavenly Father, and in our spiritual family, when we love one another as Christ did. We are reminded that this Christ-like love is not measured by great human acts devoid of love, even if we would bestow all of our goods to feed the poor or give our bodies to be burned,⁶ but rather is shown by the fruit of the Holy Spirit living in our hearts, action compelled by love. It is exemplified by giving a cup of cold water to those who are thirsty, a shoulder for the tears of the hurting, or by speaking the truth of the Gospel in love to those who are lost. It is not something that happens on rare occasions, but is the calling of each believer, every minute of every day the Lord gives us. The believer with spiritual vision behaves as the Good Samaritan who, as he passed by and saw someone in need, *“had compassion on him, went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.”⁷* This example of love—not worrying about our own needs, but the needs of the others—reflects the love of Christ in our hearts and causes the Father to rejoice.

So with such clear teaching and a wonderful example in Jesus Christ—the Word that was made flesh and dwelt amongst us⁸—why does the believer struggle? What is it that distracts us from walking in truth? Paul reminded us that while we have been called unto liberty, we are not to use this liberty for an occasion to the flesh.⁹ Satan approaches us as a wolf in sheep's clothing.¹⁰ Temptation doesn't always come in a way that is obviously wrong. We are taught to prove all things and hold fast to that which is good. Although we live in time of relative peace and plenty, we are warned not to be complacent, nor *“tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.”¹¹*

This deception often starts in the little things of life, changing the focus of our lives from trusting in God to a life focused on fulfilling our own desires. This can show up in accepting a little of the world's thinking in our lives, e.g. dwelling on what we don't have vs. counting our blessings, or rationalizing that, *“Everyone else is doing it, so it is ok.”* Unchecked, such deception will continue, not only in ways of

thinking that are inconsistent with Scripture as mentioned above, but growing into a hardening of the heart that rejects the opportunity to help one in need or withdraws from healthy fellowship. We may think, “He/she isn’t my responsibility,” or we may neglect prayer or reading of the Word, due to “not enough time in the day.” We may be less faithful in attending church functions due to indifference, or we may fail to see our own sin, or to forgive and forbear with others. Ultimately, as our connectedness to the body of Christ is diminished, our reliance on the Holy Spirit wanes also.

Our focus may be diverted from “*considering one another to provoke unto love and to good works*,”¹² towards comparing ourselves amongst ourselves, and trusting in our own works. This is not wise.¹³ Rather than fall into these traps, let’s be inspired with the example of Christ, who saw a world of scattered sheep and focused on their needs.

So, how are each of us doing? The test of our love for God is measured by our trust and obedience in Him—that He will provide us all that we need, and that His will is best for us. We know that, if we trust Him and if we are not just hearers but doers of the Word,¹⁴ this faith-based action results in a happiness in our lives,¹⁵ as well as God’s blessing.¹⁶ Just as John rejoiced when he observed “*thy children walking in truth*,”¹⁷ as this unfeigned Christ-like love for all mankind is expressed in every aspect of our lives, it leads to the “*astonishment*” of those who come in contact with us. They no longer see us, but rather Jesus Christ, as we are crucified with Him, living in us. It is His love, the fruit of the Holy Spirit living within us that can draw all men to the truth.

*“Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.”*¹⁸

Footnotes

¹ 2 John 4

² 1 John 2:15

³ Prov. 3:5&6

⁴ John 14:15

⁵ Matt. 22:37-40

⁶ 1 Cor. 13: 3

⁷ Luke 10:33

⁸ John 1:14

⁹ Gal. 5:13

¹⁰ Matt. 7:15

¹¹ Eph. 4:14

¹² Heb. 10:24

¹³ 2 Cor. 10:12

¹⁴ James 1:22

¹⁵ John 13:17

¹⁶ James 1:25

¹⁷ 2 John 1:4

¹⁸ 1 John 4:7

3 John: Support and Opposition in the Lord's Work

Editor's note: this month continues a four-part series of teachings from some of the shortest books of the Bible; Philemon, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.

*"I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth."*¹

In this third letter from the Apostle John, through a few very personal lines written to one believer, we have a beautiful insight into the realities of life in the early church. We see a deep and enduring love between brethren, an exhortation to remain in truth (the greatest source of joy), an encouragement to put faith into action, an acknowledgment of opposition to spiritual authority—even in the early church—and a reminder to reject such opposition and to honor those who are of good report.

John's love for Gaius was profound. So profound that he repeated it in his greeting, calling him wellbeloved, and then emphasizing that he loved him *"in the truth."* There are many ways in which people care for each other. Union brothers, fraternity brothers, and members and fans of a team all develop a strong bond, but there is no bond as deep or as strong as the bond of genuine Christian love, based on truth. John certainly wished Gaius the best in body and soul, but emphasized just how important walking in truth is when he reminded him that there is no greater joy than to hear that his children walk in truth.

If there is no greater joy than to know that one's loved ones walk in truth, then it is well worth our time to understand what it means to walk in truth. What is truth?

What appears to be a simple question has occupied philosophers for millennia, with little agreement. However, we read in the Bible that God is true, and that even if every man were a liar, God will still be true.² Although men might be unreliable and changeable, God does not change. God Himself confirms that by speaking through Malachi, *"I am the Lord, I change not."*³ Truth does not change. It is eternal. The Bible teaches that it is impossible for God to lie,⁴ and that life eternal is to know Him—the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom God sent.⁵ We also read that God is love.⁶ Therefore, we understand that God is true, God is unchanging, and God is love. By an equality, we understand that walking in truth is to consistently walk in love, which is to walk in the Spirit.

John rejoiced to find Gaius consistently, in all aspects of daily life, living (walking) in truth. As we have seen, this really means living in God; living in love; living by the power of the Holy Spirit. It goes far beyond a theoretical reliance on grace to a practical expression of grace. It goes beyond a positional justification through faith in Christ to a functional faith that demonstrates the power of God. John encouraged Gaius to know that whatever he did faithfully both to brethren and to strangers (foreigners) was evidence of living in truth. It was the action that mattered. "Walking" is doing. Our actions demonstrate whether we are walking in truth or living a lie. It is the doing that brings great joy.

*"If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him."*⁷

If we desire to walk in truth, we must tap into the source of truth, and then utilize His strength and wisdom to live in truth in all aspects of daily life. *"He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him."*⁸

By definition we understand that truth is objective and not subjective. Contrary to some popular philosophies one cannot have his own truth, or it is no longer truth, it is one's subjective — and deceptive illusion. There is much about this world that is deceptive. Living in the ways of the devil can never be

walking in truth, and always brings great heartache — not only to those who love us, but also to oneself. The battle between God and Satan has always come down to truth. The serpent’s first words to Eve were intended to introduce doubt of the truth into Eve’s mind, “*Yea, hath God said ...?*”⁹ Jesus refers to the devil as a liar in whom is no truth.¹⁰ No matter how good he makes sin appear, it always disappoints and it always leads to hurt. Eventually, the bitter course of uncorrected sin will lead not only to pain and disappointment, but to a full denial that Jesus is the Son of God.

*“I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth, but because ye know it, and that no lie is of the truth. Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son.”*¹¹

To his great disappointment, John had to warn Gaius of one who was not walking in truth. It seems apparent that Diotrephes believed he was walking in truth. However, contrary to the meekness of Christ, he loved to have the preeminence in the church. He felt himself to be important and wanted others to elevate him as well. He felt himself to be so important that with malicious words and discord he resisted the authority of John, who was one of the twelve Apostles chosen by Jesus and was clearly ordained by Jesus to hold authority in the church. John warned Gaius to be cautious of Diotrephes, and by extension, of all who would despise authority and cast others out of the church in their lack of love.

In contrast, John commended Demetrius, who had a good report of all. Let us also be cautious of those who are rebellious against authority and rejoice in those who worship God in spirit and in truth—those who from the heart walk in love. What a wonderful thing to not only believe that God has the power to transform our lives, but to by faith allow Him to empower us to put love into action.

It is in doing that we worship God in truth.

*“God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”*¹²

Footnotes

¹ 3 John 1:4

² Rom. 3:4

³ Mal. 3:6

⁴ Heb. 6:18

⁵ John 17:3

⁶ 1 John 4:16

⁷ 1 John 2:29

⁸ 1 John 2:4

⁹ Gen. 3:1

¹⁰ John 8:44

¹¹ 1 John 2:21-22

¹² John 4:24

Due to the shortness of 3 John, references to the chapter itself are omitted from endnotes

Jude: Marks of Ungodly Teachers

Editor's note: this month concludes a four-part series of teachings from some of the shortest books of the Bible; Philemon, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.

“For there are certain men crept in unawares... denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹

We live in a world where the amount of information and knowledge is increasing at an almost unthinkable rate. It is estimated that the total amount of human information or knowledge is doubling every 2-3 years. While there are many benefits to be gained from this increased information, including our ability to stay more connected with individuals across the miles, and an increased degree of medical understanding, there are also areas of caution for the believer in our spiritual walk of life. Paul warned Timothy that there would be those who would try to affect the Church, with their approach of *“ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*² While our day and time is different in many ways from that of Paul, we are still faced with the same evil adversary who desires to deceive all men. Jude's warning reminds us that this can happen to the Church.

Today, with easy access to nearly any teaching, man's legitimate thirst for knowledge is also a potential pitfall. It is easier than ever to gather to ourselves teachers, listening only to what pleases us. As believers, we need to be on guard, to prove all things and hold fast to that which is good.³ One key way to avoid deception is to know our teachers⁴, and to know the difference between godly and ungodly teachers. How do we discern (judge) those who teach the truth, from those who don't? First, we will focus on a few key marks of ungodly teachers that should be clearly visible to the spiritual eye.

Ungodly Teachers **Do Not**:

- Focus on the only true God, and our Lord Savior Jesus Christ.⁵
- Teach the concept of the narrow way and the way of self-denial.⁶
- Teach the concept of a converted life, based on faith in the shed blood of Jesus.⁷
- Have clear spiritual fruit in their lives.⁸

Ungodly Teachers **Do**:

- Use the liberty of Christianity to justify works of the flesh.⁹
- Pervert the grace of God to allow for fulfilment of their own personal desire.¹⁰
- Use the name of Christ to achieve personal gain.¹¹

Jude provides additional marks of ungodly teachers using the phrase, “these are” to denote key elements that the believers should use to discern godly from ungodly teachers. Disruptive and erroneous teaching is sometimes obvious and other times subtle. Jude describes the subtle approach clearly, writing, *“these are... spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear: clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots.”*¹² A teacher who mixes truthful and hopeful teaching with a self-serving agenda that results in no true spiritual benefit can appear to be godly, but will be judged by God. Similar judgments were placed on the scribes and Pharisees by Jesus when He said, *“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.”*¹³ We are thankful for Christ's example, who spoke *“nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things.”*¹⁴ Godly teachers: touch the soul by speaking truth, diminish themselves, live in a way that matches their preaching, and nurture the spiritual mind. False teachers speak to the itching of the ear, amplify themselves, and focus on the *“fables of this world.”*¹⁵

We read in verse 16 of a more insidious ungodly approach to teaching, *“these are...murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men’s persons in admiration because of advantage.”* Throughout scripture, there have always been warnings against the murmurer and the complainer – those who are not content with what God has provided for them.¹⁶ We may think, “What’s it to anyone if we complain? Isn’t that part of being human?” However, Moses reminded the people that, *“your murmurings are not against us, but against the LORD.”*¹⁷ Likewise, those teachers who focus on their own wants and not the needs of others, are carnally minded, and *“receive not the things of the Spirit of God: neither can know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”*¹⁸ And just as the Pharisees often looked for the praise of man rather than the commendation of God, we are warned to be aware of those who would speak “great swelling words,” and do not have charity, without which there will be no profit.

We are thankful that with all these concerns, God provides to the believer the Holy Spirit, the entire Bible, and fellow believers to help us discern between truth and untruth. One remaining challenge to the believer is the tendency to react negatively to a teaching that may be godly – and exactly what we need to provoke us to good works and sanctification – yet the teaching is hard to swallow. The craftiness of Satan takes on another dimension with the temptation to label the teaching that is most needful, as deceptive or ungodly. Therefore by a diligent study of the Word, searching the scriptures daily as the Bereans did,¹⁹ and trusting in the safety of the multitude of counselors, we find ourselves enjoying lives filled with truth, joy, and peace.²⁰

May it be that each of us have the spiritual vision to see the marks of ungodly teachers and avoid them, appreciate and practice what we are taught by godly teachers, and examine our own motives if we have the responsibility of teaching and sharing the gospel. Through feeding on the Word of God, let us all press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.²¹

(Footnotes)

1 Jude 4

2 2 Tim. 3:7

3 I Thess. 5:21

4 1 Thess. 5:12-13

5 Jude 4

6 Matt. 7:14, Matt. 16:24

7 Eph. 2:8-10

8 Matt. 12:33

9 Gal. 5:13

10 Jude 4

11 1 Cor. 9:15

12 Jude 12-13

13 Matt. 23:27-28

14 John 8:28

15 2 Tim. 2:4

16 Phil. 4:11

17 Exod. 16:8

18 1 Cor. 2:14

19 Acts 17:11

20 Prov. 24:6.

21 Phil. 3:14

Romans 14 – Biblical Remedy

Editor's note: This month begins a three-part series of teachings from Romans 14.

“Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.”¹

As we think about our relationships with one another, it helps to first review Romans 14:10-11. Every believer who has ever lived will appear before the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of his life. The Lord will review our life carefully, without bias, but with complete knowledge of our motives and actions. Apparently, we will start by standing before Him,² but will ultimately kneel before Him.³ Might this be after He reviews our lives with us, showing what we did well and what we should have done better? Then, we will understand what forgiveness truly means as we look into the face of Him who blends the perfect combination of justice and mercy into love. In fact, looking back at Romans 13, we see that *“love is the fulfilling of the law.”*⁴ Christ has shown us His love so clearly while expecting us to also share that same love with others, knowing we fall far short of His likeness.

Far too often the hardest situations in which to practice the law of love are not with strangers, but within our own families. It can be even more challenging when there are disagreements within the family of God. When that occurs, we need to ask ourselves if the disagreement is over foundational biblical doctrines such as we find in our Statement of Faith. Hymn #191 in the Zion's Harp (“Now and Then”) was said to have been written by a brother who was in prison because he would not deny his beliefs.⁵ We should have that same desire to not compromise the truths of the Bible.

Although some beliefs are foundational truth and not to be compromised, the Apostle Paul acknowledges that some convictions are personal expressions of faith, or lack of faith. If we hold differing convictions in such instances:

We should acknowledge we are part of the Body of Christ and not live for ourselves.⁶

We should keep our focus on Christ and what He has done and is doing for us.⁷

To make certain that our focus is truly on Jesus, we must do some introspection to determine which of the following motives describes us, remembering that we will in the future, appear before the perfect judge who knows, and will remember, our motives much better than we will:

Is our attitude similar to the quarrelsome one described in 1 Tim 6:3-5?

Or are we motivated by the desire to build up each other as stated in Romans 14:19?

We have a great need for each other's perspectives as we apply the Word of God to living in our current culture. We can learn much from each other as we teach our world about the love of Christ. If our love for one another is not evident in our lives as believers, how can we expect unbelievers to embrace it?⁸

One attribute that is so hard to put into practice is submission, which is not a word our culture likes to use. However, practicing that virtue will lead to great harmony and unity. It certainly does not give anyone the authority to demand submission from someone else, but the Lord expects each of us to submit to one another, whether it be to our spouse, church leadership, or each other. As a dear, now departed, elder once said, “Submission is very important when two people do not agree on a subject.”

When we don't agree, our relationship will struggle until we reach one of two conclusions. Both conclusions require us to humbly seek to understand each other, and in so doing reveals love, esteem, and grace.⁹

One conclusion is that we agree to disagree on the subject, understanding that it is an appropriate response to differences of conscience. When we come to this conclusion, we must be certain to esteem the other higher than ourselves,¹⁰ even though we differ on the issue. That can be called disagreeing without being disagreeable.

The second possibility is that each of us practices submission and we find a middle ground on which we can both agree. "*Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*"¹¹ Both of these conclusions are valid and happen continually in healthy relationships.

A middle-aged brother once gave a large sum of money toward a new church building. His son, who knew that he was not in favor of the building project, thinking it may be too extravagant, asked him why he was donating that much money. His father said that he had voiced his opinion but the church voted as a group to go ahead with the building, so it was his duty to contribute to what the church decided upon. This is an example of the first conclusion, in that he did not second guess or criticize the church but esteemed the other brothers higher than himself. However, he also practiced the second conclusion by showing submission in such a pure way that his son later gave his heart to the Lord. What a witness from a quiet, godly man! What the brother could not know is that dozens of his descendants would be baptized and some would preach in the church which he originally felt was too extravagant.

Until the Lord returns, society will always change. Every generation of believers has had to decide what it means to be *in* the world but not *of* the world.¹² As they discuss the proper choices for their generation there will certainly be disagreements. Some will think change is happening much too quickly while others think the opposite.

The early church grew from eleven disciples to a large enough group to have a major impact on the Roman Empire, fighting the sword with the Word. Non-believers throughout the empire were amazed at the love Christians displayed not only for each other but also for their enemies. That same attitude appeared during the early years of the Anabaptist movement. Are we striving for that same love now or are we letting differences of opinions harm both our fellowship and our witness to non-believers? Let's practice the mutual esteem taught in Romans 14 so the Kingdom can grow in numbers and in Christlikeness as it should.

(Footnotes)

¹ Rom. 14:19

² Rom. 14:10

³ Rom. 14:11

⁴ Rom. 13:10

⁵ Klopfenstein, *A Treasure of Praise*, p. 28.

⁶ Rom. 14:7

⁷ Rom. 14:8-9

⁸ John 13:35

⁹ Philemon 14

¹⁰ Phil. 2:3

¹¹ Amos 3:3

¹² John 17:15

Romans 14 (Part 2) - Resolving Disputable Matters

Editor's note: this month continues a three-part series of teachings from Romans 14.

In the Word we find basic doctrines that are indisputable tenets of the Christian faith and must be believed to acquire salvation. We also have beliefs and convictions which we hold personally that can vary from person to person or from group to group, such as the meats and days discussed by Paul in Romans 14:2-6. These are “disputable matters” or issues about which brethren can have varying degrees of conviction.

From time to time, these matters can cause conflict between brothers or sisters. We are called to avoid such conflict by loving one another,¹ and esteeming our brother higher than ourselves.² If we fail to love and esteem, we must reconcile with each other in light of our differences.

Our first step in that direction is to remove “*the beam out of (our) own eye.*”³ This requires self-inspection. Paul writes, “*Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.*”⁴ Our first question to self might be, “why exactly do I hold these convictions?” Are they based firmly on the Word of God, or is it simply that we have always understood or preferred thus and so. Or are there events of great pain or great joy that have shaped how we view life? How do our own thoughts and convictions reflect the whole Word of God? These are just a few examples of things to consider while coming to a conclusion that we are “fully persuaded.” Second, we must consider that, while “*all things are lawful*”⁵ (“all things” being disputable matters and not sin), all things are not necessarily expedient or edifying. In light of our conviction, we find ourselves willing to adjust, not necessarily our conviction but our behavior, to achieve peaceful reconciliation with our brother. After careful inspection of self, and in a humble and loving attitude, we are now ready to receive our brother and take the second step, to discuss the mote that is in his eye.⁶

The next condition in resolving a disputable matter with our brother or sister is to simply receive them in love. Paul instructs us to receive the one weaker in faith.⁷ Let us first consider who the “weaker in faith” person may be. It is very likely that neither party in a disputable matter feels they are the weaker in faith. In reality, each of us may fit that description at varying times in our life or as it relates to various issues. If we each lovingly esteem others, many heartaches and divisions are prevented no matter who the weaker in faith may be. We are taught to “*bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*”⁸ When we “*look not at our own things, but every man also on the things of others,*”⁹ we will be sensitive and tender to receive the other brother or sister with whom we have a difference. This is not to say we will agree and come to the same conclusion on the matter. Neither is it to say that we throw up our hands and tolerate anything and everything. However, it does equip our hearts to love and esteem each other in the way Christ would desire. Hence we find the solution when we follow the above Scriptures.

Let us also consider what it means to “receive” as instructed in Romans 14:1. Another word for this is to accept. Is our heart in a position to accept our fellow believer as our brother or sister in the faith even while they may have different convictions in some areas? This is certainly not to say we should compromise sound doctrine. Nor is acceptance the same as approval. But we should consider the example of Jesus. He modeled acceptance in John 13 as He washed the dust of denial and betrayal from the feet of His disciples knowing they would all forsake Him. Even with that knowledge, He still demonstrated the perfect picture of “accept” in serving and love. Is this picture a reflection of the way we treat, esteem, look at, talk to, or talk about those believers who have differences in lifestyle or conviction than us? Let us receive them in the biblical sense of this word.

The final condition in resolving a disputable matter is to seek peace. Scripture clearly teaches us to “*follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.*”¹⁰ Are we willing to put peace with our brother or sister above our passion in a disputable matter? When we overemphasize the importance of issues that vary among the brethren, it only spreads the seeds of discord. The enemy wants to use differences among us to wedge apart and divide us. Satan is well aware that it is possible to take very minor issues and turn them into some major mountain that splits apart the unity of the brotherhood. Paul states that “*the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty.*”¹¹ This means our enemy deceives by very sneaky means. In using disputable matters to divide the flock, the devil craftily uses minor differences to win major victories against the kingdom of God.

Imagine a flock of sheep dividing and biting each other because of petty preferences in the texture and color of the grass they prefer. How much more difficult is it for the shepherds to keep the sheep together and protected from wolves? Paul exhorts us to “*endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*”¹² Endeavor is an action word. It takes effort, energy, and perseverance. When we mix sincere love of the brotherhood with this endeavoring, it has the power to pull out any roots of bitterness that may be growing in our hearts. Jesus instructs us that when we love each other as He loves us, the world will identify us as His followers.¹³ When we divide and argue disputable matters, just what does the world see in the church? Are we not shining personal flashlights in each other’s eyes and compromising our born again witness while there are millions of souls stumbling in darkness and needing the light of Christ’s truth and love and grace?

In conclusion, there are three conditions laid out in Scripture to deal with disputable matters among believers: examining our own heart, receiving each other in love, and seeking peace. Although Satan works hard to sow discord and bitterness in the church, if we are willing to pursue these three virtues, it disarms him of many of his fiery darts. Each sheep in the flock of God is special to the Shepherd. He designed us, guides us, leads us, and uses us each in a very personal and unique way. Even though all the sheep have the same Shepherd, yet this Shepherd is intimate with each of us and desires all of his sheep to be at peace with each other and Him.

(Footnotes)

¹ John 13:34-35

² Phil 2:3

³ Luke 6:41-42

⁴ Rom. 14:5

⁵ 1 Cor. 10:23

⁶ Luke 6:41-42

⁷ Rom. 14:1

⁸ Rom. 15:1-2

⁹ Phil. 2:4

¹⁰ Heb. 12:14

¹¹ 2 Cor. 11:3

¹² Eph. 4:3

¹³ John 13:34-35

Romans 14 (Part 3) – Biblical Unity

Editor’s note: this month concludes a three-part series of teachings from Romans 14.

Theme verse: *“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”*¹

In the previous two parts of our discussion on Romans 14, we considered how true Christian love helps us with the differences of conscience that exist between believers. This final article concludes the topic with a discussion on Biblical unity in Christ’s body, the Church. As a quick review from the previous articles, indisputable matters are those specifically addressed in the Word. In the New Testament, these are the timeless and fundamental truths taught by Jesus and the Apostles, and as such are conditions for entering into His heavenly kingdom. Disputable matters are our own preferences, priorities, opinions, and personal convictions. By their very nature, no one should give a pat list of specific examples of disputable matters that apply to all of us. Even if they differ from our own, they are not necessarily wrong, however strongly we might feel about them.

In spite of these seemingly difficult issues, the Church is called to unity as evidenced by Christ’s prayer, *“that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me”*². Thus church unity is found in the love and mind of Christ—the very Word of Truth. The proper understanding of biblical truth will align our faith and our lifestyles in disputable and indisputable matters. By doing this, we will be examples to the world, *“...that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.”*³

In order to achieve this level of biblical unity, we of the kingdom of God. Paul addresses this by first telling us what the kingdom of God is not—it is not *“meat and drink”*.⁴ That is, it is not preferences and individual persuasions of disputable matters. Rather, *“the kingdom of God is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.”* Similar to meat and drink, disputable matters often depend on individual taste and are subject to the passage of time. On the other hand, righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit have no shelf life—they are key components of God’s eternal kingdom. May our *“hearts be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.”*⁵ In the simplest of terms, we should *“Let brotherly love continue.”*⁶

The New Testament is centered on *“grace and truth...by Jesus Christ”*⁷ with discernment enabled by the Holy Spirit; *“Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.”*⁸ Brotherly love will not take undue personal liberty or impose personal persuasions on a fellow believer. Both of these can lead to self-willed variance within the church family, or worse be a stumbling block for our brother or sister.

In the book of Revelation, Christ gives us valuable insight into how mishandling a disputable matter can become an obstacle for believers. *“But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.”*⁹ At first, the eating of things sacrificed unto idols might appear to be as equally serious a sin as fornication in this scripture. However, when we consider *“all the counsel of God,”*¹⁰ we see there is a clear difference between the two.

We know that the sin of fornication is an indisputable matter as commanded consistently in many different scriptures.¹¹ The early church first dealt with the eating of meats offered to idols during the Jerusalem council.¹² Later, the Apostle Paul gave the Corinthians some instructive details behind the directive of the church some years before. Here he acknowledges that the act of eating meat offered to an

idol is not a sin if one has a strong faith in the knowledge that there is but one true God and that the idol is nothing but a meaningless object. However, not everyone has such a strong faith, and for them the same act could become a sin. Further, if by taking this liberty one would knowingly offend (create enticement or occasion leading to sin) their brother or sister, both are sinning, *“And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.”* We see then that the willful casting of the stumbling block was the sin of Balaam that Christ was warning us against and not the disputable act of eating meats offered to an idol. The Apostle Paul then summed up the matter beautifully, *“Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.”*¹³

After considering some of the pitfalls of mishandling disputable matters, one might well ask, How can I properly handle these matters and thus promote biblical unity within the church? Love would have to come at the top of such a list. Peter instructs us that fervent charity *“shall cover the multitude of sins.”*¹⁴ The church at Corinth fell into the dangerous trap of *“comparing themselves among themselves.”*¹⁵ By copying certain individuals and ignoring others, they created much disunity.¹⁶ To counter this, Paul instructed them to examine themselves in the light of the Word.¹⁷ If we examine one another we are likely to create disunity, but if we examine ourselves in the light of Christ we will increase unity. James condenses great wisdom into one verse, *“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”*¹⁸ Being humble enough to confess we are not always right, displaying genuine openness with one another, and sincerely praying for others—including those with whom we differ—will greatly enhance biblical unity.

There is actually a wonderful purpose in resolving disputable matters. The Apostle John asked a question, *“he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”*¹⁹ Biblical handling of disputable matters not only increases unity, it demonstrates brotherly love, bringing glory to God; *“And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.”*²⁰

(Footnotes)

¹ Psalms 133:1

² John 17:21

³ John 17:23

⁴ Rom. 14:17-18

⁵ Heb. 13:9

⁶ Heb. 13:1

⁷ John 1:17

⁸ 1 Cor. 2:13

⁹ Rev. 2:14

¹⁰ Acts 20:27

¹¹ Rom. 1:29; 1 Cor. 6:14; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:13

¹² Acts 15:29

¹³ 1 Cor. 8:4-13; 10:32

¹⁴ 1 Pet. 4:8

¹⁵ 2 Cor. 10:12

¹⁶ 1 Cor. 1:12-13

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 13:5

¹⁸ James 5:16

¹⁹ 1 John 4:20

²⁰ 1 John 4:21

Expressing Gratitude to God (Part 1)

Editor's note: this month begins a two-part series on Expressing Gratitude

*"In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."*¹

Throughout the Bible, God desires to show us what He wants us to do and what pleases Him. In a world where there is often murmuring, complaining, and discontentment, God's people are taught to give thanks in every situation of life. A definition of giving is, to transmit from oneself to another by hand, speech or writing. This is an active step in our lives that reflects our heart's purpose. We are His workmanship and all that we have is a gift from our Heavenly Father. The Word teaches that we are to give cheerfully.² In contrast, we see the account of the rich young ruler whose heart's purpose was to do things for his own benefit. When given the chance to give to others in need, he went away very sorrowful: for he was very rich.³

Paul reminds us that we should be, "... *giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"⁴ Thanks is an expression of gratitude, or an acknowledgment made to express a sense of favor or kindness received. Our Heavenly Father desires to give good gifts to His children,⁵ and we have an abundance of reasons to be thankful for all that He has done. Are our hearts full of thanksgiving and gratitude?

*"Many, O LORD my God, are thy wonderful works which thou hast done, and thy thoughts which are to usward: they cannot be reckoned up in order unto thee: if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered."*⁶ Take some time today and write down examples of God's favor in your life for which you are thankful.

Our first thought of thanksgiving goes to His unspeakable gift of Jesus. We who were sinners that had gone astray, now by grace through faith in the atoning blood of our Savior Jesus Christ,⁷ can have a living hope of eternal life. It is hard to comprehend, that we who were unjust, our own righteousness as filthy rags, could be reconciled to a just and holy God. Thanks be to God who, "... *hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.*"⁸ Like the man who found the hidden treasure, the precious pearl of salvation, we can express the joy of salvation through thanksgiving, forsaking all to obtain eternal life.⁹ Like the man on Solomon's porch, we can go on our way, "... *walking and leaping and praising God.*"¹⁰

And yet, that is not all. Our Father in heaven blesses us exceedingly with all that we have need of, for body and soul. "*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*"¹¹ God is faithful. Throughout scripture, we read examples of God giving gifts to those in need. From Daniel, who was given wisdom and might;¹² to Solomon who was given wisdom, riches, and honor;¹³ and continuing to the examples in the New Testament of those who received sight, the ability to walk, and cleansing from leprosy; we see God's continual showering of blessings on those who were in need.

*"Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforesaid."*¹⁴ Daniel's life example was of thanksgiving to God, even though he knew that there would be challenges ahead. And in those challenges, God continued to provide for Daniel.

Do our lives have a pattern of thankfulness? Do we express our thanks to God in prayer? Do we have a melody in our heart to the Lord? Do we have a favorite psalm or hymn that we sing throughout the day that expresses the thanks in our hearts? There are so many wonderful psalms that were penned over the years that can be a help to us. What a precious promise we read in the 84th Psalm, “...*the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.*”¹⁵

“*What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?*”¹⁶ It is humbling that the creator of Heaven and earth is mindful of man and cares about his daily needs. “*I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.*”¹⁷ God continues to provide for our physical needs, but we are also reminded that, “*my grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.*”¹⁸ God also provides daily, to the humble of heart, those things that are necessary for our spiritual being.

We are encouraged by the example of Paul when he was on the stormy sea, “... *he took bread, and gave thanks to God in presence of them all: and when he had broken it, he began to eat.*”¹⁹ He was thankful in every situation of life. Like Paul, no matter how difficult the test, we can gratefully believe that “*our sufficiency is of God*”.²⁰

(Footnotes)

1 1 Thess. 5:18

2 2 Cor. 9:7

3 Luke 18:23

4 Eph. 5:20

5 Matt. 7:11

6 Ps. 40:5

7 Eph. 2:8

8 Col. 1:12

9 Matt. 13:44-46

10 Acts 3:8

11 Jas. 1:17

12 Dan. 2:23

13 1 Kings 3:12-13

14 Dan. 6:10

15 Ps. 84:11

16 Ps. 8:4

17 Ps. 37:25

18 2 Cor. 12:9

19 Acts 27:35

20 2 Cor. 3:5

Expressing Gratitude to Others (Part 2)

Editor's note: this month concludes a two-part series on Expressing Gratitude

*“And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.”*¹

“Now what do you tell them?” Perhaps all of us have witnessed a parent's hint to their small child upon receiving a gift. Certainly, expressing gratitude to others is a basic principle most of us learn from our youth up. Indeed, when any of us goes to the effort of doing something for someone else we like to hear a heartfelt expression of gratitude and if this is omitted we usually feel a little let down. Quite possibly, we all tell someone “thank-you” nearly every day. Some of this might be for rather ordinary things such as someone holding a door for us. However, it is also important to recognize when someone assists us in a spiritual way. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul enthusiastically expressed his gratitude to a wide variety of individuals who ministered both to his needs and to those of the church. Paul mentions many of them specifically in his epistles: Phebe, Aquila and Priscilla, Onesiphorus, and a host of others too many to enumerate.² Paul openly complimented them, which surely strengthened the bonds between them. They not only helped Paul in his physical needs, but they greatly assisted him in the furtherance of the gospel message of salvation— sometimes putting their own lives at risk to do so.

Many scriptures concentrate specifically on giving thanks to God and His Son for His many blessings, but examples also abound of individuals showing gratitude to others. Ruth was humbly thankful to Boaz for his benevolence to her and Naomi.³ The Israelites spared Jonathan's life in recognition of his miraculous victory over the garrison of Philistines.⁴ Later, when David had replaced Saul as king, he sought to repay Saul's family for the sake of his son Jonathan's faithfulness and self-sacrificing friendship.⁵ The scriptures instruct us to be thankful not only to God, but also to one another, *“In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.”*⁶ Expressing gratitude to others is a part of fulfilling the higher principle of loving our neighbor as ourselves. *“And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.”*⁷ Our expression of gratitude to others not only makes them feel loved and appreciated, it glorifies God.

One of the more instructive examples in the New Testament is that of the ten lepers whom Christ healed. From this account we learn that it is one thing to have the feeling of thankfulness and quite another to make the effort to express it. Our Saviour evidently was disappointed when only one of the ten lepers returned to give Him thanks for being cleansed, *“And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger.”*⁸ We do not read that the other lepers were completely unthankful, but we do know that they did not make the effort to tell Him. The lost opportunity for the glorification of God is what disappointed Jesus, not His own hurt feelings.

The Samaritan's sincere gratitude glorified God as an illustration of the grace and mercy of the New Testament age. Jesus had given the ten lepers specific instruction to go show themselves to the priest in fulfillment of the old law regarding leprosy. All ten obediently turned to do this, and as they went, all of them realized that they were cleansed of this dread disease. However, only one turned around and returned to give thanks, honor, and glory to his Savior for His merciful compassion that far exceeded the power of the law. Small wonder that Jesus responded, *“... Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole.”*⁹ The prophetic words in one of the psalms of Asaph are also applicable, *“Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that ordereth his conversation (course of life) aright will I shew the salvation of God.”*¹⁰

We might expect that showing gratitude comes naturally and is always a pleasant and easy experience. However, before being succeeded by David, King Saul spent years chasing David and his followers through the wilderness while repeatedly trying to kill him. During this time, David experienced two opportunities to slay Saul with little danger to himself. However, David refused to “*stretch forth (his) hand against... the anointed of the LORD.*”¹¹ Later, after Saul died in battle with the Philistines and David became king, he rewarded those men of Jabeshgilead who retrieved the bodies of Saul and his sons from the Philistines and buried them. Like the Samaritan leper, David also fulfilled a New Testament teaching of Christ: “*But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.*”¹²

In the face of so many examples of thankfulness, the Word also warns us of the dangers of being unthankful. To do so exhibits pride rather than humility and robs God of His due glory, “*Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.*”¹³ As an illustration, David treated Nabal’s servants and his property with respect. Nabal’s servants realized this and were thankful for it; “*But the men were very good unto us, and we were not hurt, neither missed we any thing, as long as we were conversant (walking) with them, when we were in the fields: They were a wall unto us both by night and day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep.*”¹⁴ When David’s men asked a favor in return, their master Nabal not only refused them, but also treated them with contempt.¹⁵ Nabal’s ingratitude and churlish behavior ultimately cost him his life.

Clearly, there are many blessings in a sincere expression of gratitude. Most importantly, it glorifies God and His Son. It may sound a little redundant, but people truly appreciate gratitude. It strengthens our relationships within the church, our families and our friendships. We edify the body of Christ when we appropriately express appreciation to someone for their demonstration of faith and love: “*We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth.*”¹⁶

(Footnotes)

¹ Col. 3:15

² Rom. 16:1-4; 2 Tim. 1:16-18

³ Ruth 2:10

⁴ 1 Sam. 14:45

⁵ 2 Sam. 9:1

⁶ 1 Thess. 5:18

⁷ 1 John 4:21

⁸ Luke 17:17-18

⁹ Luke 17:19

¹⁰ Psalms 50:23

¹¹ 1 Sam. 24:6

¹² Matt. 5:44

¹³ Rom. 1:21

¹⁴ 1 Sam. 25:15-16

¹⁵ 1 Sam. 25:10

¹⁶ 2 Thess. 1:3

Love One Another: The Great Commandment

Editor's Note: The Bible uses the term "one another" multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In 2018, we will look at several of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

Theme verse: "*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*"¹

Most of us are familiar with the second greatest commandment that Jesus and the Apostles taught us, "*Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*"² This familiar scripture is quoted directly from an Old Testament passage³; however, in the New Testament Jesus raises His expectation of our degree of love with His commandment: "*A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.*" Jesus demonstrated His love towards us by His tremendous sacrifice on the cross in our stead. By this we understand that our Lord expects us to not only love one another as ourselves, but also to achieve the higher plane of a sacrificial love. Sacrificial love, is a form of charity, and is defined in more detail in the familiar Love chapter, "*Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil.*"⁴ This level of love "never fails." It is to be unconditional and enduring regardless of the circumstances around us.

The Bible contains many relevant examples of the application of this level of love. Joseph was able to freely forgive his brothers under what were nearly incomprehensible circumstances. Though having been terribly mistreated by his brothers for years, he freely forgave them even when it was finally within his power to punish them. "*Moreover he kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them: and after that his brethren talked with him.*"⁵

Moses truly loved the people of Israel and made many sacrifices on their behalf during their journey through the wilderness of Sinai. One of the more notable occurred when he interceded for the people after they sinned by convincing Aaron to make the golden calf. God had told Moses that He would destroy the people and make a great nation of Moses' seed. Moses' humble and sincere intercession touched the heart of God; "*And Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, LORD, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand? Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin--; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.*"⁶

Jonathan, the son of King Saul, was a wonderful example of sacrificial love. When David killed Goliath, Jonathan could easily have been envious of the attention given David. Instead, his nobility and self-sacrificing friendship were revealed, "*Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle.*"⁷ Later, when he knew that David was to be made king instead of him, Jonathan was willing to put his own ambitions aside and even risked his own life to intercede for that of David's.⁸

Jesus' account of the Good Samaritan illustrates several principles of love. For one thing, the injured man was a Jew, and as a Samaritan he could easily have felt some level of prejudice against the other man since the "*Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.*"⁹ Nevertheless, he had compassion on the unfortunate man and went to great effort and expense to help him. "*And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence (two days wages), and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest*

*more, when I come again, I will repay thee.”*¹⁰ Very likely the Good Samaritan was aware of the ill feelings between his people and the Jews, and he very likely had his own activities planned out for the day. However, in this instance he avoided judgment of his fellow man, exhibited humility and esteemed others higher than himself. By so doing, he fulfilled several precepts of love, *“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.”*¹¹

Mary, the sister of Lazarus, loved her Savior dearly. She was willing to undergo great financial sacrifice to show this love even in the face of public criticism: *“Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment. Then saith one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, which should betray him, Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor? This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein. Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this. For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always.”*¹² Giving financially to one another when an opportunity arises is another way we can show sincere love to one another.

Showing love to one another provides many benefits to the church family. Showing love demonstrates a true conversion, *“We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.”*¹³ Some other examples follow. Loving one another enough to admonish them, though difficult, not only brings the *“peaceable fruit unto righteousness,”*¹⁴ but it will increase love in the end: *“rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee.”*¹⁵ Fervent love enables the church to flourish and retain its purity, *“And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.”*¹⁶ Then our love one to another will show to the world that we are followers of Jesus, *“By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”*¹⁷ This will in turn fulfill the desire of Christ *“that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”*¹⁸

Christian love is the peak of spiritual growth as described by the Apostle Peter: *“And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*¹⁹

(Footnotes): ¹ John 13:35

² Mark 12:31

³ Lev. 19:18

⁴ 1 Cor. 13:4-5

⁵ Gen. 45:15

⁶ Exod. 32:11, 32

⁷ 1 Sam. 18:3-4

⁸ 1 Sam. 20:27-34

⁹ John 4:9

¹⁰ Luke 10:34-35

¹¹ Phil. 2:3

¹² John 12:3-8

¹³ 1 John 3:14

¹⁴ Heb. 12:11

¹⁵ Prov. 9:8

¹⁶ 1 Peter 4:8

¹⁷ John 13:35

¹⁸ John 17:21

¹⁹ 2 Peter 1:5-8

Consider One Another

Editor's Note: The Bible uses the term "one another" multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In 2018, we will look at several of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

Theme verse: "*And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works.*"¹

It may be common when reading this verse in Hebrews to focus one's attention on the act of provoking one another to love and good works. However, if we hope to be successful in *provoking* our brother to love and good works, it is essential that we exercise the prerequisite, "consider one another." In this context, "consider" means to "observe fully." It could also be translated that we should behold, discover, or perceive one another more deeply. In short, it means we should truly learn to know one another, if we hope to help one another become more fruitful.

How can we learn to know one another more deeply? Is it even a worthy goal to learn to know someone more fully? Jesus said, "*A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*"² Loving one another as Jesus has loved us is an impossible human task. It is made easier if we can learn to know one another deeply.

Shared experiences are one way in which people learn to know one another better. Whether co-worker, teammate, cancer survivor, or soldier, each can identify with and know others who have shared the same experiences. In particular, those who have suffered together as soldiers in wartime form bonds that are not lightly broken. Some of those bonds are further strengthened through personal sacrifice on behalf of a fellow soldier. In a different way, sacrifice is an element of the bond between parent and child, but it is augmented by a connection that transcends the physical, and goes deeper than mere shared experiences. Is it possible that we could foster similar bonds in the church family?

Birth

If we, by faith, are born again, we can experience the bond between spiritual parent and child. We can learn to know God, just as Jesus knew and loved the Father. We can also experience the sibling bond with Jesus. Paul expressed it this way: "*That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death.*"³ Paul did not mean that he desired to know *about* Jesus. He wanted to *know* Jesus. To do that, Paul had surrendered all things to Jesus. He gave up his status as a ruler and lawyer and was willing to work with his hands to earn his living, while laboring "night and day" to bring the gospel to people⁴ who had no knowledge of God. Allowing ourselves to suffer the loss of all things by dying to self and being born again is a necessity if we hope to experience the love of Christ by loving and knowing one another. We can be freed from all of our destructive behaviors and perspectives. By being conformed to the death of Jesus, we can learn to know the power of His resurrection!

Sacrifice

Jesus told His disciples that He knows His sheep and is known of them. And that He knows the Father as the Father knows Him. Even from Old Testament times, God communicated His desire to His people that we would know Him.⁵ Because of that knowledge of the Father, Jesus was willing to lay down His life for the sheep.⁶ Through these few simple phrases, we begin to sense the power of knowing someone. Because Jesus knew the Father, He could trust the Father, not just with a few details of daily

living, but with His very life. When we learn to know Jesus, we can lay down our life for Him, and for His brethren. It is in laying down our life for the brethren that we demonstrate true love.

Shared Experience

Paul encouraged shared experience across many miles of separation. He told the Ephesian church that Tychicus would make all things known to them regarding Paul's affairs and how he was doing⁷. He further encouraged the Thessalonian church to know them which labored among them.⁸ It was the same encouragement to consider, observe, discover, and perceive what kind of people they were. He wanted the church to understand their thinking, to comprehend their motives, and to understand their sacrifice. Such understanding is only possible through the shared foundation of a new birth in Christ, a shared sacrifice of dying to self, and a shared experience of living a life of unashamed faith in Christ.

How can we put this into practice? One possibility is to share in the most difficult moments that our fellow believers face. We are taught to bear one another's burdens.⁹ That may be accomplished by sharing in tragedy. It may be by sharing financially with those who are not as well off as we are. It may be by sharing time in prayer and song. It may be by serving together in some capacity, or even simply spending time with one another.¹⁰

However, to "observe fully" requires that we be willing to be fully observed ourselves. We are called to be transparent with our brothers and sisters in Christ. For them to know us and consider us, means that we must be willing to be known. We must be willing to confess our faults one to another. (*And thereby be healed.*)¹¹ Although it is not human nature to acknowledge weakness and imperfection, the knowledge of Christ can enable us to acknowledge to the Body what the Head already knows. Such transparency communicates trust, and fosters mutual openness, which often leads to a deeper awareness of shared experiences.

If we consider one another, we will learn to know one another deeply. When we know one another deeply, it is not so difficult to love one another deeply. When we love one another deeply, it is not so difficult to sacrifice on behalf of our brother. More importantly, it is not so difficult to refrain from demanding of our brother unreasonably. Finally, it will become second nature to gently provoke unto love and good works—and to gently receive that provoking from the brethren whom we love so profoundly, because they are Christ's, as are we. "*Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed on us.*"¹²

(Footnotes)

¹ Hebrews 10:24

² John 13:34-35

³ Philippians 3:10

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 2:9

⁵ Isaiah 43:5-11

⁶ John 10:14-15

⁷ Ephesians 6:21

⁸ 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

⁹ Galatians 6:2

¹⁰ 1 John 3:17, James 2:16

¹¹ James 5:16

¹² 1 John 3:1

Esteeming One Another

Editor's Note: The Bible uses the term "one another" multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In 2018, we will look at several of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

Theme verse: *"In lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves."*¹

The word esteem means, to set a value on, whether high or low; to estimate. That definition reminds us of a couple of different but complementary thoughts. First, it reminds us that this is our own determination of someone's or something's value—it isn't necessarily the correct value, but rather our perspective. We can understand this when we go to a garage sale. As we walk around, looking at the different items, there are price tags on them. The owner has set what they have perceived as the value of the item. We put our own value on them, and if there is similarity, we make a purchase. If not, we pass on by and go look at the next item. Often, there is no discussion with the owner or effort made to learn more about the value. When we do, we often get a better perspective about the value that has been placed on it. However, too often, we just walk on right by and potentially miss an "opportunity."

Second, we are reminded that it is an estimation. We may never know the true or complete value of the object or individual. Have we ever experienced that in our own lives? This can happen not only when we are perusing items at a garage sale, but also when it involves other people. We often are so busy that we don't really know their situation, their joys, their talents, their struggles. We often only see "one side" of someone and miss an opportunity to help or be helped on our Christian walk.

Who can help us see the true value of an item or an individual? We read in St. John, *"All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made."*² As our Creator, He knows the *"downsitting and uprising"* of all men³ and if we ask Him in prayer, we will receive all that we need to have the right view of others.⁴ Throughout the Bible we read of the value that God placed on each individual, no matter what their background. He loved us so much, that He desired that not one would perish, but that all would come to eternal life.⁵ And He translated that desire into action by sending His only begotten Son here to the earth to shed His blood that all through faith in the atoning Blood of Jesus Christ would be saved.

Esteeming someone higher than ourselves is first placing the same value on them as God does, which then spurs us to action to help them (by God's grace) in their need. How does this manifest itself in our lives? What examples do we have in Scripture?

The best example is Jesus. We are reminded that He left the glories of Heaven, to take upon Himself the robe of flesh, be tempted and tried in all ways common to men, to shed His blood on the cross, for our salvation. Eternal life – the ultimate gift, purchased at the ultimate price, His life. Now, think of the times where we may have been presented with a situation, where we were asked to "get out of our comfort zone" so that we could help someone else. What is our first reaction? Do we complain? Do we look for a way out? How does that compare to what Christ did for us?

In the Bible, we see how Jesus valued others differently than how the disciples and others around Him did. What examples come to mind? In each situation, Christ saw those in need, reached out to them and provided their need. We see this in the little children who wanted to come to see Jesus, the ten lepers, the woman caught in adultery, the criminal on the cross, the Samaritan woman, and many more cases, where men would have looked the other way, and yet the Master saw their worth, stopped what He was doing, and thereby transformed lives.⁶

We see this also in the lives of other faithful men and women in the Bible. From Daniel to Mary to Paul and others, we are encouraged to use Christ's perspective in esteeming others, in all situations. Take some time today to review these examples and how the preparation of their lives helped their spiritual vision and enabled their ability to help one another.⁷ At the same time, look over the last week and do some self-examination of your own Christian journey.

We all have experienced the challenges of life, and yet God still asks us to have the same care for all. The account of Joseph and his brothers – the same brothers who sold him into Egypt, gives an example of what to do when we have been wronged. Years after selling Joseph into slavery, they came back to him, looking for food and help. He didn't seek his own vengeance, but was submissive to God's perfect plan, "*God did send me before you to preserve life.*"⁸ He esteemed the teachings of God to be right and more important than his own will or feelings.⁹

We are reminded in God's Word to esteem the position of those in authority.¹⁰ The prophet Samuel recounts the time when Saul had been seeking David to harm him, and came into a cave. David and his men were in hiding and had a clear opportunity to turn the tables on Saul. However, David esteemed the position of the King of Israel, as "*anointed of the Lord,*" and would not harm Saul.¹¹ The Apostle Paul had a similar experience when he was speaking to the high priest. He had originally rebuked the man, but when he found out that he held the position of high priest apologized for his actions, as he was not to "*speak evil of the ruler of thy people.*"¹²

Each of us has been blessed by a God who looked down on us and saw our need. As we are on our own road to Jericho, let's think of the story of the Good Samaritan¹³. Which individual do we most reflect? Do we likewise pass by the one in need or do we esteem them? May we have the mind of Christ to see people and situations as He did and to help them.

(Footnotes)

¹ Philippians 2:3

² John 1:3

³ Psalms 139:2

⁴ Matthew 21:22

⁵ John 3:16

⁶ Luke 18:16, 17:12, John 8:3,
Luke 23:43, John 4:7

⁷ Romans 12:10

⁸ Genesis 45:5

⁹ Psalms 119:128

¹⁰ Jude 8, Ecclesiastes 10:20

¹¹ 1 Samuel 24

¹² Acts 23:5

¹³ Luke 10:30-35

Forgive One Another

Editor's Note: The Bible uses the term "one another" multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In 2018, we will look at several of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

Theme verse: *"And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."*¹

To forgive means to pardon or cancel an offense and to treat the offender as not guilty. It can also be viewed as a release of our resentment towards them. Forgiveness is one of the noblest virtues of a true Christian. It requires some level of self-sacrifice on our part as well as sincere love for our neighbor, fulfilling Christ's second commandment. Clearly, forgiveness is needed to follow Christ's commands given in His sermon on the mount. *"Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."*²

Pardoning someone's offense does not mean we condone what they have done, nor does it directly alter their status of being forgiven by God. However, if we choose to withhold forgiveness we hurt ourselves far more than we hurt the other person. Christ makes it abundantly clear in his discourse on prayer that if we desire forgiveness from our Heavenly Father, we must first be willing to forgive others. *"For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*³ Peter boldly suggested that forgiving someone seven times should be quite enough for human endurance, which prompted Jesus' solemn reply, *"I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."*⁴ In other words, our attitude of mercy and forbearance towards one another must be unlimited if we desire the same treatment from our Heavenly Father.

We could easily have the thought, "I will forgive them, but they need to apologize to me first." This is not scriptural as evidenced by two noteworthy examples in the New Testament. First, Christ forgave those who were mistreating and torturing Him during the crucifixion, *"Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots."*⁵ He knew they did not realize the magnitude of what they were doing, and His love for them was so great that He did not hold his oppressors accountable for their act. Second, Stephen forgave his murderers under similar circumstances as he was dying while being unjustly stoned for rightfully rebuking the unbelief of the Jewish council. *"And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep."*⁶ Both Christ and Stephen freely forgave the men who were in the act of doing grievous wrongs against them. Undoubtedly in both cases those perpetrating the sin did not express sorrow or remorse at that time.

Forgiveness is neither easy nor natural, particularly when the hurt is very deep. Having a sincere love for others and fervently praying for one another will have eternal impact for all concerned. *"And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins."*⁷

For us to not have resentment over an old hurt does not require us to forget all about it. “Forgive and forget” is familiar advice, but it is not humanly possible to purposely forget something. However, if we forgive someone and we recall the hurt later on, we must choose to focus on the healing that has occurred and not allow bitterness and resentment to rise up every time we think of it. In a natural sense, when we observe an old scar we have the choice of remembering the pain of an old wound, or we can concentrate on the miraculous ability of the body to heal itself. Through forgiveness, we choose to not let the memory dominate our thoughts or define our relationship with the individual, enabled by God’s grace.

An example of such a mistake occurred when Shimei sinned greatly against King David by cursing him and throwing stones and dust at him when David’s son Absalom drove him out of Jerusalem. David freely forgave Shimei when he humbly asked for his forgiveness. *“And Shimei the son of Gera fell down before the king, as he was come over Jordan; And said unto the king, Let not my lord impute iniquity unto me, neither do thou remember that which thy servant did perversely the day that my lord the king went out of Jerusalem, that the king should take it to his heart. For thy servant doth know that I have sinned...But Abishai the son of Zeruiah answered and said, Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the LORD’S anointed? ...Therefore the king said unto Shimei, Thou shalt not die. And the king sware unto him.”*⁸

Some eight years later, David evidently still harbored a good deal of resentment over Shimei’s offence as revealed by his advice to his son Solomon upon his succession to the throne. *“And, behold, thou hast with thee Shimei the son of Gera...which cursed me with a grievous curse in the day when I went to Mahanaim: but he came down to meet me at Jordan, and I sware to him by the LORD, saying, I will not put thee to death with the sword. Now therefore hold him not guiltless: for thou art a wise man, and knowest what thou oughtest to do unto him; but his hoar head bring thou down to the grave with blood.”*⁹

Christian forgiveness does not mean we totally forget, but it does require that we remember graciously—without anger, bitterness, and resentment—seeking to follow Paul’s encouragement in our theme verse. May we treat the faults of others as God treats ours, *“For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.”*¹⁰

(Footnotes)

¹ Ephesians 4:32

² Matthew 5:43-45

³ Matthew 6:14-15

⁴ Matthew 18:22

⁵ Luke 23:34

⁶ Acts 7:59-60

⁷ James 5:15-16, 19-20

⁸ 2 Samuel 19:18b-23

⁹ 1 Kings 2:8-9

¹⁰ Hebrews 8:12

Exhorting One Another to Love and Good Works

Editor's Note: The Bible uses the term "one another" multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In 2018, we will look at several of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

Theme verse: *"And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."*¹

Reflecting on the cumulative effect of "*so much the more as ye see the day approaching,*" such a continual increase over nearly 2000 years should give us pause to consider whether we are sufficiently exhorting and provoking one another in love today. In a previous article, we learned that to "consider one another" is to learn to know and understand one another. One purpose of this deeper awareness of one another is to be better able to nudge one another to love and good works by knowing the heart of our brother.

Why should we provoke one another to love and good works? The simple answer is because God is love and desires His children to love.^{2,3} And because He has created us for the purpose⁴ of doing good to others. These things are the very reason for our existence and the fruit of regeneration. However, they easily take a back seat to our human nature if we neglect to prioritize the spirit over the flesh. With gentle encouragement from our brothers and sisters, we are called to set our affections on things that are above.⁵

This may look quite different to believers in various situations. Let's consider the different ways in which our station in life may impact the kind of exhortation we need and our ability to see the need of our brother.

A brother who lacks material wealth may face temptations that a brother with sufficiency does not face. He may feel the need to work rather than assemble with other believers. He may resent his wealthier brothers and struggle to love them. Even if he does not resent his wealthier brethren, he may be embarrassed by his poverty and avoid fellowship with them. Although he probably does not struggle very much with the temptation to spend idle time in costly entertainments, material poverty can bring discouragement so strong that one's faith in the Lord is diminished.

A brother who lives in a land that persecutes believers may appear to have similar challenges. However, they may be quite different. A persecuted brother may find it risky to assemble with other believers—not knowing if the authorities will raid the meeting. He may be tempted to avoid calling any attention to himself whatsoever and thereby miss opportunities to show love to others. This might all be made more difficult by his love for his family and desire to shelter them from persecution. It may be very hard to love his enemies because of their open hatred for believers. Such challenges can leave a believer wondering "Where is God?"—and faith can wither if one is not encouraged by others.

A new believer just learning the Word may neglect assembling with the saints purely from a lack of awareness. She may not understand the profound calling to love and good works. She may absorb false doctrines that appears to be good Christian teaching that she found online or in a book. Perhaps through hurtful experiences in the past she believes that her relationship is with Christ and not with the church and thus feels no need for fellowship. Actively nurturing new believers and encouraging them is a wonderful way to fulfill our calling to feed Christ's lambs⁶ and prevent a slow disconnect from fellowship.

A mature believer who has been prosperous in the things of this life may face completely different obstacles to love, good works, and fellowship. We read that the cares and riches of this life can

spring up and render such a one unfruitful.⁷ The sense of success may inspire a false sense of importance and one can believe that he does not need other believers. The ability to afford costly entertainments brings temptations that poorer brethren never face because they don't have that option. The duties of a successful job may seem more important than opportunities to serve others and love wanes as self-centeredness grows. Such carnal success can diminish one's perceived need for the Lord causing faith to lose out to self-confidence.

To avoid such disastrous results, we are firmly taught to "*Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end.*"⁸ He articulates clearly why we need this frequent mutual encouragement, reminding us that we are made partakers of Christ if we continue in faith until the end.

Can exhorting one another and provoking one another to love and good works really keep us from being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and falling slowly into the grip of unbelief? Yes! Similar to the way that the foolishness of preaching is God's way to share the good news of salvation, the simplicity of fellowship in the Spirit perpetuates saving faith in those who believe. In neither case should we be haranguing others, but rather gently sharing the encouragement and truth found in the Word of God. To exhort is to gently implore. It is a nudge, not a shove—an invitation, not a demand.

Whatever our station in life, we have need of each other—and others need us. Your gentle encouragement is needed in the church. Your presence is needed in the church. Your spirit will be strengthened and enlivened when you strengthen and encourage others. Love and good works foster more love and subsequent good works. Carried out in the love of Jesus, those who are born again can exhort one another to grow in grace⁹ and faith until the end. And so much the more as we see the day approaching.

*"Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables."*¹⁰

(Footnotes)

¹ Hebrews 10:24-25

² 1 John 4:16

³ 1 John 4:21

⁴ Ephesians 2:10

⁵ Colossians 3:2

⁶ John 21:15

⁷ Mark 4:19, Luke 8:14

⁸ Hebrews 3:12-14

⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:21

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 4:2-4

Bear One Another's Burdens

Editor's Note: The Bible uses the term "one another" multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In 2018, we will look at several of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

*Theme verse: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."*¹

At some time in our life we will face the necessity of bearing some type of burden ourselves, and we will have the opportunity to help someone else bear one of theirs. Burdens are defined in Webster's 1828 dictionary as that which is borne with labor or difficulty; that which is grievous, wearisome or oppressive. We usually have little or no choice in the burdens we carry, and they come upon believers and nonbelievers alike. They may be related to physical or mental afflictions, sickness or disease, financial difficulty, relational problems, natural disasters, and the list continues. These burdens can be very personal such as a serious disease or relationship issue, or they can be more corporate in nature such as an entire community that suffers from a natural disaster. In virtually all cases, burdens are much easier when shared. By doing so we are obeying the scripture, "*Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.*"² Using our gifts, abilities, and energy to assist someone in need is akin to loving God "*with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.*"

Even though it is God's desire that we gladly assist one another in bearing our burdens, He does not expect us to provide beyond our means. "*For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not. For I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened: But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality: As it is written, He that had gathered much had nothing over; and he that had gathered little had no lack.*"³ This New Testament scripture refers to the time when God provided manna for the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai. When Moses told the people of God's commandment, their initial obedience and mutual cooperation resulted in a miraculous provision. Later on, the people forgot the miracle behind the manna, and began complaining because they found their diet too monotonous. Their continual murmuring then developed into a burden for Moses, "*And Moses said unto the LORD, Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me?*"⁴ God answered Moses' request by providing seventy elders of the people that "*they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone.*"⁵

Bearing one another's burdens can take many forms. James instructs us to "To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction,"⁶ while Job gave them both food and clothing.⁷ The prophet Isaiah suggests that bearing one another's burdens is the true purpose of fasting and sacrifice: "*Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?*"⁸ Dorcas, "full of good works and almsdeeds,"⁹ made coats and garments for the needy. Jesus relieved the burdens of a wide variety of people, "*The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.*"¹⁰

In the New Testament, the book of Acts contains an interesting example of individuals within the church helping one another. In the early days, the believers were so zealous of doing this that all who owned land or houses sold them, and the money was distributed by the apostles to all who had a need.¹¹ Later, when a great famine was predicted by one of their own prophets, the apostles realized that the land

of Judea would very soon be in need of relief. *“And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.”*¹²

At time, one might surmise that some burdens might come upon others for a valid reason. Perhaps we think they have made some questionable choices that have affected their long-term welfare, and we forgo helping someone for these or similar reasons. We should consider how Jesus answered the lawyer’s question of *“who is my neighbor”* in the familiar account of the Good Samaritan. Bearing in mind the context of other scriptures, it seems probable that the two men had reason to be somewhat prejudiced against each other, *“for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.”*¹³ The Samaritan could easily have justified himself in passing by the unfortunate man just as the priest and the Levite did earlier. Instead, he put aside any selfish motives and simply *“...went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.”*¹⁴

Our motive for relieving others of their burdens should always be that of genuine love. It is not for us to determine their intentions or decide whether we think they deserve it or not. Jesus reminds us that when we bear one another’s burdens out of sincere love, we are doing the same to Him. *“And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”*¹⁵ We look to Christ as the supreme example of bearing our burdens when we certainly did not deserve it, *“Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.”*¹⁶ His desire is to help all of us for our eternal good, *“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*¹⁷

(Footnotes)

¹ Galatians 6:2

² Galatians 6:2

³ 2 Corinthians 8:12-15

⁴ Numbers 11:11

⁵ Numbers 11:17

⁶ James 1:27

⁷ Job 31:15-20

⁸ Isaiah 58:6-7

⁹ Acts 9:36

¹⁰ Matthew 11:5

¹¹ Acts 4:32-37

¹² Acts 11:28-30

¹³ John 4:9

¹⁴ Luke 10:34

¹⁵ Matthew 25:40

¹⁶ Isaiah 53:4

¹⁷ Matthew 11:28-30

Forbear One Another

Editor's Note: The Bible uses the term "one another" multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In 2018, we will look at several of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

Theme verse: *"Walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love."*¹

Jesus calls us to walk in close relationship with Him and each other as *"one body in Christ, and every one members one of another."*² This closeness can bring tremendous strength as our hearts are *"knit together in love."*³ Ironically, the more closely we walk together, the more directly we are exposed to each other's faults and weaknesses. Even in our best efforts, we will at times be hurt or disappointed by each other, or simply feel frustrated and annoyed with one another. It is in these moments that Christ calls us to forbear one another in love.

To forbear literally means to bear up against or hold back. When we forbear one another, we hold back our natural reaction to each other's faults. We bear up against our tendencies to seek vengeance when wronged or respond harshly when annoyed. In simple terms, to forbear one another is to put up with one another. We are called to tolerate each other's personality weaknesses and make allowance for each other's faults.

Forbearance by definition does not come naturally to most of us. How can we grow in our ability to forbear one another? In our theme verse, Paul encouraged the Ephesians to first put on lowliness, meekness, and longsuffering.⁴ He wrote very similar encouragement to the Colossians, with these same virtues in exactly the same order: *"Put on therefore, as the elect of God...humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another."*⁵ These attributes of the heart and mind—humility, meekness, and long-suffering—prepare us to forbear one another in love.

In the next verse, Paul adds: *"And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness."*⁶ Our mutual love for Christ and His body binds us together, motivating us to forbear one another as we endeavor *"to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."*⁷ Christ entreats us as His elect to forbear one another in love, whether in our marriages, families, friendships, or church family, that he might bless our relationships with unity and peace. When we fulfill these scriptures, our relationships become a witness to the world and bring glory to our Lord. *"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if you have love one to another."*⁸

If we struggle to consistently forbear one another, we are not alone. We find many examples in the scripture of Christ's followers struggling to put up with one another or make allowance for each other's faults. We can take comfort and example from Jesus' responses as he patiently bore with them in love, even as he forbears us in love.

In Jesus' interaction with Mary and Martha, we see both the challenge and blessing of forbearance among family and friends. Like each of us, Mary and Martha had *"gifts differing according to the grace that is given"*⁹ unto them. Both were loved equally by Jesus, yet their differences sometimes created tension between the two siblings. During one of Jesus' visits, Mary *"sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me alone to serve?"*¹⁰ Jesus responded to Martha's weak moment with gentleness and truth. He helped her to recognize her own nature and esteem Mary's gifts, and thus established a beautiful example of how to forbear one another in love.

As we observe Jesus' disciples, we see how our response to each other's faults can either drive us apart or bind us together. James and John came to Jesus and requested the most honorable place in His kingdom. *"When the ten heard it, they began to be much displeased"*¹¹ and struggled to bear up against their own impulsive reaction of indignation. On this and other occasions, rather than putting on humility and meekness, they *"disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest."*¹² Each time, Jesus showed forbearance to their weakness, gently but firmly correcting them and reminding them that *"if any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all."*¹³

Jesus' actions teach us to forbear one another while at the same time maintaining accountability and helping each other grow. The church at Ephesus carried out this teaching when a fervent minister named Apollos came on the scene. Apollos spoke eloquently but was missing vital elements of the full doctrine of Christ. The Ephesian believers could have discredited his preaching and written him off as an inadequate preacher. Instead, an experienced married couple, Aquilla and Priscilla, reached out to Apollos with forbearance and love as *"they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly."*¹⁴

As we consider Aquilla and Priscilla's loving response, it seems evident that their forbearance must have begun at home with each other. For those of us who are married, perhaps the most important relationship in which to exercise forbearance is with our spouse. We are exposed to each other's weaknesses on a daily basis, and can either feed the weeds of discord or sow seeds of loving forbearance. When we make allowance for each other's faults, we minister grace one to another and enable God to add the increase and bring His full blessing of love, unity, and peace to our marriage.

In all of our relationships, forbearance also applies when we experience more serious hurts or wrongs. Paul encourages the Colossians to exercise forbearance as a precursor to forgiveness, *"forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye."*¹⁵ If someone has wronged us, we exercise forbearance by holding back our natural impulse to seek retribution. This helps provide time and space for them to repent and for our own heart and mind to work through the process of forgiveness. In the ultimate example of forbearance and forgiveness, God not only held back and delayed the punishment of our sins, giving us and all humankind time to repent, but also provided the atonement of sin through Christ's redemptive work on Calvary, enabling our forgiveness.

May we seek daily to forbear one another in love, even as Christ forbears us, that we might bring glory to His name and peace and unity to our relationships.

(Footnotes)¹ Ephesians 4:1-2

² Romans 12:5

³ Colossians 2:2

⁴ Ephesians 4:2

⁵ Colossians 3:12-13

⁶ Colossians 3:14

⁷ Ephesians 4:3

⁸ John 13:35

⁹ Romans 12:6

¹⁰ Luke 10:39-40

¹¹ Mark 10:41

¹² Mark 9:34

¹³ Mark 9:35

¹⁴ Acts 18:26

¹⁵ Colossians 3:13

Serve One Another

Editor's Note: The Bible uses the term "one another" multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In 2018, we will look at several of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

Theme verse: *For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.*"¹

As believers, we enjoy liberty in the best and highest sense of the word. Through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross we have been freed from the condemnation of sin and given hope of eternal life. We are recipients of the most amazing exchange in that the sinless Son of God took our sin upon Himself in order that we might go free. *"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."*²

Yes, grace is truly amazing. The cleansed sinner arises, as it were, from kneeling at that old rugged cross and asks the penetrating and appropriate question, *"What wilt thou have me to do?"*³ The Saviour with outstretched, nail-scarred hands answers, *"Love one another; as I have loved you."*⁴ Had He simply said, *"love one another,"* we might stop at the extent of human love limited by the goodness of the other.⁵ But—and so fitting in light of His sacrifice—He added, *"as I have loved you,"* raising the bar to the amazing, sacrificial giving of oneself demonstrated on a Roman cross.

Among the many ways we are called by Jesus to love one another—and we are exploring several of them in these editorials this year—perhaps the most profound is His example of being a servant. Paul reminds the Philippians of the incredible humbling that Jesus experienced as He descended in status from the Son of God (a position He retained despite the humbling) to being made *"in the likeness of man,"* to taking on the *"form of a servant,"* and eventually becoming *"obedient unto death,"* and (again, amazingly), *"even the death of the cross!"*⁶

Jesus changed the world by dying and He taught those around Him to become like Him—that is, in the role and manner of a disciple. In His Great Commission, He commissioned the original disciples to essentially go and make more disciples. So as believers in Jesus today we must be becoming more like Him day by day. We must become servants, as He did.

In a tender moment shortly before He was to go to the cross, Jesus gathered the disciples and humbled Himself even further by removing His garments and taking a basin of water with which He washed their feet. They were rightly stunned by this action—Peter even tried vainly to stop it—and must have wondered at its meaning. They must have leaned in especially hard to hear what He'd say about this—His words now punctuated by humble service with a deep ability to penetrate their hearts, *"If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet."*⁷

As Christian disciples some twenty centuries after these events we are deeply moved by the actions of our Lord and Master. We desire to seek application of this command on a daily basis. Does that mean we will perform the physical act of washing the feet of another? It might—and believers have found meaning in doing so, especially when great hurts have been experienced and the act is done as a symbol of reconciliation. But the teaching must also reach past the literal act so that we ask what washing feet means in the broadest sense and application. What unexpected act of service should I perform—not as an ostentatious display but in demonstration of the profound lesson learned at the cross? What words fitly spoken might I offer to provide comfort, healing, and forgiveness where man's reason would suggest I am justified in remaining silent? How might I be able to humbly clean the dust of earthly carnality from my

brother's feet—and permit my brother to wash mine? How does my interaction with every man, woman, and child—regardless of their station in life—reflect the heart of one who is mindful of the great price with which he has been bought? *“What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.”*⁸

As we consider much of the American culture around us, we can conclude that having the heart of a servant is not at the forefront of the messages with which we are bombarded each day. Modern advertising is especially focused on meeting our own needs, e.g. this car, vacation, clothing, etc. will make us feel good. We are told that fulfilling our own needs and becoming our own person will satisfy us. And yet we need only look at the many broken lives around us to see the embedded lie. Jesus' words ring true, *“For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it”*⁹ and *“what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”*¹⁰

The heart of every individual knows and recognizes the deeper truths of God. A closer look at how people respond—often including special highlights by the news media—when sacrificial love is demonstrated reveals a respect for such “counter-cultural” actions. Examples can be found of forgiveness in the face of great loss, putting one's life at risk to save others, and serving in and among the poor as one's life's work. And it is in those humble acts of service that the love of Christ is most plainly seen.

In closing, we have tremendous freedom (liberty) in Christ. But we are warned not to use it, *“for an occasion to the flesh, but by love (to) serve one another.”*¹¹ And as we ponder the sacrificial love of the one who humbled Himself so dramatically, we are moved by Paul's call to action to, *“present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service [emphasis added].”*¹²

(Footnotes)

¹ Galatians 5:13

² 2 Corinthians 5:21

³ Acts 9:6

⁴ John 13:34

⁵ Romans 5:7

⁶ Philippians 2:7-8

⁷ John 13:14

⁸ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

⁹ Luke 9:24

¹⁰ Mark 8:36

¹¹ Galatians 5:13

¹² Romans 12:1

Comfort One Another

Editor's Note: The Bible uses the term "one another" multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In 2018, we will look at several of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

Theme verse: *"Wherefore comfort one another with these words."*¹

We all find ourselves in need of comfort at times. We live in a fallen world, and each of us takes our turn experiencing sorrow or fear, separation or loneliness, affliction or discouragement. And yet we are not left to endure grief and distress alone and comfortless. God has provided us with His Word, that *"we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope."*² And He has provided us with each other, that we would *"comfort one another with these words."*³

How is it that we comfort one another? The original Greek word for 'comfort' means to call to one's side. To be effective comforters, we first come alongside of one another, and then we gently encourage each other to come near to the side of Jesus to feel the comfort of His healing power and hopeful promises. Let's take a closer look at the Bible's many comforting truths and practical examples of how we can comfort one another.

In Corinthians we read that God himself is *"the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."*⁴ From this we learn that to comfort one another, we share the same comfort we ourselves experience from God through His Word, His Son Jesus, and His Holy Spirit.

Perhaps the most fundamental comfort we share together is that of God's love and mercy manifested in the sending of His Son Jesus Christ. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."*⁵ Jesus loved us enough to endure trials, temptations, sorrows, and grief. Through suffering He became both the Captain of our salvation and our Comforter, giving us *"everlasting consolation and good hope through grace."*⁶

We can further remind each other that Jesus promised that He would *"pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter,"*⁷ the Holy Spirit. When we feel His Spirit abiding in us, we know that we are His and that He is yet with us. At times we need each other to help us see the evidence that the Holy Spirit accompanies us through dark valleys.

When those in our church family suffer grief or pain⁸, God encourages us to *"weep with them that weep"*⁹ and *"remember...them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body."*¹⁰ When *"one member suffer(s), all the members suffer with it."* We see this fulfilled by both the Jews and Jesus as they wept with Mary and Martha at the death of their brother Lazarus, and we see this fulfilled in our own communities when tragedy and afflictions arise among us and many gather around to weep together.

Job endured deep sorrow and painful affliction with unanswerable questions and distresses. His three friends initially set a wise example as they came alongside him and sat together in silence for seven days. They could not fully relate to Job's depth of grief, and yet acknowledged his unspeakable sorrow and communicated love and support simply by being quietly present.

Ironically, the three friends later became miserable comforters when they began to speak and found no answer to his complaints, and yet condemned Job. The fourth acquaintance, Elihu, spoke words

of truth which helped Job see himself and God more accurately. In the end, Job humbly received God's divine counsel, comfort, and promises.

Jesus spoke words of comfort in the night of His betrayal, reminding His troubled disciples of the Father's promises of love and redemption. He prayed a compassionate and loving intercessory prayer on their behalf. They together sang what must have been a sober yet encouraging hymn. And when Jesus Himself was overwhelmed with agony, He sought the comfort of having His closest disciples near him in prayer. Many of us in like manner have experienced comfort as we encourage one another in God's promises, lift our voice in song, and in close communion watch and pray together.

We may feel moved to comfort one another not only through prayer and shared tears, but also by embracing each other. The Ephesians sorrowed at Paul's departure, knowing they would see his face no more. Paul *"kneeled down, and prayed with them all. And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck, and kissed him."*

Often we find ourselves desiring to provide comfort when we cannot be present in person. Paul wrote letters of encouragement and prayer to those in tribulation and sorrow, exhorting them that, *"God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him."* We can echo these words whether in person, or through cards, e-mails, texts, and social media, reminding one another of God's intent for our salvation and His promise of eternal deliverance. And let us not forget the simple power of praying for one another, even those we don't personally know well. Many who experience great tragedy or deep burdens have expressed how they felt carried by the prayers of the brethren.

At times we may need encouragement in our spiritual walk, even as Paul wrote to the Romans and desired to be *"comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me."* We can comfort one another simply by living a life of faith and bearing the fruit of the spirit. In the unfortunate circumstance where Satan gets the upper hand in a believer's life, we can fulfill Paul's instruction to the Corinthians in how to relate to a soul who after falling into a deeply hurtful sin had experienced a sufficient time of repentance: *"forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow."*

And finally, we can encourage one another to accept comfort and not be as Jacob when he lost his son Joseph: *"All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted."* Let us instead help one another in times of darkness to open ourselves to our Lord's comfort, allowing Him as our shepherd to gather us in His arms, and gently carry us in His bosom.

(Footnotes)

¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:18

² Romans 15:4

³ 1 Thessalonians 4:18

⁴ 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

⁵ John 3:16

⁶ 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

⁷ John 14:16

⁸ 1 John 3:24

⁹ Romans 12:15

¹⁰ Hebrews 13:3

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 12:26

¹² John 11:33-35

¹³ Job 32:3

¹⁴ Job 33:32

¹⁵ Acts 20:36

¹⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10

¹⁷ Romans 1:12

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 2:7

¹⁹ Genesis 37:35

²⁰ Isaiah 40:11

Edify One Another

Editor's Note: The Bible uses the term "one another" multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In 2018, we will look at several of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

Theme verse: "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another."¹

Edify is usually defined as promoting another's growth in Christian virtues such as wisdom, faith, holiness, and joy. Edifying one another will necessitate some activity on our part. Indeed, the literal meaning of the word 'edify' as used in the New Testament is "to build up." Applying this important teaching to one another will require us to pay less attention to ourselves and to think more about the needs of others: "*Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification.*"² As Christians, we are walking together on the path to Zion and to sincerely seek to edify each other along the way is one of the most positive things we can do.

For us to be successful in edification, this building process must begin with a foundation built upon a firm faith in Christ, and not in the contemporary ideals of society, "*Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.*"³

Examples abound in the scriptures of people who were exemplary patterns of edification for us. In terms of edifying others, Jonathan and his father, King Saul, provide one of the best and worst illustrations respectively. Out of jealousy, Saul was intent on slaying David. Jonathan sought not only to defend David, but tried to promote him before his father, even when doing so cost him the kingship. "*And David saw that Saul was come out to seek his life: and David was in the wilderness of Ziph in a wood. And Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God. And he said unto him, Fear not: for the hand of Saul my father shall not find thee; and thou shalt be king over Israel, and I shall be next unto thee; and that also Saul my father knoweth.*"⁴ In the New Testament, the Apostles gave much of themselves in building and establishing the new church, even under threat of death. "*And he (Paul) spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him. Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus. Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.*"⁵

Reading and meditating on the Word of God will be very uplifting to ourselves and ultimately will profit others as well. "*Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all.*"⁶ This should involve an active contemplation of God's Word, making a deliberate effort to avoid distractions, "*Mine eyes prevent (anticipate) the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word.*"⁷

Prayer is another important factor of edification. When someone expresses a deep need to us, the simple words, "I will pray for you" can be very encouraging. Checking in with them from time to time to see how they are doing shows the sincerity of our feelings for them. "*And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do.*"⁸ Virtually all of us experience difficulties in life and when we humbly share

our experiences of answered prayer it is very helpful for others. This should be done in a way that others who are struggling will be able to relate, without making them feel unworthy. David was quick to acknowledge his faults and gave the glory to God when deliverance was achieved. *“This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them. O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.”*⁹

Christian fellowship is intended to be an important encouragement to one another, but can easily be taken for granted. The goal of true fellowship is to edify one another and to nurture our relationship with the Lord. Chatting about current events or common interests of everyday life has its place, but true edification only occurs when the conversation centers on spiritual matters. Again, we have the early church as a good example: *“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”*¹⁰ Fellowship can begin at a young age when parents encourage their children’s participation in organized Sunday school activities. Families will be blessed by visiting other Apostolic Christian congregations when vacationing or visiting relatives.

The psalmist reminds us of how singing has long been a wonderful blessing for our Apostolic Christian brotherhood. *“O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.”*¹¹ We can encourage one another’s participation, regardless of our level of expertise in this area! The result not only brings praise to God, but it will edify all who participate, *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”*¹²

The scriptures also warn us of those things that create a hindrance to edification. We must avoid a carnal or worldly spirit which causes envy, strife, and division.¹³ Another such danger is becoming spiritually lukewarm. This can come about from becoming lax in church attendance, reading, and praying; or trusting too much in our own strength or even our wealth. The outcome is misery, blindness, and leanness to our soul.¹⁴ In contrast, the early church as portrayed in the book of Acts provides a wonderful example of edifying one another. Nowhere else do we read of such tremendous growth in the church. The Christians were zealous in worship, in reading the Word, and in fervent prayer with fasting. They had a genuine and sacrificial love for one another. The result being that God was praised and the Christians were viewed favorably by all the people.¹⁵ Most importantly, “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

(Footnotes)

¹ Romans 14:19

² Romans 15:2

³ Colossians 2:7-8

⁴ 1 Samuel 23:15-17

⁵ Acts 9:29-31

⁶ 1 Timothy 4:13-15

⁷ Psalms 119:148

⁸ Acts 15:36

⁹ Psalms 34:6-8

¹⁰ Acts 2:42

¹¹ Psalms 95:1

¹² Colossians 3:16

¹³ 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

¹⁴ Revelation 3:15-17

¹⁵ Acts 2:47

Greet One Another

Editor's Note: The Bible uses the term "one another" multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In 2018, we will look at several of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

Theme verse: *Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently.*¹

A young Mexican man grew up in a small farming village helping his father raise corn and edible beans on a tiny acreage. Rainfall is sparse in those high plains, more than 7000 feet above sea level, and many years there was little or no harvest. His family lived in a two-room adobe house with no running water. His mother was blind and suffered from advanced diabetes. This young man was willing to risk his life to get to America to find work to help his family. He knew it would be years until he could see them again. He went anyway.

The time came, years later, when he had opportunity to go home, traveling with an American family which had befriended him. As they pulled up in the courtyard of the adobe house, a small thin man was waiting. His dark, crevassed, weather-beaten face was crisscrossed with the hills and valleys of a difficult life and appeared to be much older than his seventy years. While his traveling companions watched, the son stiffly exited the vehicle and slowly advanced toward his now-widower father. His father stepped toward him and they embraced with an indescribable intensity. The father sobbed loudly, "Mi hijo! Mi hijo!" – "My son! My son!" His words were barely intelligible, but his passion and joy in seeing his son again was unforgettable.

Greetings speak volumes about how we feel about one another.

Whom do you greet with joy and passion?

In the days of the Apostles, persecution was understood to be the lot of most believers. When a soul repented and began to follow the way of Jesus, it was with the full knowledge that it could cost his life and often included ostracization from one's own family.² This shared risk cemented the bond between believers and prompted joyful and somber greetings when meeting another fellow-sufferer. For many believers, the church became their family, as they were rejected by their parents and siblings. We can sense these powerful links in Paul's extended list of greetings to the believers that he knew in the church at Rome.³ This was his family and he wanted to maintain that deep connection.

The word translated as "greet" or "salute" in the New Testament carries with it a sense of enfolding or embracing one another and intimates a meaningful greeting in and of itself. It's not just a physical embrace, but rather a heartfelt spiritual and emotional embrace that can be conveyed in Christians' greetings. It seems unlikely that the persecuted church greeted each other with a mere, "What's up?" Rather, the bond of love founded in the death and resurrection of Jesus recognized fellow believers as family and fellow pilgrims – willing to suffer for the name of Christ and willing to share all with their brethren.⁴ Inevitably, the shared bond of faith, hope, suffering, love, and joy fosters close relationships. And inevitably, we rejoice when we meet someone with whom we share a close relationship.^{5,6}

Is it different today? Although in our North American and Japanese churches we do not currently suffer the specter of death because of our faith, do we comprehend that such is our commitment? Do we understand and appreciate that commitment in each other? Are we fostering and investing in our

relationships in the church? Isn't it reasonable to think that we would develop such close relationships if we would be engaged in one another's life? With a close relationship, greeting one another will not become a superficial event. Let's consider some aspects of what the Apostles were teaching when they taught the church to greet one another with a holy kiss.

As the Apostle Paul carried the gospel to the Gentiles, he covered a lot of territory and learned to know people of every station in life from dozens of distinct cultures. He recounts the equalizing force of Jesus, emphasizing that, "*there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.*"⁷ He could well have added, Albanian nor Spaniard, Italian nor Egyptian, and more. The miracle of salvation erased ethnic, gender, and social divisions and produced deep bonds of love that crossed all boundaries.

To all these cultures, both Peter and Paul encouraged believers to show their deep love and bond by the heartfelt greeting of a holy kiss.^{8,9,10,11} They wrote to the Romans (Italy), the Corinthians (Greece), and the varied cultures across the Asia Minor peninsula (modern-day Turkey). The Apostles' encouragement to greet one another with a holy kiss crossed all kinds of unthinkable barriers and instituted one consistent cross-cultural form of greeting in the church. Slaves greeted their owners. The wealthy greeted the poor. Jewish believers greeted the "uncircumcised." It was then, and should be today, a grace-filled way to acknowledge the equalizing power of Christ.

Have you experienced the equalizing power of Christ? Do you feel yourself no lower and no higher than any other? Does your social standing prevent you from feeling close to other believers, which you may view as either higher or lower than you? Do you shy away from greeting a brother who may not exhibit the standards of cleanliness that you do?¹² Do you struggle feeling a bond with believers of other ethnicities or races ... or has He freed you from the bondage of human status and class? Have you been made free of sin? If so, Jesus affirms that He will make you free indeed¹³... genuinely free from fear of death, free from fear of rejection, free from the slavery of sin, and free from the need to live up to the false human standards of race, class, culture, and status. Sharing in this redemption – bought by the blood of Jesus – we feel no barrier between us and our fellow believers.

The holiness of our greeting is not found in the routine keeping of a commandment but in the conscious awareness of the deep and abiding bond we have with our fellow-brethren in Christ.¹⁴ As we greet each other with this kiss of charity, let's contemplate our mutual willingness to die for Christ and to love one another in truth.¹⁵

(Footnotes)

¹ 1 Peter 1:22

² Micah 7:6

³ Rom. 16

⁴ Acts 4:32

⁵ 3 John 1:3

⁶ 1 Peter 1:3-9

⁷ Colossians 3:11

⁸ 1 Corinthians 16:20

⁹ 1 Peter 5:14

¹⁰ 1 Thessalonians 5:26

¹¹ Romans 16:16

¹² James 2:1

¹³ John 8:36

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:26

¹⁵ 1 Peter 1:22

Receive One Another

Editor's Note: The Bible uses the term "one another" multiple times and it is clear God is very interested in our relationships. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. In 2018, we will look at several of the "one anothers" in the Bible.

Theme verse: *"Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God."*¹

This past year we have looked at several ways in which we are called by God to relate to each other. In all ways Jesus is our example for how we should do this. Indeed the very person of God is expressed in relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In creating humankind, God extended that relationship to people, desiring the mutuality of love freely offered in fellowship, communion, and tightly-woven bonds of familial relationship. Jesus likewise commissioned His followers to follow a "new commandment" to love as He loved.² He knit it all together when He explained that the second greatest commandment—after the Old Testament imperative to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength—was like the first, to love our neighbor as ourselves.³

So just as we are constrained by the love of Christ to love as we are loved, to forgive as we are forgiven, and to extend mercy as it has been extended to us, so likewise are we impelled to receive one another.

What does it mean to receive another? We may think of some item that is given or paid to us that we may or may not accept. Acceptance is part of—perhaps the first step in—the biblical call to receive others. The Greek word for receive used in the theme verse means to take to oneself; to friendship or hospitality. Clearly it is not something that can be done from a distance nor could it possibly be the common attitude of "live and let live" that the world seems to embrace.

In Paul's discourses on how believers are to conduct themselves in the household of faith⁴—how we are to relate to one another—we find words which give color and application to what it means to receive. It involves both engaging in certain actions and refraining from others as we interact in the family of God.

Romans 14 in particular is a carefully balanced treatment of this subject as it plays out in the reality of differences of conscience, conviction, and practice found in the church. Depending on which side of a particular issue we may find ourselves—and most of us we will be on either side from time to time depending on the subject at hand—we are warned not to judge when our conscience demands abstinence and not to despise when we feel free to partake. Both "judging" and "despising" are at odds with "receiving" and involve the elevation of self and one's understanding above another. The elevation of self and denigration of the other is anathema to obeying the injunction to receive one another.

For centuries, Christians have struggled with the matter of judging. How do we reconcile Jesus' command that we not judge⁵ with the clear biblical teaching to discern that which is evil, harmful, or even just not edifying?⁶ Perhaps much of the problem can be attributed to our failure to imitate Christ. He clearly did not shrink from calling sin, sin. But he also avoided the overtone reflected in the original definition of "to judge" which carries an implication of "to try, condemn, and punish."

In today's use of language, the word "accept" is confused with approval or endorsement. Did Jesus approve of the sinful ways of those with whom He associated? Did He endorse Mary Magdalene's demon-possessed behavior when He welcomed her into his inner circle? Was He guilty by association

when He spoke with Zacchaeus, the cheating tax collector and went home with him? Was He worried about appearances in any of these associations? Or rather did He lovingly accept each of these, seeing them with eyes of compassion and desiring their fellowship—knowing their relationship with Him would lead to their redemption?

Indeed, the highly polarized political environment of our time has made it seem incredible that two people who don't see things the same might enjoy friendship. What a loss! As believers we are not only called to see others as made in the image of God, we are to love each other as He loves us—to truly receive one another. And that's anything but a distant, theoretical, platitudinous expression of regard. Rather it's an "up close" willingness—even desire—to "take to oneself."

We would readily agree that judging—with its inherent overtones of condemnation and punitive treatment—is at odds with building the kinds of relationships Jesus nurtured and expects us to sustain. Paul makes it clear that we can live in a way that holds to the highest of standards, including that of avoiding offense towards another and still avoid the peril of judging, when he writes, "*Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way.*"⁷

Perhaps the most telling aspect of whether we have received another is found in how we speak of them when they are not around. It is the height of hypocrisy to feign relationship and affinity with someone only to tear them down in our speech. James makes it clear that we must, "*Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge.*"⁸ Rather, may our "*speech be always with grace,*"⁹ which will season like salt the relationships we share one with the other.

As we close, let's consider the relationship between the runaway slave Onesimus and his Christian brother master Philemon. In his eponymous epistle, Philemon is entreated by Paul to receive this brother in faith who had so clearly wronged him. Paul did not encourage lip service to forgiveness or a relationship safely bounded by distance; rather he noted that perhaps their separation for a time was being turned by God for good so that the receiving would endure forever. Indeed that Philemon would receive Onesimus as he would Paul himself, as a brother beloved.¹⁰ How like our Lord and Master Jesus Himself!

(Footnotes)

¹ Romans 15:7

² John 13:34-35

³ Deuteronomy 6:5, Mark 12:30-31

⁴ Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 10:23-33, 1 Corinthians 12-13

⁵ Matthew 7:1

⁶ John 7:24, Romans 12:9, 1 Corinthians 10:23

⁷ Romans 14:13

⁸ James 4:11

⁹ Colossians 4:6

¹⁰ Philemon 1:15-17

The Faith of Abel

Theme verse: *“By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.”*¹

Abel, the second son of Adam and Eve, is the first person mentioned in the ‘roll call of faith’ contained in Hebrews 11. Though at first it might seem that relatively little has been recorded about Abel in the Bible, we can gain much from studying his example: *“And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings (firstborn) of his flock and of the fat (choicest) thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.”*² Both brothers made a decision about what to bring as an offering, but unlike Cain, Abel’s choice was made by faith. He believed God, and it was through faith that Abel recognized the principle of giving the best he had to Him. By this, Abel’s gift was a foreshadowing of the type of sacrifice that God truly desired.

Several other differences will be noted in the decisions of the first brothers in their gifts at the altar. First of all, Cain evidently brought some of the harvest from his tilling the ground, while Abel brought a sheep from his flock. Because they were of different occupations, it seems natural that each would bring something to the Lord from that which he had readily at hand. There was nothing particularly wrong with Cain’s choice of gift, since later on the Israelites were commanded to bring meat or food offerings at the various feasts. These “meat (or grain) offerings” were always without blood since nothing was killed, and the purpose was generally that of thanksgiving. On the other hand, Abel’s offering involved the shedding of blood since the lamb or sheep had to be killed. The purpose of this type of sacrifice was that of a sin offering. In either case, whether a meat or a sin offering, only the best was to be given. *“All the best of the oil, and all the best of the wine, and of the wheat, the firstfruits of them which they shall offer unto the LORD, them have I given thee.”*³ God expects no more from us than what we have, but it gives Him pleasure when by faith we recognize our sin and offer ourselves completely to Him. Abel understood this principle by faith. He acknowledged his sin to himself first, obeyed God from his heart and brought a genuine sacrifice, offered it in faith acknowledging his sin to God, which resulted in bringing delight to God. In like manner, the choices we make should be driven by a deep faith in the high level precepts of His Word. By doing so, our actions will also not only bring pleasure to God, but will increase our own joy. *“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”*⁴

We read further in the Genesis account the main reason why God was not pleased with Cain’s sacrifice. *“And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.”*⁵ In other words, God expected Cain to be an overcomer of sin, rather than allowing sin to have dominion over him. Having committed sin was bad enough, but Cain obviously tried to hide it from God instead of confessing and revealing it. *“The sacrifice of the wicked is abomination: how much more, when he bringeth it with a wicked mind?”*⁶ The lesson for us is clear: *“He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.”*⁷ Further, we can be sure that God is a reader of our hearts: *“And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the LORD searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts: if thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off for ever.”*⁸

Clearly Abel had at one time or other committed sin as well, since “there is no man that sinneth not”. However, unlike his older brother, Abel’s heart was evidently pure when he brought his gift to the

altar. *“But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you.”*⁹ The concept of freeing oneself from sin on the way to the altar was reinforced by Christ. *“Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.”*¹⁰ Confessing our faults and praying for one another go hand in hand and will strengthen our relationships. *“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”*¹¹ How much better would have been the outcome if only Cain had made this his choice!

Lastly, but certainly not least, Abel was slain by his older brother in a fit of envy. *“And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.”*¹² Christ later recognized Abel as being a righteous man who became the first martyr, *“That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.”*¹³ Certainly, it is difficult for anyone to look forward to suffering, even when done for Christ. However, should this become our lot, we should not fear, *“But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.”*¹⁴

In summary, we have learned much from observing Abel’s life. His faith was not only deep, but it was visible to others. In turn, God was willing to give testimony of Abel’s righteousness and gifts with the intent that these lessons would endure to future generations.

*“By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.”*¹⁵

(Footnotes)

¹ Hebrews 11:4

² Genesis 4:3-5

³ Numbers 18:12

⁴ Hebrews 11:6

⁵ Genesis 4:6-7

⁶ Proverbs 21:27

⁷ Proverbs 28:13

⁸ 1 Chronicles 28:9

⁹ Romans 6:17

¹⁰ Matthew 5:23-24

¹¹ James 5:16

¹² Genesis 4:8

¹³ Matthew 23:35

¹⁴ 1 Peter 4:13

¹⁵ Hebrews 11:4

The Faith of Noah

Theme verse: *By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house.*"¹

Imagine being warned by God of inconceivable destruction coming upon the earth and instructed to build a huge odd-looking vessel to save yourself and your family. In obedience, you sacrifice decades of your life, preaching righteousness to unbelievers who scoff at your words and ridicule your work. Few of us endure such fiery trials of faith. Yet all of us are called to walk faithfully with God and maintain our belief in Christ regardless of our circumstance. We can find great encouragement and inspiration from Noah's journey and victory of faith.

We might think of Noah's faith as being shaped by his experience building the ark. But in reality, he was chosen by God to build the ark because of his faith. When Noah was five hundred years old, "*God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth,*"² and decided to destroy His creation from off the face of the earth.³ And yet one man and his wife and family stood apart. God saw that Noah was a righteous man and blameless, and Noah "*...found grace in the eyes of the LORD.*"⁴ This same Lord sees us and likewise knows our faith, "*for the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers:*"⁵

How was it that Noah was able to resist the temptations all around him? How did he find the wisdom to train his children to serve God amidst a corrupt society? In Genesis we read a simple, profound answer: "*and Noah walked with God.*"⁶ What a beautiful way to live! We can envision Noah communing often with God, his character being molded over time to be more like God, so that he naturally eschewed the ways of the world. We can experience this same transforming power of walking with God as we fulfill his instruction to "*Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.*"⁷

How did Noah come to such a walk of faith? Perhaps he was impacted by the account of his great-grandfather Enoch, who also "*walked with God*"⁸ and pleased the Lord to such a degree that God took him directly to heaven.⁹ We likewise are given impactful examples and can be "*followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*"¹⁰

When Noah was warned of God, he could have either obeyed or ignored God's direction. But true belief, obedience, and trust are inseparable: if he truly believed God, the only viable path was to build the ark. He could have been skeptical and thought 'surely God will never destroy the world.' He could have questioned 'What is rain?' or 'Why an ark?' Instead he was motivated by faith and reverent fear, not understanding exactly how the world would be destroyed or how the ark would save him, moving forward in obedience and trust to save his family.

We too are warned of destruction to come and taught the way of escape. We may not fully understand how judgment will unfold, or how and why it is that we are saved by grace through faith¹¹. But just as faith and obedience were inextricably linked for Noah, so it is for us. If we believe God's Word, we will follow Christ's teachings and rest in his promises. How blessed we are to be moved to obedience not only by fear, but even more so by love – God's perfect, life-giving love, manifested in Jesus Christ.

As Noah labored decade after decade, he could have lamented, 'this isn't what I expected' or 'this is just too much.' He could have asked 'why do I have to endure this?' or 'Isn't there an easier way?' We too can find ourselves asking very real and difficult questions, desiring relief from our burdens and trials. But as Noah pressed forward in faith, may we also "*hold fast the profession of our faith without*

wavering,"¹² knowing that *"Faithful is he who calleth us, who also will sanctify and preserve us blameless unto the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ."*¹³

Those around Noah surely thought he was foolish and ridiculed his tireless labor as they continued to enjoy the pleasures of life. Similarly, the choices we make in serving God may seem foolish to those around us. We like Noah are called by God to serve Him faithfully *"in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world."*¹⁴

Even in the midst of ridicule, Noah had a heart for the unbelievers. As a preacher of righteousness,¹⁵ he warned the ungodly of God's wrath to come. Sadly, none but his wife and family believed. We too may be discouraged when others disregard the gospel message, but we must never cease to share the truth, constrained by the love of Jesus Christ.

When the time finally came to enter the ark, Noah and his family must have felt untold emotion as they left behind their homes, land, cousins, and friends. We likewise are called to forsake all and follow Christ. Noah must have been tremendously thankful to journey with seven other believers, just as we can be thankful we have our church family and all fellow believers to encourage and comfort us.

As the flood came, Noah trembled in God-fear and awe. Day after day the waters rose. Month after month they floated, perhaps wondering, 'How long can we endure the animal stench? Will the food last? Has God forgotten his promise?' In patience they persisted, until finally the great day came to step onto dry ground. Noah rejoiced and offered sacrifices in thanksgiving, praise, and worship to God. He had believed and obeyed unto the end to the saving of his household.

Similarly, we may feel our faith running thin and our confidence in Christ fading. We may wonder if it's really worth sacrificing the pleasures of this life or enduring pain and suffering for months or years in hope of a reward we've never seen. We as Noah are called by God to *"Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise."*¹⁶

After the flood, God put a rainbow in the sky and made a covenant with Noah and his seed; never again would he destroy all living creatures from the earth by a flood. We are the recipients of a better covenant, established on better promises through Jesus Christ¹⁷, and like Noah have become heirs of the righteousness which is by faith, believing to the saving of our souls.

Regardless of our circumstance or the corruption around us, we can take courage from God's love and provision for Noah, trusting that the Lord sees us and *"knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations."*¹⁸

(Footnotes)

¹ Hebrews 11:6

² Genesis 6:5

³ Genesis 5:7-8

⁴ Genesis 6:9

⁵ 1 Peter 3:12

⁶ Genesis 6:9

⁷ Galatians 5:16

⁸ Genesis 5:24

⁹ Hebrews 11:5

¹⁰ Hebrews 6:12

¹¹ Romans 11:33

¹² Hebrews 10:23

¹³ 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

¹⁴ Philippians 2:15

¹⁵ 2 Peter 2:5

¹⁶ Hebrews 10:35-36

¹⁷ Hebrews 8:6

¹⁸ 2 Peter 2:9

The Faith of Abraham

Theme verse: *“By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.”¹*

God’s Word entreats us to walk *“in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham.”²* What was the nature of Abraham’s faith? Did he struggle against doubts and fears? How can we be justified by faith and be *“blessed with faithful Abraham?”³* What was the blessing of Abraham? How did his obedience affect this blessing? Let’s take a closer look at Abraham’s faith and faithfulness.

Abraham’s father left his homeland to go to Canaan, but stopped and settled his family – including Abraham and his wife Sarah -- in the town of Haran. Many years later, the Lord *“said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: and... I will bless thee.”⁴* This call to be blessed by God came at a steep cost. Abraham had to deny himself the comforts of his life and family in Haran, and trust that God would bless him in an unknown life in an unknown land. We likewise are called by Jesus to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow Him.⁵

Imagine if Abraham had told God he believed, but like his father stopped and stayed at some other place. Without the fruits of trust and obedience, his faith would have been dead⁶ and the blessing forfeited. Thankfully, *“By faith Abraham... obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.”⁷* We in like manner demonstrate our faith in Christ by the choices we make in obeying his Word and trusting his provision, believing His promise that *“whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.”⁸*

Abraham lived many years in Canaan as a pilgrim and stranger, waiting to inherit the promises.⁹ Perhaps he was tempted to build a permanent dwelling place, or intermingle with godless people, or give up and go back to the comforts of his homeland. But by faith he looked *“for a city... whose builder and maker is God.”* And because of this, God was not ashamed to be called his God, and prepared for him an eternal inheritance.¹⁰ We like Abraham are called to live as pilgrims and strangers, setting our affections on things above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God and prepares us a home in glory.

In the midst of his years of waiting, God spoke comforting words to Abraham: *“Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.”* Why would God speak this to Abraham? And why did Abraham ask, *“Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless?”¹¹* Abraham must have felt fearful, confused, perhaps even discouraged and struggling with unbelief. We too may find ourselves *“troubled on every side”* with fightings without and fears within.¹² And yet God speaks to us through the comfort of His Holy Spirit in our hearts, reassuring us of His love and faithfulness.

Following Abraham’s question, a profound event took place. God assured him that he would indeed bear a son, and then said, *“Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.”* *In that moment, in the midst of fears and uncertainties, Abraham “believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness.”¹³* What a miraculous transformation, to believe and become righteous in God’s eyes! Abraham did not earn his righteousness. He believed in the Lord, and God in his grace credited Abraham’s belief to him as righteousness. This amazing truth *“was not written for his sake alone, ... but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.”¹⁴*

And yet immediately after Abraham believed, he seemed to still struggle to grasp it all, and asked God how he would know it to be true. God in his mercy explained his plan and sealed a covenant with

Abraham by blood and sacrifice.¹⁵ We also may struggle to believe God's promises. May our faith rest in God's New Testament covenant of grace, sealed in the precious blood of Jesus.

Years later, when Abraham was ninety-nine years old, God again appeared and confirmed his wife Sarah would bear a child. In response to this impossible thought, "Abraham laughed," seemingly struggling to believe, perhaps thinking the promise would be fulfilled through his son Ishmael.¹⁶ But God patiently repeated his miraculous declaration, and Abraham "*staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.*"¹⁷

What was this promise that Abraham believed? Was it simply that his seed would inherit the land of Canaan? Or did he look beyond, to a Redeemer who would spring forth from his seed? Jesus himself confirms that "*Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.*"¹⁸ And so against hope, Abraham believed in hope and believed in the coming of a Savior, through whom he and millions after him would be justified by faith.¹⁹ We likewise are called to believe in hope, trusting that despite the weakness of our flesh, God is able by his grace to make us righteous through faith and help us walk faithfully until the promised rest.

After the promised child grew to be a young lad, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son. What if Abraham refused God's command to offer his son back to God? Would he still be the father of those who are justified by faith? And yet his faith was fully alive, for "*by faith Abraham, when he was tried... offered up his only begotten son... accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead.*"²⁰ In response God declared: "*In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.*"²¹ And so Abraham's faith brought forth the fruit of faithfulness, and "*by works was faith made perfect.*"²² This same precept applies to us: "*But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid.*"²³ And yet we can take courage, for "*now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.*"²⁴ "*For if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*"²⁵

(Footnotes)

¹ Hebrews 11:7

² Romans 4:12

³ Galatians 3:9

⁴ Genesis 12:1-2

⁵ Luke 9:23

⁶ James 2:26

⁷ Hebrews 11:7

⁸ Luke 9:24

⁹ Hebrews 11:13

¹⁰ Hebrews 11:9-10, 15-16

¹¹ Genesis 15:1-2

¹² 2 Corinthians 7:5

¹³ Genesis 15:4-6

¹⁴ Romans 4:23-25

¹⁵ Genesis 15:8-21

¹⁶ Genesis 17:15-18

¹⁷ Romans 4:20-21

¹⁸ John 8:56

¹⁹ Romans 4:18

²⁰ Hebrews 11:17-19

²¹ Genesis 22:18

²² James 2:22

²³ Galatians 2:17

²⁴ Romans 6:22

²⁵ Galatians 3:29

The Faith of Sarah

“Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised.”¹

The faith of Sarah is explicitly noted only in this one verse in the letter to the Hebrews. Yet it is a powerful exhibition of faith in God. It is also a powerful exhibition of how God fulfills prophecy through human faith, which results in obedience. As a first step, Sarah received strength to do what needed to be done. With that strength, she became able to conceive. She needed to conceive in order to bear a son. She needed to bear a son for the promise of God to be fulfilled. Every step in the process must have seemed impossible to her.

What factors enable us to believe God – even when it seems impossible?

There are at least three elements in Sarah’s life that appear to have contributed to her faith. She respected her husband – to the point of calling him “Lord”.² Perhaps because of that respect for Abram, she also learned to fear God. Because of her respect for God, she had the faith to act in obedience and hope – “because she judged him faithful who had promised.” Before we question those elements too much, let’s think it through together.

It can be easy to emphasize Sarah’s initial reaction when she heard that she would have a son with Abraham. As she responded instantly and impulsively to the impossibility of the promise, she laughed within herself.³ However, when the Lord asked, “*Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is anything too hard for the LORD?*”⁴ ... she was afraid. When she realized she was interacting with the Lord, the fear of the Lord sobered her, enabled her to think beyond the obvious, and tempered her initial reaction. Though our instinctive response to God’s word may at first make us think, “That’s not possible!” – faith in God and the fear of the Lord enable us to adjust our initial reaction with a more tempered response that acknowledges, “... *with God, all things are possible.*”⁵

One might wonder what respect for authority has to do with faith. John teaches us that if we don’t love our brother whom we can see, how can we claim to love God whom we can’t see?⁶ In similar fashion, if we don’t respect, trust, and obey the authorities we can see, how can we respect, trust, and obey God whom we can’t see? We have opportunity to practice this respect with parents, teachers, in the workplace, with governmental authorities, in marriage, and in the church – anywhere we have a vertical relationship.

We have several examples of Sarah’s respect for Abraham – probably the only authority in her life. In Peter’s first epistle, we read that Sarah called Abraham “Lord” – a title of respect that indicates a master, or supreme authority.⁷ From the simple, everyday respect that she exhibited when Abraham asked her to quickly prepare a meal for guests, to the risk of representing herself as Abraham’s sister instead of as his wife, she demonstrated a ready and willing obedience. When he asked her to represent herself as his sister (she was truly his half-sister), rather than his wife, at every new place to which they came, she could easily have dismissed her husband’s request as being fearful. But instead, she honored him with her obedience. Both in Egypt and in Gerar, God delivered her out of the hand of the king – experiences that must have strengthened her faith in God.

Finally, at the advanced age of 90 years, believing that not only would she be able to conceive, but also that she would be given the strength to give birth, Sarah demonstrated her faith in God once more. Although Sarah had never experienced the strain and pain of giving birth, she had witnessed it

firsthand when Hagar bore Ishmael “on Sarah’s knees”. She must have known that it would be extremely taxing for a woman of her age.

And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.⁸

Like Sarah, we can be prepared for the impossible by learning to trust God in the little things and by humbly fulfilling the role in which we find ourselves. Sarah found herself in the role of a wife and she acknowledged the authority that Abraham had over her, respecting him as her “Lord”. Although it does not appear to have been her nature, she cultivated a meek and quiet spirit – which is of great price in the sight of God.⁹ Like Sarah, we can act when God calls us to action. If Sarah had not been willing to be with Abraham when God promised that she would bear a son – she would never have conceived. Her example points us to three simple truths: respect God-ordained authorities, fear and obey God even more than man, and by faith take the necessary steps – even if it seems impossible. By doing these things, we will be prepared like Sarah when asked to do the impossible. By establishing a track record of faith and obedience, we will be empowered to believe God in the big things. It is in the day to day fundamentals that we can become prepared to do great things.

Finally, what seems impossible in your life?

Have you been given a duty that seems too big or difficult to do? Have you been asked to bear a burden that seems too heavy? Do the commandments of God seem too difficult to keep? If faith and obedience are not practiced in daily life, facing such challenges with confidence is nearly impossible. Determining, like Sarah, to fulfill your calling in the routine little things of life, will enable and prepare you for the impossible that may someday be yours to do.

Do you, with Sarah, judge God to be faithful?

(Footnotes)

¹ Hebrews 11:7

² Romans 4:12

³ Galatians 3:9

⁴ Genesis 12:1-2

⁵ Luke 9:23

⁶ James 2:26

⁷ Hebrews 11:7

⁸ Luke 9:24

⁹ Hebrews 11:13

¹⁰ Hebrews 11:9-10, 15-16

¹¹ Genesis 15:1-2

¹² 2 Corinthians 7:5

¹³ Genesis 15:4-6

¹⁴ Romans 4:23-25

¹⁵ Genesis 15:8-21

¹⁶ Genesis 17:15-18

¹⁷ Romans 4:20-21

¹⁸ John 8:56

¹⁹ Romans 4:18

²⁰ Hebrews 11:17-19

²¹ Genesis 22:18

²² James 2:22

²³ Galatians 2:17

²⁴ Romans 6:22

²⁵ Galatians 3:29

The Faith of Isaac

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.”¹

As we think of Isaac in the scriptures, we find the events of his life were often overshadowed by others. When he was nearly offered in sacrifice, we think of Abraham’s mighty faith and obedience. When he desired a helpmate, we think of Abraham’s servant and Rebekah’s faith. When Isaac sought to bless his eldest son, we think of Jacob obtaining the blessing through deception.

Isaac’s faith was revealed not in the notable deeds or journeys or visions of his father Abraham or son Jacob, but in peaceably trusting in God’s promises and submitting to His workings through life’s circumstances. God gave equal respect to Isaac’s faith, calling Himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Let’s take a closer look at how Isaac became a peaceable and enduring link of faith through which God’s promises were passed from one generation to another.

We can picture a young Isaac asking his mother how she came to have a son in her old age, and marveling at God’s promise fulfilled by his own birth. Through time Isaac’s faith and peaceable spirit must have grown as he realized that God desired him to be a joint heir of the promised blessings. We should likewise implant in our youth the knowledge that they each are a special blessing from God and can inherit His eternal promises by walking in faith.

As he grew into manhood, Isaac was traumatically exposed to the costs of discipleship and rewards of faith. Imagine his emotions as his loving father Abraham — in obedience to God — took him on a long journey, bound him, laid him on an altar, and took up a knife to slay him in sacrifice to God. Even in this fearful and confusing trial, Isaac peaceably submitted to his father, mirroring his father’s submission to God’s command and trust in God’s promises. Thankfully, Isaac in the next moment experienced the depth of God’s mercy as God provided a ram to sacrifice in his place.² A few minutes later, Isaac heard for himself the promised blessings that came to his father by faith and were affirmed through obedience and trust: “...because thou... hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven... And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.”³ What a tremendous lesson and promise not just for Isaac, but for all of us: God calls us to obey him at all costs, and yet even our highest service or act of obedience is far outweighed by His mercy and eternal blessings.⁴

Isaac’s submissive spirit and peaceable faith were further revealed when he desired a helpmate. His father Abraham sent a trusted servant to find a godly wife, and for many days Isaac awaited the servant’s return. In the midst of increasing anxiety and anticipation, “*Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide.*”⁵ Through his meditations, Isaac’s heart was prepared to accept God’s direction and provision. When the servant returned, Isaac was moved by God’s work and Rebekah’s faith. He “*took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her.*”⁶ As we face uncertainties of life, what a blessing when we can quietly meditate on God’s goodness to calm our minds and allow God’s Spirit and Word to shape our thoughts and speak to our hearts.⁷

In the years that followed, Isaac and Rebekah perhaps grew discouraged, as they had no children to inherit the promised blessings. But Isaac must have remembered his own birth, late in his mother’s life. In faith and love, “*Isaac entreated the Lord for his wife, because she was barren: and the Lord was entreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.*”⁸ When we face discouragements and await the fulfillment of God’s promises, may we like Isaac pray in faith for and with those we love.

Soon after, Isaac observed Rebekah's faith as she felt twin children struggling within her and asked God for understanding. "*And the Lord said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb... and the elder shall serve the younger.*"⁹ One may wonder whether years later Isaac struggled to reconcile God's declaration with his own personal affection toward his eldest son and his expectation that Esau would inherit the greater wealth and blessing.

When a grievous famine struck the land, Isaac prayed in faith to God, for guidance whether to move to a more fertile land. God answered, "*Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee; ...and will give unto thy seed all these countries; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.*"¹⁰ There was no great command to do anything except quietly endure and be still, trusting in the unfolding of God's promises.

As the famine raged on, Isaac's servants twice unearthed wells to water his flocks, only to have his neighbors claim it for their own. Rather than fight, Isaac peacefully retreated to a different location. God rewarded his faith by reassuring him to "*fear not, for I am with thee, and will bless thee, and multiply thy seed.*"¹¹ May we like Isaac see ourselves as pilgrims on the earth, bearing the fruit of peaceableness and embracing the blessed assurance of being the children of God.¹²

As Isaac's body began to wear down in his old age, he desired to bless his favored and eldest son Esau before he died. In a somewhat perplexing account, Rebekah and Jacob deceived him into granting Jacob the blessing he intended for Esau. When Esau then appeared and asked for his father's blessing, Isaac trembled in confusion, struggling to grasp what happened. He blessed Esau with a heartfelt but lesser blessing, respecting the greater blessing he had already pronounced upon Jacob.¹³

Isaac must have wrestled with how and why this all unfolded, but through time and meditation remembered God's declaration to his wife and recognized God's hand working to accomplish His will. Isaac accepted God's choice and again blessed Jacob, this time with full intention and faith entreating God Almighty to "*give thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee, and to thy seed with thee.*"¹⁴ May we likewise submit ourselves to God's direction and embrace his power to accomplish His will even through our weaknesses.

As we reflect on Isaac's life, let us be inspired by his submissive and peaceable faith, which links together Abraham and Jacob in an enduring chain of faith and promise that was ultimately fulfilled in Christ, and continues to include us today as joint heirs of God's eternal promises.

(Footnotes)

¹ Hebrews 11:20

² Genesis 22:6-13

³ Genesis 22:15-18

⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:17

⁵ Genesis 24:63

⁶ Genesis 24:67

⁷ Psalms 1:2

⁸ Genesis 25:21

⁹ Genesis 25:22-23

¹⁰ Genesis 26:3-4

¹¹ Genesis 26:24

¹² Matthew 5:9

¹³ Genesis 27

¹⁴ Genesis 28:1-4

Enoch's Faith and Translation

Theme verse: *“By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.”*¹

Translation

Scripture shares very little about the Enoch of Hebrews 11. The seventh from Adam, Enoch walked with God. “. . . and all the days of Enoch were three hundred sixty-five years: And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him.”² The writer of Hebrews adds that *“God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.”*³ Translation (gr. metathesis) meaning transferal or removal. Enoch's faith was rewarded by being transferred to heaven by God without experiencing death on earth. This 'translation' is replicated only once in the Bible, when the prophet Elijah was taken up into heaven. *“And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.”*⁴

The significance of translation touches all who have had a spiritual rebirth in Christ. Jesus Christ often taught eternal spiritual truths in parables by using the created (physical) world that we can see, hear and touch, as an example. *“Verily, verily I say unto you, he that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, if a man keep my saying, he shall never see death.”*⁵ What Enoch and Elijah by faith experienced in the physical, we as followers of Christ can experience in spirit and soul. From these two scriptures we can conclude that by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, evidenced by the keeping of His sayings (commandments), we will experience in our eternal being what Enoch experienced in the physical body.

Walking with God

Enoch's faith is evident by the scripture's testimony that he walked with God. What does it mean to walk with God? The Old Testament expression of men walking with God, in addition to Enoch, is used of both Noah⁶ and Abraham⁷. The prophet Micah captured it well, *“He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”*⁸ To walk humbly with God is to have fellowship with Him, to hear and obey His counsel and to openly share with Him our joys, sorrows, and struggles. As believers, we walk with God in prayer and by reading and meditating on His Word. We walk with Him in submission and in agreement that He knows what is best for us. *“Can two walk together, except they be agreed.”*⁹

Pleasing God

Enoch pleased God. He may not be the first biblical character we call to mind when we think of God-pleasers, yet the writer of Hebrews calls our attention to this very connection when he writes that Enoch's life was pleasing to God. *“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”*¹⁰ The writer of Hebrews is clearly connecting Enoch's pleasing of God to Enoch's faith. Something about Enoch's life of faith—his pursuit of God and fellowship with Him—played out in a heart which trusted that God was who He said He was (*“...believe that he is...”*) and that walking with Him, and thereby pleasing Him, would bring great reward (*“...and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him...”*). The apocryphal writings, which give a bit more insight into the life of Enoch, echo this same idea of belief that God is who He says He is. Jude 14-15 quotes from the apocryphal book 1 Enoch 1:9 *“And Enoch*

*also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed ...*¹¹ Enoch spoke of God's judgment, and his belief in God being true to His word is evident in Enoch's prophecy. He believed that God was who He said He was and that He would do what He promised. While Hebrews 11 outlines a great many actions of faith; the offering of sacrifices (including Abraham's son Isaac), the building of the ark, the leaving of one's homeland, and standing up in the power of God against Pharaoh, some faith-filled heroes, like Enoch, seemed to have simply lived a life of faith and fellowship with their God; speaking His words, sharing His truth, and truly believing that He was God, Lord of all, and that in following hard after Him there is rich spiritual and heavenly reward.

Enoch's Translation, The Believer's Translation

So, what do we know about Enoch? We know that he walked with God, which implies a strong relationship with God and a godly way of living. We know that he prophesied; he spoke words of God, sharing them with God's people to build them up or to stir them up. We know that he pleased God, which in itself bears witness to an incredible theological truth—to think that the creation of the Almighty God can move Him, giving Him pleasure or displeasure. We know that he did not see death, because he was translated or taken up. We may not know a great deal about Enoch, but what we do know sets a pattern for the life to which we are called today. We can walk with God, growing in our knowledge and love for Him, sensing His presence and His love for us. We can speak words, desiring, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14, the gift of prophecy to “*build and stir up the church.*”¹² We can, miraculously, please God, as we walk with Him and speak His words through our life and our voice. Finally, we do not have to ‘see’ or experience death because of the resurrection. As Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 15, “*So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, death is swallowed up in victory. O death where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”¹³

We, too, await our translation.

(Footnotes)

¹ Hebrews 11:5

² Genesis 5:24

³ Hebrews 11:5

⁴ 2 Kings 2:11

⁵ John 8:51

⁶ Genesis 6:9

⁷ Genesis 24:40

⁸ Micah 6:8

⁹ Amos 3:3

¹⁰ Hebrews 11:5

¹¹ Jude 14-15

¹² 1 Corinthians 14:12

¹³ 1 Corinthians 15:54-57