

Remedial Christianity

Correcting Deficiencies
in
Popular Christianity

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*Remedial Christianity: Correcting Deficiencies in
Popular Christianity*

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This volume was compiled using the notes from a 26-part series of sermons on fundamental aspects of Biblical Christianity (*“Remedial Christianity”*) that Pastor Paul delivered to his congregation at Branch of Hope OPC in Torrance, California.

At the end of each of his sermon notes, Pastor Paul has included a section of “Questions for Study and Meditation.”

We hope the reader will find these helpful in their study of and meditation on the Word of God.

Soli Deo Gloria

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Part I

Establishing Our Starting Place

March 23, 2003

My Remedial Body

Not long ago I was on campus at UCLA to watch a sporting event. I was accompanied by a couple of friends, one of whom happened to be a track and field coach for the university. We thought it would be fun to go out to the track and have a little high jump competition. The high jump was an event I did in college. In fact, about twenty-five years ago I got a track scholarship as a high-jumper. The competition began.

We started at about four feet—all clearing the height easily. Slowly we inched the bar up to five feet; a height I had made in the eighth grade. They made it; I missed it. I felt the old competitive nature start to well up in my soul. I wasn't about to lose this competition. My opponents weren't even high-jumpers. On my second effort I gave it the old college try. I remember learning about muscle memory in my exercise physiology classes. My muscles started to remember. They remembered the injuries and abuse I had put them through as a youngster. They retaliated with surgeon-like precision and gladiatorial cruelty. I limped off the track with a pulled hamstring, vowing never to return again.

I spent the first half of my life abusing my body and I'll spend the second half trying to undo the damage. This is a pretty common scenario. People spend fifty years smoking or eating a cheese-based diet thinking their body will forgive and forget—until their first heart attack. Then we get all nice to our bodies. No smoking, maybe a little jogging and a little tofu—this is remedial living.

Defining Remedial

Remedial, according to Webster, means *to correct a deficiency*. If someone is remedial they need to unlearn wrong things and re-learn them the right way—they need to undo the damage and

reconstruct the damaged area correctly. Remedial classes in college aren't for people who have no background in English or math. Technically they're designed for people who have learned English or math incorrectly; this makes it a more difficult task. It's much easier to build a house on a vacant lot than it is to remodel a damaged house. Sometimes it's better to just demolish the old house and start from scratch; like the military flight instructor who opens his class by ordering all his students (many with past flying experience) to forget everything they know.

I have been a Christian for thirty years. During the past twenty years I've been correcting the deficiencies, or errors, I acquired in my first ten years. I've been practicing remedial Christianity. This is not to say that I don't still absorb new errors, but, quite frankly, in most cases it's the difference between a complete u-turn and a moderate adjustment in the wheel. I've had to make some huge u-turns in my understanding of Christianity. I'm remedial and I'll bet you are too.

Remedial is different than immature. It's easy to teach the immature. They don't have any bad habits yet. As a remedial Christian I found it much more difficult to be properly trained. I had all sorts of bad habits. I misunderstood verses and passages in the Bible, concepts about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, God's law and the very nature of salvation. I didn't merely have to learn about these things, I had to unlearn the wrong things I had been taught.

Admitting I was wrong about God was a hard thing for me to do. I had taught many of these things to others. There was a lot of pride tied up in my thoughts. I also had an emotional investment in my thoughts about God. The image I had of God in my thoughts and prayers was slowly being shattered or, at very least, altered significantly.

I imagine I'll spend the rest of my life unlearning wrong things and learning them the right way. This doesn't really bother me—it means I'm growing. After all, most of the epistles in the Bible were written to correct errors. The lessons here are directed to people like me, and the other remedials to whom I have had the opportunity to minister. A good eighty percent of my time as a pastor, teacher, counselor, and radio host has been dedicated to helping people unlearn wrong thoughts about God and relearn them the right way.

Learning New Errors

At least one question is in order at this point. How do I know I'm not just learning new errors? How can that be guaranteed? I have found that when I have been properly corrected, my errors become obvious to me. Simple and wise correction can be overwhelmingly effective. For example, people go their whole lives living as skeptics and asserting that they don't believe in anything they can't see. In a few seconds you can point out that they believe in many things they can't see: time, energy, space, mass, etc. In fact, they can't see the statement they just made about not believing anything they can't see.

The first half of the remedial process (unlearning the wrong stuff) can be as simple as that. We must be willing to be corrected all of our lives. In time, like cross hairs dancing across a target, we are slowly being brought closer to the truth. I can't think of anything more fundamental to this pursuit than humility. The Bible teaches that **God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5)**.

I am not asking you to be humble before me. Lest you think I am seeking to make you overly malleable to what I have to say, the Scriptures also instruct us, **“Test all things; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21)**.

Determining Our Control Belief

Test what I am saying. If what I have to say is senseless, throw it in the garbage with the rest of the trash. This, however, brings us to our first issue: By what standard will you determine if what I, or anybody else, says is true? What is your control belief? What is the bedrock of your measurement of truth? What is your starting place of knowledge? You open a book or a newspaper; listen to a lecture or a television or radio broadcast, and then begin to make your evaluations. On what authority do you rely to make this evaluation?

If I were to say that I think it is all right for me to lie, cheat, steal, and maim in order to secure my own happiness, by what authority would, or could, you refute such a self-centered standard of living? You could say, “It's just wrong” or “It's obvious,” but I am not sure how convinced I would be by such an argument.

I am regularly invited to speak at college ethics classes on the issue of homosexual marriage. I am usually expected to make my argument against homosexual marriage by marching in a bag of statistics showing the damaging effects of homosexuality on a society or some such thing. There is one big problem with that. There must be some agreement on what a damaged society looks like. I might argue that a damaged society is one where homosexuality is viewed as an acceptable alternative lifestyle, but then I am begging the question—my conclusion is contained in my premise. I don't approach the subject that way.

I usually pick some other moral issue, one by which all the students will be repulsed—usually pedophilia. They all agree this is wrong and I am considered near mad to compare homosexuality to such a deplorable sin. The field has now been tilled and is ready for seeding. “What,” I generally ask, “is the standard you have used to accept the one (homosexuality) and reject the other (pedophilia)?” I am quick to remind them that fifty years ago, if I were to compare something that was becoming acceptable then (say, living together out of wedlock) to homosexuality, I would have received the same reaction; the ninety-year-olds in the retirement home Bible study still can't believe homosexuality is so widely accepted.

Be that as it may, why are these eighteen-year-olds so accepting of homosexuality while holding pedophiles in contempt? The answer they give is usually something like this: “The former are consenting adults and the latter is against the law,” at which time the classmates, frustrated with the idiocy of my presentation begin their mob-like chorus of “yeah, right, etc.” But then I ask why they think people must be willing to consent; where is *that* written? Then they say, “It's written in the law books,” end of argument, time for lunch. “So,” I ask, “you all believe that if it's the law, then it's right?” They respond, “Well, no.” “How do we determine,” I continue, “which laws are right and which are wrong?” Now the mob is transformed into deer in the headlights.

The first half of remedial instruction (recognizing the error) has been completed. They now realize they have no idea whatsoever how to determine what is true or right or ethical. Philosophers would say they are not *epistemologically self-conscious* (epistemology is the study of the theory of knowledge). In other words, they don't know *why* they know what they know.

Now comes the second portion of remedial instruction—the actual correction of the deficiency. As a Christian I believe this can only happen as a result of the grace of God. This is not due to insufficient information but because once you begin to acknowledge the truth, you must recognize that it has a claim on your life; there are certain things that are simply not okay. Jesus sheds light,

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

If Jesus is right, and I tend to think He is, the problem in terms of embracing the light or truth is not a matter of sufficient evidence or argumentation, but because people prefer darkness to the light. The reason people prefer the darkness is because the darkness, at least for a while, hides our evil deeds.

All this is to say that the beginning point of our instruction must be to establish what our control belief is. What is the starting point (or presupposition) of determining truth? What is the authoritative and absolute beginning of genuine, inerrant (without error) knowledge?

The Bible

The answer the Christian gives to this question is the Holy Scriptures. Jesus informs us that **“Your (God’s) word is truth” (John 17:17)**. But why would we consider the Bible the word of God? What is the Bible and why should we believe it? Who is God, how do we know He is God, and why should we trust Him? If, in our remedial instruction, we have established that the common methods of determining truth are insufficient, perhaps we are ready for the correction of the deficiency.

But what will we find in the Scriptures? What does the Bible have to say about what the Christian faith actually is? Is Christianity the headlong pursuit of getting people to ask Jesus into their hearts during an altar call? Is Christianity power living? Is it a matter of figuring out the secret of the Spirit-filled or Spirit-led life? Is it being

a good-deed doer? Is it immersing oneself in church programs? Is it a matter of losing your personality and becoming timid and compliant beyond all recognition? Is it being a republican? Is it becoming monk-like and denying all worldly pleasures? Is it wearing religious jewelry or putting a fish on the bumper of my car? Must I quit dancing and drinking and laughing and become a teetotaler with no rhythm or sense of humor? If you think the essence, or heart, of the Christian faith is any of these things, you need a good dose of remedial Christianity.

In short, I will state (just in case you can't manage to get through all these messages) that the essential message of the Bible is that there is a righteous and holy God. God *is*—God exists. Furthermore, we will learn that men, because of their sin, have broken fellowship with God and have souls which are in peril. The Bible teaches that God has provided a Savior to rescue sinful men from that peril. And this Bible, in no uncertain terms, reveals that Savior, Jesus the Christ (the one anointed by the Father for this task). We are to trust in Him as the Savior of our souls and Lord of our hearts.

But I have jumped ahead. I am giving information from the Bible. Our questions now are, “What is this Bible?” and “Why should I believe it?” Answering these two questions will be next on our list.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Define *Remedial*.
2. What is the difference between remedial and immature?
3. Why would it be hard to admit having incorrect thoughts about God?
4. What is one of the most fundamental character traits necessary for learning the truth?
5. What is your control belief?
6. How do you know that your control belief is sound?
7. How do you determine behavior to be acceptable or unacceptable?
8. Why do people (according to Jesus) resist the truth/light?
9. What is the control belief/starting point of knowledge for the Christian?
10. What is the essential message found in the Bible?

Part II

The Bible: Just What Is It?

March 30, 2003

Years ago it was my privilege to be invited to the banquet of the Olympic Gold Medal winning USA volleyball team. A few talks were given prior to bringing on their keynote speaker. This main speaker was arguably the finest college basketball coach in the history of the NCAA, John Wooden.

Retired, elderly and eloquent, Coach Wooden began to challenge these Gold Medalists to pursue the finer things in life. He spoke of things like art, beauty, history and the like. As his speech was coming to a close, he broached the subject of literature. "Read the classics," I remember him saying. And then, as if he were speaking of a separate category altogether he said, "And read the greatest classic of all, the Bible."

The tenor of his language gave the impression that their Gold Medals paled in comparison to what these young men would find contained within the pages of the Holy Scriptures. The aged Wizard of Westwood, who had won all his sport had to offer, when given the opportunity, spoke as one who had possession of that which transcended all human honor and glory, this great possession being found in the pages of Scripture.

Starting Point

Previously we established the necessity of determining our starting point of knowledge. Everybody has an opinion; everybody has some sense of right and wrong, truth and error. But very few people are epistemologically self-conscious; that is, most people don't know why they know what they know.

Recently PETA (the animal activist organization) was back in the news regarding the use of dolphins to find depth charges in the ocean. Many PETA enthusiasts are under the impression that the value of the life of an animal is equal to that of a human. A letter

from a PETA member was written to the leader of a nation that courted terrorist activities. It seems they had sent a donkey, loaded with explosives, into a group of people. The explosion killed many people and of course, the donkey. The writer was not so concerned about the people who died in the explosion as she was concerned about the innocent donkey who had died.

Is a human life inherently more valuable than an animal's life? If you were driving down the road and found yourself in a situation where you couldn't avoid either hitting a human or an animal with your car, would you choose to hit the human or the animal? Ninety-nine percent of people asked would clearly choose to save the human rather than the animal; but not everybody would agree with this decision. The real question is where is the answer found.

What is our starting place of ethics and truth? Is it the way we feel, the way our ancestors or culture taught us? Is it mere convention or consensus—majority making it moral? Is it so weaved into our nature that it is just blatantly obvious? It doesn't take too much ciphering to figure out that none of these provide an objective basis for truth. What if someone else feels differently than I? What if I myself feel different tomorrow? What if I find that my other ancestors (from my mother's side) believed completely opposite to my father's ancestors? What if the consensus changes? What if I'm the deciding vote? What if that which is weaved into my nature is contrary to what is weaved into my neighbor's nature?

How can we avoid making the type of nonsensical and contradictory statements made by Alan Dershowitz in his debate with Alan Keyes? In less than a ten minute period he says he doesn't know what goodness is, that his audience of about three thousand doesn't know what it is either and never will, and that he is writing a book on it (something he will never know). But for a man who is incapable of defining goodness, he seemed to know enough about goodness to assert that it is absolutely wrong for religion to have an influence in government decision-making.

In order for there to be any sense of objective, absolute truth or ethics, we must recognize a source that transcends all of humanity. This source must be righteous and this source must communicate that righteousness to us in an objective and observable way. According to Christianity the source of truth is God and the means by which He conveys this truth is the Bible.

The Holy Bible

Just what is this best-seller above all best-sellers we call the Bible? It is not one book, but rather is 66 books written by 40 different authors of varying occupations over a 1500-year period. The 66 books of the Bible are broken into two large sections known as the Old Testament (39 books written between 1500 BC and 400 BC) and the New Testament (27 books, all of which were written in the first century AD).

It's customary for these 66 books to be referred to collectively as The Holy Bible. The word *Bible* merely means *book* or *roll* or *scroll*. *Holy* means *separate* or *sacred* or *set apart*. The Bible is a holy book. Its author is holy, its message is holy and its design is to make us holy.¹ The Bible is not merely a book about God; it is a book *from* God. The assertion is that God inspired the forty authors to infallibly and inerrantly record what He had determined to record. The Bible is, therefore, absolute in its authority. It is the standard of all standards. It is not confirmed by human investigation, but just the opposite: human endeavors, be they scientific or philosophic, are judged by Scripture. For Christians, the Bible is the starting point of true knowledge. Later we will discuss why we should believe this. Here we will survey the contents and then the over-arching message of the 66 books. First, the Old Testament:

Surveying Scripture

Book Narratives: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy

There are varying types of books in the Bible. The first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch), written by Moses, are narratives. They give an historical account of events from the beginning of creation until the delivery of the Israelites from slavery. These books convey the stories of Noah, Babel, Abraham, Joseph and his brothers, Pharaoh, etc. We learn of the beginning of the nation of Israel. They also give a record of the sacrificial and priestly systems designed to foreshadow the person and work of Christ.

¹ R. C. Sproul, *Geneva Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson, 1995) p. iv.

#6-17—Joshua Through Esther: Narratives

Books six through seventeen—Joshua through Esther—are also historical books. We read of Joshua entering the Promised Land and receiving all the land God had promised to Abraham. In these books we read of a period in history called Judges, where God ruled His people through these selected and inspired leaders. It is here that we read of Samson and Gideon.

This section of the Bible also contains the period called Kings (1, 2 Samuel; 1, 2 Kings; 1, 2 Chronicles). We learn here of Kings Saul, David and Solomon, and the eventual division of Israel as kingdom and its enslavement to foreign nations.

#19—Psalms: Poetry

Toward the center of your Bible you will find a book of 150 chapters known as the Psalms or Songs. These are mainly written by David and are poetic in nature. Being poetic, however, does not mean they are not rooted in historical fact. Many of the events we read of in the Kings portion of the Bible are the historical context for the Psalms. They often record David's passionate and personal responses to the toils in his life and the peace he finds in God.

#18, 20, 21, 22—Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon: Wisdom Literature

Three of the four above books were written by Solomon, who was gifted by God to be the wisest man who would ever live. These books do not so convey history as much as they impart specific truths and thoughts (often dealing with ethics) in particular situations. We are generally informed in these books what kind of behavior is foolish and what kind of behavior is wise.

#23-27—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel: Major Prophets (prophetic)

The Major Prophets give both warning and consolation to God's people. They warn Israel to repent lest they fall into judgment, and they proclaim that God will deliver them from judgment and oppression. We learn much about the justice and deliverance of God

in the Major Prophets. In these books you will find language which is apocalyptic in nature (unveiling of future judgment through signs).

#28-39—Hosea Through Malachi: Minor Prophets (prophetic)

The Minor Prophets generally address the issues of the divided Kingdom of Israel, which had come to be referred to as Israel and Judah. It is here in history (about 700 BC until 400 BC) that we learn of Israel's captivity to the Assyrians and Judah's captivity to the Babylonians. The Old Testament ends with God's people in captivity.

The New Testament

After about four hundred years of prophetic silence a new prophet arises in Israel whose name is John (the Baptist). It is his job to announce the coming of the Promised One of God, Jesus the Christ. It is this Jesus who is the one who will bring freedom to God's captive people; although not in the way many people thought. This is the New Testament.

#1-4—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John: Gospel Narratives

The first four books of the New Testament are called Gospels (meaning *good news*). The good news is that Jesus, God's promised Messiah, has come to seek and to save that which was lost. The four gospels give accounts of the birth, life and death of Christ from four different perspectives. Matthew, Mark and Luke are very similar and are called the synoptic (meaning *to see the whole together*) gospels.

#5—Acts: Narrative

Acts, written by Luke, is basically a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. It records the beginning of the Christian church. Though there is theology to be observed and learned in Acts, great confusion takes place when people use the events in Acts as if they are to be the perpetual norm for the church. In Acts we read of the ascension of Christ, Pentecost, Apostles raising people from the dead, speaking with absolute apostolic authority, etc. These are all part of

the accomplished work of redemption and we must be careful not to expect all of these types of things to be present today.

#6-18—Romans through Philemon (Paul’s Epistles): Didactic (instructional; meant for teaching)

The epistles (letters) of the Apostle Paul make up the meat of theological instruction found in all of Scripture. It is their design to teach proper doctrine about God in a very direct manner. Many of the churches, or individuals, to which Paul writes are churches he started or individuals he brought to Christ. These letters are generally correctional in nature and are addressing errors that were creeping into the church.

The difficulty here lies in seeking to assess what the problems were that Paul was addressing. In a way, we’re reading somebody else’s mail. These people and churches would have been directly taught by Paul prior to these letters and they, obviously, would have been quite familiar with the problems Paul is addressing—problems we are left to figure out.

#19—Hebrews: Didactic

Although many people believe Paul wrote Hebrews, there is no conclusive evidence in Scripture that he did. Hebrews is written to Jewish Christians who were tempted (often through fear of persecution) to leave Christianity and go back to Judaism.

#20-26—James through Jude: General Epistles (Didactic)

The General Epistles are written by James, Peter, John (the Apostle) and Jude. Similar to Paul’s epistles, they are all addressing problems creeping into the church (often regarding false teachers) which would detract from the pure message of the gospel once for all delivered to the saints.

#27—The Revelation: Apocalyptic

The final, and perhaps most controversial, book in the Bible is the Revelation. It is a cyclical letter written to seven churches. It

reveals to its readers (through signs) the judgment of God over the enemy of God's people and God's power to preserve His church, with an accent on His ultimate and eventually judgment of evil and deliverance of His people to eternal peace. Arguably, the Revelation is difficult to understand by design. Since it was likely a letter revealing to Christians the eventual destruction of Israel and the Roman Empire, it was written in such a way that only Christians familiar with the literary style of the Old Testament prophets would understand. If it fell into the hands of Rome, no one would be able to interpret the signs.

The Over-Arching Message

One might think that 66 books written by 40 different authors over a 1500-year period might be pretty scattered regarding its theme or message; after all, ten witnesses to an automobile accident can easily have nine different and contradictory accounts of the same event only hours later. Not so with the Scriptures.

The over-arching message of Scripture is quite clear. We see it all in seed form in the very first three chapters in Genesis. In short, there is a God who is good and holy. He created all things and created them good. God created man who rebelled against God, and death entered. It did not please God to leave men at the mercy of death, so God made a promise (a covenant) that through the seed of the woman (speaking of the eventual birth of Jesus), the enemy of God's people (Satan, sin, death, et al) would be destroyed.

The rest of the Scripture unveils this simple message of redemption. The Bible is the story of the history of redemption. The Bible surely contains instructions in living, truth, reality, knowledge, ethics, etc. But all of these categories are there to buttress the primary message, which is God's glorification of Himself through His redemptive plan to save sinners through the cross of Christ. This is what leads Jesus to say, **"You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39).**

And though we may not see Jesus in every jot, tittle, period or comma in the Bible, to read too far in the Scriptures and miss the message that there is a God who judges sin and delivers sinners through the judgment of His own Son is to miss the point of Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, that is the message.

Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-24).

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, *was* the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each *tree* yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree *were* for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name *shall be* on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever (Revelation 22:1-5).

You may think this is all well and good, but why should I believe the Bible? It is this subject we will take up next.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What is your starting point of knowledge? Why do you think it's reliable?
2. How many books make up the Bible? How many authors? When were the books written?
3. What is meant by the title *Holy Bible*?
4. How does the Christian view the Bible in terms of authority, authorship, etc.?
5. Who wrote the first five books of the Bible?
6. What is a narrative?
7. If something is poetic, is it necessarily fiction?
8. What are the books of wisdom?
9. What are some of the main roles played by the prophets?
10. What are the gospels and what do they convey?
11. Who wrote Acts and what must we be careful of in our study of Acts?
12. What was Paul's purpose in writing his epistles?
13. Why do you suppose that the Revelation is such a difficult book?
14. What is the over-arching message of Scripture?

Part III

Why Should I Believe the Bible?

April 6, 2003

Review

We've addressed the need to establish a starting place for truth, knowledge, ethics, etc. If there is no agreement regarding a starting place for truth, then all discussions will be futile. If one person believes that the starting place for ethics is what he feels is right, he will never come to agree (other than by coincidence) with another person who believes the starting place for truth to be the teachings of Gandhi or the Constitution.

We then offered the assertion that the starting place for truth, knowledge, and ethics for the Christian is the Bible. We gave a brief overview of what the Bible actually is—sixty-six books written by forty different authors over a fifteen hundred year period. Along with the overview we discussed the overarching message of Scripture.

That message, in short, is that there is a God who is good and holy. He created all things and created them good. God created man who rebelled against God, and death entered. It did not please God, though, to leave men at the mercy of death so God made a promise (a covenant) that through the seed of the woman (speaking of the eventual birth of Jesus), the enemy of God's people (Satan, sin, death, etc.) would be destroyed.

The primary message in Scripture is that there is a God who will glorify Himself through His redemptive plan to save sinners through the cross of Christ. This is what led Jesus to say, **“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39).**

What Do You Need to See?

The question before us this morning is: why should we believe the Bible? If I said I had some evidence behind the podium that will

convince you beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Bible is true, what would you expect to see? The Shroud of Turin? The Ark of the Covenant? An old dusty scroll written by some Roman potentate? A piece of the cross? Just what would I have to come up with in order to convince you to believe that the Bible is true? Even if I had all those artifacts, how would you know they're legit?

I could say that we should believe in the Bible because it is true. In fact, that is what I will end up saying. But being the reasonable and rational people that we are, we would certainly be unconvinced at such a circular statement. The conclusion is contained in the premise. We have begged the question.

Since we are, therefore, so very rational, what would convince us to make our starting place—our bedrock—our standard to measure all truth—the Bible? What if I were to pile payloads of archeological, anthropological, and historical data demonstrating and affirming the impeccable accuracy of Scripture?

Testimony of Science

I could also produce archeological recantations of errors regarding cultures (like the Hittites) that scientists said never existed, but of which the Bible spoke; cultures that archeologists later unearthed, thus further verifying the testimony of Scripture. There are bags of this kind of evidence. All good science affirms things already found in Scripture.

Evidential argumentation for the veracity of the Bible is a very common practice for remedial Christians. And, as Dr. Greg Bahnsen stated, “they work if you have an unsophisticated audience.” Why is this unsophisticated reasoning? It should be obvious that if you decide to believe the Bible due to the testimony of science, then science, and not the Bible, is your starting place for truth. Let's briefly pursue this.

Do you not find it interesting that scientists never feel the need to justify their starting place for knowledge? The empiricist (scientist) proudly asserts that he only believes that which he can observe. In order for something to be true, it must fall under the scientific method. (The scientific method is usually something like testability, measurability, observe-ability and repeatability.) Of course, the scientific method itself is none of these. Science, as a starting place for knowledge or truth, crumbles under its own method.

We all know that looks can be deceiving. The oar, when placed in the water, appears to be bent. It will appear to be bent if I place it in the water a thousand times. But we all know it does not bend. *Or does it?* Do you trust your sense of sight over touch?

I have great respect for good science. But science cannot be the starting place for truth. Science is dependent on there being a thing called *truth* in order for it to work. If all this is too difficult, read a sixty-year-old science book and find out how much of the truth *then* is still truth *today*.

History

A very popular evidential argument for the truth of the Bible is found in the assertion that the Bible is historically verifiable. Things are cited like clear testimonies from non-Christian ancient Roman governors regarding the truths contained in Scripture. An argument I was fond of using was that the fact of the cross is as historically verifiable as the fact that Napoleon was at the battle of Waterloo. But I don't know if Napoleon was at the battle of Waterloo. I might have a hard time finding Waterloo on a map. For all I know Napoleon had a twin; pretty slim evidence on which to rest your eternal soul.

Changed Lives

Another tactic for remedial Christians is to seek to impress people with the effect the Bible has had in the lives of people. As one young man said regarding a discussion he had with unbelievers, "They can't deny my testimony." Why can't they deny your testimony? Others have testimonies. Muslims have testimonies. Jews have testimonies. AA members have testimonies. Tony Robbins' followers have testimonies. Certainly the Bible is responsible for changing the lives of billions, but that is relatively unimpressive in terms of an argument for it being true.

Fulfilled Prophecies

What of all the fulfilled prophecies? There were numerous and detailed prophecies made about the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ in the Old Testament that came to pass in the

New Testament. But this argument is not compelling to someone who simply doesn't believe in the Old or New Testaments.

The Futility of Argumentation

It is my opinion that all the arguments in the world, no matter how sound, will not convince someone to believe in the Bible. If someone is committed to unbelief, they will interpret all arguments through their grid of unbelief. Those who hold the position that miracles can't happen will never believe it was a miracle. Considering the event to be miraculous is not an option. They will employ Sherlock Holmes' methodology: "Eliminate the impossible and then whatever is left, regardless of how improbable, is your only option." If your starting place for knowledge doesn't allow for miracles and you saw me perform a miracle you would simply assert that there is some natural explanation, even if you don't yet know what it is.

Arguing Nonetheless

So, what to do! I guess I could just dismiss the congregation right now. I have miserably failed at accomplishing the thesis of my sermon. But since I believe that that which is impossible with man is possible with God, I would like to go ahead and make a three-fold argument for the truth of the Bible. My first argument will be weak, my second argument will be weak as well, but my third argument will be undeniable. My first argument is that no other worldview can give a plausible explanation for reality as we know it. My second argument is that the Bible does give a plausible explanation for reality, and my third argument is...well, we'll get to that.

No Plausible World View

My first argument has, pretty much, already been made. There is no worldview (other than the one found in the Bible) that can explain the reality we all observe. Those who believe that the universe is eternal cannot explain how we reached today since it is impossible to cross an infinite span of time. Those who believe that the universe did not exist at one time cannot give any explanation as to where the material came from that started the universe or why it

exploded when it was not acted upon by an outside object (a violation of the laws of physics).

Those who don't believe in the biblical account of creation cannot explain the essence of ethics. If man, and not the Bible, is the final determiner of what is right, then we must ask: *which* man? In short, those who reject the Bible cannot give any rational explanation for the material or immaterial world we all observe. C.S. Lewis said it in his usual humorous and thought-provoking fashion:

If the solar system was brought about by an accidental collision, then the appearance of organic life on this planet was also an accident, and the whole evolution of Man was an accident too. If so, then all our present thoughts are mere accidents—the accidental by-products of the movement of atoms. And this holds for the thoughts of the materialists and astronomers as well as for anyone else's. But if *their* thoughts—i.e. of materialism and astronomy—are merely accidental by-products, why should we believe them to be true? I see no reason for believing that one accident should be able to give me a correct account of all other accidents. It's like expecting that the accidental shape taken by the splash when you upset the milk jug should give you a correct account of how the jug was made and why it was upset.

I remember finding this type of argument quite compelling. I think the statements are accurate and we should all be properly impressed to think this out. But I certainly haven't proven the Bible to be true.

A Plausible World View

My second argument has already been made as well. The Bible's account of creation gives a plausible explanation for the reality that has caused philosophers and scientists to scratch their heads for centuries. There is an eternal self-existent God who has created everything both material and immaterial. The reason philosophers have any ability to think clearly is because they have been made in

the image of God, and the reason science works is because God has created a uniform nature. We learn all this in the Bible. It is simple, it is true, it explains everything, yet men bend over backwards to find other, less tenable, explanations.

Though I believe this to be true I also recognize that men can simply assert that the quest of history will find some other explanation for the reality we all observe. I have made an argument, but I haven't proven anything.

Argument #3: God's Word in Writing

Let us cruise into my third argument (the undeniable one) with a little history lesson. In the 1640s one of the greatest Christian confessions (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*) ever written (by men wiser than I) began by addressing and defending the Bible. They wrote,

I, 1. Our natural understanding and the works of creation and providence so clearly show God's goodness, wisdom, and power that human beings have no excuse. However, these means alone cannot provide that knowledge of God and of His will which is necessary for salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord at different times and in various ways to reveal Himself and to declare that this revelation contains His will for His church. Afterwards it pleased God to put this entire revelation into writing so that the truth might be better preserved and transmitted and that the church, confronted with the corruption of the flesh and the evil purposes of Satan and the world, might be more securely established and comforted. Since God no longer reveals Himself to His people in those earlier ways, Holy Scripture is absolutely essential.

In short, general revelation (things creation reveal about God) is only sufficient to hold men without excuse. Further revelation is necessary for salvation. God revealed Himself, in a special way, through apostles, prophets, etc., and then committed the revelation to

writing, that the transmission of His word might be better preserved.

Having put forth the essential nature of the Holy Scriptures, how would these brilliant teachers justify their assertion that the Scriptures are the word of God? What is their argumentation?

Circularity?

I, 4. The Bible speaks authoritatively and so deserves to be believed and obeyed. This authority does not depend on the testimony of any man or church but completely on God, its author, Who is Himself truth. The Bible therefore is to be accepted as true, because it is the word of God.

This sounds very circular. The Bible is to be accepted because it is the word of God. We know it is the word of God because it says it is. Perhaps circularity was not something from which the divines of Westminster sought to hide. In some form, it seems that circularity is practiced by everybody. Robert D. Preus, in his explanation of Thomas Aquinas on Scripture, states, as we mentioned earlier,

All sciences argue from principles and do not try to prove their principles. This it is also with theology, whose principles (*principia*) are the articles of faith. In philosophy the lower sciences cannot dispute or prove the principles of a higher science. Sacred Scripture offers the highest science.²

The empiricist, assuming his position to be soundest, uses empiricism to argue the truth of his position. The rationalist does the same. If someone believes their worldview to be true and the soundest explanation of reality, it is only reasonable for them to make the arguments for their worldview, using the principles of their worldview. Why would anyone abandon what they believe to be the soundest principles available for the development of their argument? Preus also states,

² Norman Geisler, *Inerrancy* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 369.

The philosopher will, for instance, work out proofs for the existence of God, but only with the presupposition that he already believes in God. He does not make himself temporarily an atheist.³

Neutrality?

If Christians view the atheist as wrong and foolish, why would they adopt the atheistic worldview as a starting point for their argumentation? Herein lies the modern myth of neutrality. G.I. Williamson comments on this:

Sometimes Protestants have unwittingly done this too. It has often happened in the dealings of Christians with unbelievers. The unbeliever claims that he sees nothing in the Bible to demand belief that it is the word of God. And the believer has all too often, in effect, granted that the unbeliever has had some justification for his position. The believer may even imagine that he can find a “neutral” starting point at which he and the unbeliever are in agreement. Then, it is thought, a series of arguments can be erected on the neutral starting point which in the end might possibly prove that the Bible is the Word of God (or perhaps equally as well that it is not). Thus human reason or archaeology or history, etc., may be made the starting point, and unconsciously this starting point becomes the “higher authority” before which judgment bar God must pass muster. This in effect makes some authority higher than the authority of God. And this cannot be done (cf. Heb. 6:16-18).⁴

Dr. Greg Bahnsen equates this methodology with immorality:

³ Geisler, p. 368.

⁴ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith, for study classes*, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1964), p. 8.

No such compromise is even possible. “No man is able to serve two lords” (Matt. 6:24). It should come as no surprise that, in a world where all things have been created by Christ (Col. 1:16) and are carried along by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3) and where all knowledge is therefore deposited in Him who is the Truth (Col. 2:3; John 14:6) and who must be Lord over all thinking (2 Cor. 10:5), neutrality is nothing short of immorality. “Whosoever therefore would be a friend of the world maketh himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).⁵

According to Bahnsen, and others, to approach the defense of the Scriptures as if they are not the primary authority on earth is dishonest. This is not to say I am not allowed to view things hypothetically. For example, I can hypothesize, “Let’s say for a moment there is no God.” But for me to actually grant that there may not be a God when I actually believe the Bible is true would be dishonest to my highest belief.

The Church Made the Bible

It is not uncommon for Christians to argue that the church somehow established, rather than recognized, the authenticity (canonicity) of Scripture. Don’t we have to believe that the church accurately put the canon together (in which case the church has authority over the Bible—a common claim of Roman Catholicism)? A.A. Hodge points out the all-important, canonical position in Christendom:

This proposition is designed to deny the Romish heresy that the inspired church is the ultimate source of all divine knowledge, and that the written Scripture and ecclesiastical tradition alike depend upon the authoritative seal of the Church for their credibility. They thus make the Scriptures a product of the Spirit through the Church; while, in

⁵ Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, (American Vision, 1996), p. 9.

fact, the Church is a product of the Spirit through the instrumentality of the Word.⁶

Fallible Witnesses

Neither science nor philosophy nor the church can take precedent over the authority of the word of God. The Bible will not be a defendant at the mercy of these fallible witnesses. As Paul wrote, **“let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written...” (Romans 3:4)**. Notice that Paul equates his statement to that which is *written*. R.C. Sproul (actually quoting John Calvin) writes,

Nothing, therefore, can be more absurd than the fiction that the power of judging Scriptures is in the Church, and that on her nod its certainty depends. When the Church receives it, and gives it the stamp of her authority, she does not make that authentic which was otherwise doubtful or controverted, but acknowledging it as the truth of God, she, as is duty bound, shows her reverence by an unhesitating assent.⁷

The Value of Evidence

What we will see in paragraph five is that the Westminster Confession did not discount the value of the church (or other lesser resources) but rather found a proper, yet subordinate, place for these evidences.

I, 5. We may be influenced by the testimony of the church to value the Bible highly and reverently, and Scripture itself shows in so many ways that it is God's word; for example, in its spiritual subject matter, in the effectiveness of its teaching, the majesty of its style, the agreement of all its parts, its unified aim from beginning to end (to give all glory to God), the full revelation it makes of the only way

⁶ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Banner of Truth, 1869), pp. 35,36.

⁷ Geisler, p. 339

of man's salvation, its many other incomparably outstanding features, and its complete perfection. However, we are completely persuaded and assured of the infallible truth and divine authority of the Bible only by the inward working of the Holy Spirit, Who testifies by and with the word in our hearts.

Sproul writes about the value Calvin saw with evidence (*indicia*):

Calvin enumerates the *indicia* or evidence the Scriptures have for their divine origin and authority. He speaks of the dignity of the matter, the heavenliness of its doctrine, the content of its parts, the majesty of its style, the antiquity of its teaching, the sincerity of its narrative, its miracles, predictive prophecies fulfilled, its use through the ages, and its witness by the blood of martyrs. He sees this evidence not as being weak and tentative but objectively strong and compelling.⁸

It doesn't seem that Calvin, or the divines of Westminster, would have eliminated the value of external evidence altogether. To the extent that any evidence is credibly evaluated, it will testify to the truth of God's holy word. The Scriptures will, no doubt, stand up under any legitimate scrutiny or evaluative gaze fixed upon it.

The historical testimony of the church (and other lesser resources) is quite impressive. The spiritual subject matter contained in the Bible along with the effectiveness of its teaching is also worthy of our respect. The majesty of its style, the agreement of all its parts, its unified aim from beginning to end (which is to give all glory to God) leaves the Scriptures unsurpassed as an historical document and reaches the zenith of any literary or historical analysis. For sixty-six books written by forty different authors over a 1500-year period to have such harmony is practically beyond human explanation.

If archeology, anthropology or astronomy were properly pursued, and their conclusions properly evaluated, there is little doubt

⁸ Geisler, p. 343.

that these modern disciplines will also testify to the Scriptures in such a way to be virtually undeniable.

Evidences—Subordinate to Internal Testimony

But let us be firmly convinced that compared to Scripture, all other evaluative tools are dubious at best. We “are completely persuaded and assured of the infallible truth and divine authority of the Bible only by the inward working of the Holy Spirit, Who testifies by and with the word in our hearts.” Sproul said, quoting Calvin:

Let it therefore be held as fixed, that those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture; that Scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit.⁹

Blindingly obvious it should be now to observe the folly of strapping the Scriptures to the defendants’ table while marching witnesses and evidences in and out of courtroom. The Scriptures deign “not to submit to proofs and arguments.”

One wonders how a brilliant scholar like Calvin might proceed in his defense of Scripture. Perhaps he would not deign the Scriptures to submit to proofs but require the views of his opponents to submit to proofs. Perhaps, rather than guarding the castle, he would cast down the strongholds by answering the fool according to his folly. His argumentation might go, “If that be so, then how do you explain...?” I don’t wish to speculate too much here. Suffice it to say, Calvin would not subject the word of God to the scrutiny of dust and neither should we. As he states:

**These [*indicia*], however, cannot of themselves produce a firm faith in Scripture until our heavenly Father manifest his presence in it, and thereby secure implicit reverence for it...
Still the human testimonies which go to confirm it**

⁹ Geisler, p. 342.

will not be without effect, if they are used in subordination to that chief and highest proof as secondary helps to our weakness. But it is foolish to attempt to prove to infidels that the Scripture is the Word of God. This cannot be known to be, except by faith (VIII/13).¹⁰

Preus indicates that Calvin's position was nothing new. Below we read of the disposition of the church Fathers a thousand years before either Calvin or the divines of Westminster:

According to the Fathers, Scripture is *a priori* (from the former) true, irrefragably so. Scripture needs no verification of any kind from outside authority.¹¹

It would seem that the church Fathers also viewed the Scriptures as *a priori* true. Verification may be well and good. It might even be part of a discussion. But it was not needed. Preus, quoting Luther, shows this to be the position leading into the Reformation as well:

Paul takes them all together, himself, an angel from heaven, teachers upon the earth, and masters of all kinds, and subjects them to the Holy Scriptures. Scripture must reign as queen, all must obey and be subject to her, not teachers, judges, or arbiters over her; but they must be simply witnesses, pupils and confessors of it, whether it be pope or Luther or Augustine or an angel from heaven.¹²

Preus, commenting on Luther's position,

This statement of Luther indicates also that Scripture is infallibly true in all its assertions, irrefragable. We need not test it with reason,

¹⁰ Geisler, p. 343.

¹¹ Geisler, p. 365.

¹² Geisler, p. 374.

experience, or any other authority. Its utterances can and ought to be accepted *a priori*.¹³

Let's not mistake Preus' comments here to suggest that the Scriptures are not reasonable, but instead that it is unreasonable for man (whose reason is flawed at best) to subject the pinnacle of truth to his own feeble scrutiny.

The Undeniable Argument

My third and undeniable argument is that the Bible is to be believed because it is true and because to deny its truth is to deny something we know to be true. Jesus taught,

He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day (John 12:48).

The word of God has sufficient authority to act as a judge for all mankind. It is my prayer that by the grace of God we will all recognize the insanity of seeking to judge that which in reality judges us.

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do (Hebrews 4:12, 13 NASB).

My argument for believing the Bible to be true is not a matter of evidences or speculation. And it certainly isn't a matter of convincing people to make a blind leap of faith into a mythological, nonsensical fairy tale. It is more akin to bringing people to their senses, to quit denying the obvious. Specifically, we are called to

¹³ Geisler, p. 379.

repent of our rejection of that which we all know to be true. To argue against the truth of Scripture is like arguing against the existence of air. Every time you inhale in order to make your next point, your argument becomes weaker.

But those who are willing to acquiesce before the profound truths of the Holy Word of God will find on these pages light and life. The message is a message from heaven, a message of redemption. The message itself is the means by which the redemption is applied. *Come and Thy people bless and give Thy word success. Amen.*

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why is it important to have an established starting place for truth?
2. How many books are in the Bible? How many authors? Over how long a period?
3. What is the over-arching theme of Scripture?
4. What would impress you to believe the Bible to be true? Why would it be sufficiently impressive?
5. Why is science a poor starting place for truth?
6. Are “changed lives” a powerful argument for the truth of the Bible?
7. Why are evidential arguments for the truth of the Bible futile?
8. What is wrong with an unbiblical worldview?
9. How does the Bible plausibly explain the world as we know it?
10. In what way does everyone argue in a circular fashion?
11. Why is neutrality a myth?
12. Did the church make the Bible?
13. Of what value is evidence?
14. What is the undeniable argument for the truth of the Bible?

Part IV

A Knowable, Good God

April 27, 2003

Remedial Thoughts Regarding the Knowledge of God

Having discussed what the Bible is and why we should believe it, we now turn to the main topic of the Bible—God. I have only three goals in this present section. To show: 1) that God is knowable, 2) that the quest for knowing God is reasonable and noble, and 3) that God is good. This seems simple enough. But we remedial Christians are capable of taking even the most simple and straight-forward concepts and twisting them into theological pretzels.

A Knowable God

There are many things Christians encounter regarding our knowledge of God that require remedial instruction. First, we are often presented with a God who may not be worth knowing. Another is a God who simply can't be known. He can't be known because He thinks so differently from us that in our interaction with Him, we can't really know which end is up.

A Contemporary God

Today, the church is very hip on viewing God as a contemporary. In a certain sense it seems that God desires this. We read, **“So the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Exodus 33:11)**. Jesus taught this, saying **“No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15 NASB)**.

So, God is our friend. But when Moses spoke to the people on behalf of God his face shone in such a way that the people were afraid to come near (Exodus 34:30). And even though Christ called His apostles friends, they never used that title for themselves. Instead

they referred to themselves as servants or slaves of Christ. Peter's response to one miracle of Jesus accurately portrays man's proper response to Christ: **When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8)!**

In our headlong pursuit of seeking to make Christianity significant, we often bring God down to a level where He is so knowable that some reckon He is no longer a God worth knowing. Instead of a God who is to be revered and worshiped, He is a super-psychologist, a phenomenal friend, or the parent or spouse we never had. If I'm happy with my life, friends, family or marriage, what use is God to me? I don't need another friend.

The Unreachable God

Another popular remedial view is that God is not knowable at all, that He is so above us that He operates in a realm that is unknowable, and perhaps even contradictory, to mankind. With a sort of false humility, or cop-out (since if there is a God He no doubt has a certain claim on our lives), we reckon that there is no point in trying to extend our thoughts to such an infinite being. But God's infinite nature does not make Him unreachable. Paul writes,

But what does it say? "*The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart*" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved (Romans 10:8, 9).

So, in our remedial thinking, God is either my buddy who may, or may not, be worth knowing or He is so far in outer space that even the Hubble telescope can't pick Him up. If we could somehow put these two together, we might be closer to the truth. God is both immanent and transcendent. He is the God who is among us and the God of heaven and eternity. Either way God, though incomprehensible, is knowable. I'll explain.

An Incomprehensible God, A Knowable God

Who is God? How does the Bible define God? The questions themselves seem so arrogant. I've always found it a bit disquieting to hear people talk about God. I've always felt a bit uncomfortable talking about God myself. For men to seek to define God is like plankton seeking to define the nature of the whale that's swallowing them. I am not sure at what level plankton might know things, but there does seem to be a certain aspect of the whale to which they are privy. Christians believe that there are certain aspects of God that He has revealed to His creation.

Let us, in all humility, acknowledge the incomprehensibility of God. But let us also recognize that simply because God is incomprehensible in terms of His immensity or vastness (quantitatively), it does not follow that God is *entirely* unknowable in any sense whatsoever. In other words, the fact that I don't know *everything* about God does not mean I don't know *anything* about God. Most of you could not give me an all-encompassing, comprehensive definition of baseball, but that doesn't mean that you don't know what a strike-out is.

A Logical God

It's also important to recognize that the limited number of things I do know about God are as true for God as they are for me (qualitative). In other words, when I learned that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), I had to understand that lying is to God what lying is to me. If two plus two equals four for me, it equals four for God. If parallel lines don't intersect for me on earth, they will never intersect for God in heaven. It might be said this way, "When I know the truth, I know the mind of God (in a qualitative but not quantitative sense)."

I don't mean for this to sound overly philosophical, but a few quick explanations can reveal the importance of recognizing the knowableness and reasonableness of God. After all, if God is not reasonable, He certainly is not knowable; you can't know *nonsense*.

The truth is the truth on earth *because* it is the truth in the mind of God. Some have asserted that parallel lines may intersect in heaven—after all, God is above logic (supra-logical); seems harmless enough, even humble. It's also an easy method to explain away difficulties in theology; when we have a problem, we merely consign

it to a supra-logical God. But we must realize that the reason parallel lines don't intersect on earth is due to the fact that they don't intersect in heaven (if by heaven we are speaking of the economy or rules of God).

Allow me to bring this closer to home. If parallel lines intersect in heaven, we must acknowledge that God can be a God of contradictions. If God is a God of contradictions, 'yes' may mean 'no' and 'trust' may mean 'doubt'; 'believe and be saved' to us may mean 'believe and be damned' to God.

We established the Bible to be our starting point of knowledge. Since God is the author of the Bible, it makes Him our starting point of knowledge. The Scriptures declare: **"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7)**. The Apostle Paul writes of **"the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:2, 3)**. Implicit in these statements, and the hundreds like them in Scripture, is the assumption that knowledge proceeds from God and that we can have access to that wisdom and knowledge. It is no wonder that the serpent's initial assault on humanity was **"Indeed, has God said" (Genesis 3:1)?**

A Reasonable Quest

So Many Disagreements

Now, to our second point.

This, my friends, is the ultimate quest of humanity: to know God. A common argument against organized religion (as if unorganized religion has any less difficulty) is that there is so much disagreement regarding what the Bible teaches about God.

Just recently I was discussing some theological disagreements with a Christian friend within earshot of a non-Christian friend. My non-Christian friend commented, "It's amazing how the church still disagrees on so many things" (again, as if the non-churched all see things eye to eye). The tenor of his statement betrayed his thoughts on the futility of pursuing something of which no one can seem to agree. But we should not be discouraged by the fact that there are

disagreements in the church.¹⁴ There is a great deal of disagreement on how we should approach treating cancer and heart disease; this does not mean these pursuits should be abandoned.

I once had a coach who had instructed numerous world record holders and gold medalists in track and field. His knowledge of the sport far exceeded the boundaries of both my intellect and talent. Would it have been reasonable for me to fire him because I was so inept? What kind of tortured logic would compel me to dispose of such genius due to my own ignorance and inability? It is unreasonable for humanity to abandon its mission to know and serve God simply because we are poor at coming to the correct conclusions. All this to say that God can be known; it is a promise made by God Himself. **“I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently will find me” (Proverbs 8:17).**

God is Good

A Truncated View of God

My final point is that *God is good*. This seems so blatantly obvious that it is hardly worth arguing the point. But, as a remedial Christian, I even found my notion of viewing God as good to be lacking. The primary defect in my thinking was that I had a notion of God on one hand, a separate notion of good on the other hand, then came to the conclusion that they matched up okay. Allow me to explain.

God has often been portrayed as a sort of George Burns-ish, kindly old man who is seeking to keep the world in good working order. We all like this kindly old man. We thank him at the Golden Globes and Emmy's. But as we read the Bible we see that He demands our allegiance, and even our worship. He is a jealous God who exacts His judgments on those who refuse to acknowledge His God-hood. This alter-ego side of God is down-played in the church. All of a sudden George Burns seems more like Saddam Hussein. This God is sexist, homophobic, pro-war and against a woman's right to choose. He also sends people to hell because of sin. That God will never be given a chair, or mention, at the Academy Awards.

¹⁴ I will address this more deeply when we discuss whether or not Christians should argue.

The problem lies in viewing God as a mere part of creation; He generally makes the right decisions and picks things that are good. Sometimes, however, people feel He oversteps His boundaries and arbitrarily calls things good which may be evil. It is not uncommon for those in the academic world to question the decisions of this militant, overbearing God.

But God does not pick things, or make laws, because they are good (as if they were good out there all on their own) nor are they good because He arbitrarily decides to say they are good. Goodness itself is defined by the character and nature of God. The old confessions put it this way.

God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient...He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things.¹⁵

Hating God = Hating Good

The Psalmist writes, “**You are good, and do good**” (Psalm 119:68). The Apostle Paul put it this way, “**For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen**” (Romans 11:36). In other words, in order to actually say that something is good, it must be in harmony with the character of God. To offend God is to offend goodness. To hate God (a popular saying these days) is to hate goodness. Notice in Proverbs that God equates Himself with life:

For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the Lord; but he who sins against me wrongs his own soul; all those who hate me love death (Proverbs 8:35, 36).

To hate God is to hate life. Life, truth, beauty, purity, goodness, justice, and love are not merely qualities that God happens

¹⁵Smith, M. H. 1990; Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.). Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press: Greenville SC.

to be good at, or is capable of defining; these things are defined by, and flow from, the very character of God Himself.

I remember, when examining whether or not I wanted to be a Christian, scrutinizing whether or not the Christian faith was really ethical—did it have its act together? Was the God of the Bible truly worthy of my devotion? Was He good? Hopefully now we can see the hubris of such a disposition. Essentially what I, in my over-inflated view of self-importance, was seeking to do was determine whether or not goodness was actually good; and I was the personal oracle of judgment over the essence of goodness and God. Sounds crazy! But it is pretty much the norm of man’s thinking.

Seeking to Know a Good God

According to the Scriptures there is a good God who is knowable by man. There is no greater or nobler pursuit than to seek after this God. He is the sprocket to which all spokes connect. When God is left out of the equation, all things—familial, governmental, relational, ecclesiological (church)—crumble. Jesus taught,

Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you (Matthew 67:31-33).

And God is not merely good but the fount of goodness itself. To abandon the notion of God is to abandon the notion of good; and have we not seen this to be the case?

God is Good, We are Not

I would be remiss in my duties, at this point, if I did not direct our minds to something painfully clear to us all. Though God is good, we are not good. Jesus states the obvious, **“No one is good but One, that is, God” (Mark 10:18)**. The righteousness, holiness and goodness of God are so above us that this quest for knowing God in a certain sense, quite frankly, becomes a fool’s errand. There is simply

no tower of excellence or ladder of righteousness that man can build to find God. Isaiah teaches us what we already suspected, **“But we are all like an unclean *thing*, and all our righteousnesses *are* like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6).**

So what hope have we? Our hope lies not in us finding God but in God finding us. He finds us by extending His love toward us through His Son Jesus,

who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8 NASB).

How clear this should be to us! The only way man can know God is by God extending Himself to us. Jesus, God the Son, became a man, He emptied Himself, He became sin, He humbled Himself to the point of death that we might have life—life that is found only in union with God. It is by faith in Christ, and Christ alone, that men have hope of reconciliation with God who is good. May God grant us vision to see this truth and may we ever call upon the name of the Savior.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are the dangers of over-emphasizing God as our friend?
2. How would you respond to the assertion that God is not knowable?
3. Does God's incomprehensibility mean He can't be known at all? Explain.
4. Why is it important to understand that God is logical or reasonable as we understand logic and reason?
5. What was the serpent's initial assault on humanity? What, do you suppose, was his reason for this?
6. Are disagreements in the church a reasonable motive to avoid seeking after God?
7. Discuss the relationship between God and goodness.
8. When someone says they hate God, what are they actually saying?
9. If God is good and man is not, what is the answer to this dilemma?

Part V
Believing in God
Romans 1:18-23
May 4, 2003

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Romans 1:18-25).

Review

We have, in our Remedial Christianity series, discussed: 1) The need to recognize that there must be a starting place for knowledge; how is it I know the things I know? 2) That, at least from a Christian world view, the Bible is the starting place of all knowledge, ethics and truth; it is nonsensical to affirm the veracity of the Bible by evaluating it through lesser authorities. 3) What the Bible is actually about; a brief overview. 4) Why we should believe the Bible; because its truth is authoritatively self-evident. 5) The main topic of the Bible, God; that God is good, reasonable and knowable. We will now continue our discussion of God—specifically, why should we believe in God?

An Assumption

There is an assumption that every prophet, apostle, teacher, evangelist or pastor in the Bible seems to make—that there is a God. Not only do the wise and inspired teachers we read of in Scripture make this assumption, they assume their audience knows it as well. As a remedial Christian I was fascinated when I came to realize that the Bible never offers any type of proof for the existence of God.

The Bible warns against following false gods. The Bible also gives correction regarding false views of the true God. But no one in the Bible ever does that which is so common among remedial Christians today—seek to give an argument for the existence of God. Why do you suppose that is?

An Overbearing Task

I remember feeling this great responsibility to provide a plausible argument for the existence of God. Similar to my desire to defend the truth of the Bible, I laid upon my shoulders the task of defending the existence of God. Many of my methods were the same with God as with the Bible.

Evidential Proof

I marched in the testimony of science. Archeologists are daily making finds, which affirm the existence of God. In the April 12, 2003 edition of the L. A. Times we read in headlines, “Israeli Kings No Myth, New Data Suggests”. I would most certainly have added this clipping to my seemingly undeniable evidence for the existence of God.

The historical record was also in my arsenal. There are numerous extra-biblical sources that affirm the truth of the Bible and therefore the existence of the God who inspired it. And, of course, we must also give heed to the changed lives. A changed life is surely a great argument for the existence of God until one begins to notice that there are many people whose lives change and who do not believe in God at all. Fulfilled prophecies also seem to be very

persuasive. Unless, of course, the person you're speaking with doesn't believe the prophecy was ever made in the first place.

Historical Proofs

Then there are the historical proofs for the existence of God; things like the cosmological, teleological and ontological argument.

Cosmological Argument

The cosmological argument, simply stated, is an argument based on cause and effect. As Maria sang in the Sound of Music, "Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever did." Everything must have a cause. It only makes sense that God is the first cause, the uncaused cause. Do I believe this to be true? Yes. Is it the only plausible explanation for the world we see? I think so. But believing it and proving it are two different things. The cosmological argument may be a pretty good argument, but it certainly isn't proof.

Teleological Argument

The teleological argument is the argument of design. There seems to be a design to the universe and it is unreasonable to believe that there is a design without a designer. If I found a watch in the jungle, it would be silly for me to ignore that fact that a watchmaker must exist. This is quite a compelling argument. And quite frankly, I can't think of any better explanation for the glorious designs we see than to acknowledge a master designer. But the watch may have been placed in the jungle by the warlords of the planet Zakon. This may sound silly, but people often believe silly things. The fact that the teleological argument is the most reasonable explanation for the reality we observe is not necessarily proof; a good argument perhaps, but not proof.

Ontological Argument

About a thousand years ago, Anselm came up with the ontological argument. I will mention it only briefly due its difficulty. It may not sound compelling, but some great minds view it as quite a

convincing argument. It goes something like this, “God is a being than which no greater being can be conceived. Since being is greater than non-being, God must exist.” This argument, of course, assumes that being is greater than non-being. I’ll bet by now your mind has begun to wander and you’re wondering what to have for lunch!

An Infinite Regress

The chore of proving the existence of God is daunting. And it generally leads into conversations of infinite regress. I march in my facts, you march in yours, I would deny yours, and you deny mine. I point out the unreasonable nature of your position; you do the same to me *ad nauseum*.

God Probably Exists?

It seems that if there is a God, you shouldn’t have to be a philosophy professor or master logician (man of logic) to figure out that He exists. Nor should you have to be a debate champion in order to convince others that He exists. Add to this that the above arguments only assert probability. Are we to suppose that on judgment day God will judge the unbelievers by stating that they should have known that He probably existed?

As stated earlier, there is no argument anywhere in the Bible for the existence of God. Again, why do you suppose that is?

Many of the arguments I have given so far have come from great thinkers such as Anselm, Aquinas and Aristotle. More recently we see the very popular arguments coming from fine thinkers such as J. P. Moreland, Gary Habermas, Lee Strobel and Josh McDowell. We don’t, however, see this kind of argument coming from Augustine, Calvin or many other Reformed thinkers. Maybe you’ve never heard of any of these scholars. Let’s appeal to someone you *have* heard of.

David’s Argument—The Apostle Paul’s Explanation

How do you suppose David, speaking with divine authority, makes an argument for the existence of God? We needn’t wonder; it’s in Scripture and his argument is simple, “**The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’**” (Psalm 14:1). Seems a bit *ad hominem*

(an attack on the person rather than the merit of the argument). It seems even more *ad hominem* when we realize that when the Bible speaks of a fool it carries the notion, not of an ignorant person but of an immoral person. How can this be? The Apostle Paul explains,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Romans 1:18-25).

It would be unwise of me, in my conversations with humans, to ignore what the Bible says about them. I need to examine the scouting report. What do I learn about mankind in this passage? Let's back into this passage (noticing the "Therefore's", "because's" and "since's" at the beginning of the verses) and see what we learn about people.

In **verses 23 and 25** we learn that people "**worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator**" (could "creature" include things like human reason and science?). We also learn in **verse 25** that the reason they do this is because they made an exchange: they "**exchanged the truth for the lie**". This also means they, at least at some level, had the truth and made a willful exchange.

In **verse 24** we learn that the worshiping of the creature (the creature is obviously very limited in terms of holding men accountable for their actions) is inextricably related to immoral behavior. They dishonored **“their bodies among themselves.”** People will generally choose worldviews which allow them to do as they please. People will always follow their strongest inclination at the moment; they must.

In **verse 22** we learn that the culture of people who exchange the truth for a lie are not necessarily criminals who are readily willing to admit their sin. It is said of them: **“Professing to be wise, they became fools.”** It is one thing to help a professed sinner who seeks the mercy of God. It is quite another thing when you have (as with the Greeks, Romans and today’s post-modern, humanistic, academic cultures) anti-Christian thinking heralded as wise and intellectual.

In **verse 21** we learn that this foolishness and darkness was a result of the futility (ineffectual) of their thoughts. All this happened **“because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful.”** We now begin to see that the foolishness, darkness, and futile thinking was not a matter of having insufficient evidence or argumentation. It was a matter of denying what they already knew to be true. But how do they know the truth of the existence of God?

Verse 20 tells us that **“by the things that are made”** God’s **“invisible attributes are clearly seen.”** This would include **“His eternal power and Godhead.”** Furthermore, we learn that it is so evident that men are **“without excuse.”** So much for an argument of probability! He doesn’t say that men will have a *poor* excuse or a *little* excuse or that they *should* know of the true God. He says they *do* know.

In **verse 19** we learn that this knowledge is not discursive. In other words, it’s not that men need to figure it out. We don’t look at the stars then somehow reckon somebody must have made them. It is not merely that God has shown men what may be known of Him, but it is **“manifest (clearly apparent) in them.”** In other words, all men know there is a God. And not merely a god of their own making. All men know that there is one true God. So why don’t they believe?

That question is answered in **verse 18** where we are told that men **“suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”** Perhaps now the argument of David makes more sense to us. Men’s rejection of God is a sin, the sin of unbelief (Hebrews 3:12).

The Sequential Order of Darkness

Men suppress the truth (a truth that has been clearly shown to them and made clearly apparent in them), not because of ignorance but in unrighteousness. Men know there is a God but willfully choose to neglect glorifying Him as God. As a result of this they become futile in their thinking; their foolish hearts are darkened, and in this darkness profess a twisted and perverted wisdom. But professing to be wise they are fools. The end result of the immoral foolishness is the worship of the creation rather than the Creator. Instead of serving a wise, all-powerful, benevolent Master and Giver of life and all good things, they serve the dust.

God in the Flesh

There is nothing more blatantly obvious than the existence of God. As Christians, we are to view the ranting of men deny the existence of God (no matter how well dressed in academic verbiage) as darkened foolishness. And this God, who saves lost souls from their own rebellion, has revealed Himself in the person and work of Christ. **For in Him (Christ) dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Colossians 2:9).**

A litmus test as to whether we believe in the true God is our response to Christ. Jesus taught, **“If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also” (John 8:19).** God became a man who dwelt among us and died for us. It is critically important to understand that even though the Bible teaches that all men know there is a God in a way that leaves them without excuse, it does not teach that all men know God in a saving way. It is the power of the cross alone which delivers men from the futility of their own darkened hearts. It is the cross of Christ alone which saves souls and unites men with the true Holy God. May we ever trust in Him.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What assumption do we see made by prophets and teachers in Scripture?
2. What are the weaknesses of evidential and historical proofs for the existence of God?
3. Give a brief explanation of the cosmological, teleological and ontological arguments.
4. Why is it a poor argument to assert that God *probably* exists?
5. What was David's argument against the unbeliever?
6. How does the Apostle Paul explain the reasonableness of David's assertion?
7. What is the sequential order of darkness?
8. How has God revealed Himself to humanity?
9. How does one know if they have a genuine, saving relationship with God?

Part VI

The Nature of the Relationship Between Man and God: Getting Started with God

May 11, 2003

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 unless they are sent? As it is written: “*How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things*” (Romans 10:14, 15)!

Review

We have, in our Remedial Christianity series, discussed: 1) The need to have a starting place for knowledge. 2) That for Christians, the Bible is the starting place of all knowledge, ethics and truth. 3) The over-arching message of the Bible. 4) Why we should believe the Bible. 5) The main topic of the Bible, God; that He is knowable and why we should believe in Him.

We now move into the nature of the relationship between man and God; specifically, how does the relationship get started?

Preview

I intend to address the remedial nature of the popular presentation of the Christian faith: namely, asking Jesus into our hearts. Then I will seek to show what the biblical components of the presentation of the gospel actually are: believe, repent, be baptized, acknowledge pardon, and persevere.

The Sawdust Trail

Altar calls are the rage. The 19th century was flooded with traveling salvation shows, tent revival meetings and people, by the thousands, sauntering down that sawdust trail to redemption. Though mass media may have put a bit of a damper on the Elmer Gantry-style yurt worship, the heart of this style of evangelism has changed very little during the past two hundred years.

Whether it's the television evangelist urging his viewers to place their hands on the television set in an act of saving faith, or the para-church crusader urging his audience to walk forward to the tune of *Just As I Am* while the busses patiently wait, the central theme of popular Christian evangelism during the past two hundred years has remained constant: get people to ask Jesus into their hearts.

Asking Jesus Into Your Heart

My recognition for remedial instruction in this area became acute one day when a church member walked into my office and asked me to show him where in the Bible we're told to ask Jesus into our hearts. I knew enough to avoid the popular Revelation 3:20 passage.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me (Revelation 3:20).

These words were written to a church in danger of going apostate (backsliding). These would be people who, presumably, would have already asked Jesus into their hearts. Peter tells us to sanctify the Lord in our hearts (1 Peter 3:15). But again, this is written to Christians regarding lordship (power of authority), not getting saved (power of deliverance). There are, nonetheless, places in the Bible that talk about Jesus being in our hearts.

There is certainly some sense in which Christ should be in our hearts. We see this in the prayer of the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul prays **“that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Ephesians 3:17).**

But once again, this is written to Christians. It is not evangelism to unbelievers. Certainly the heart of the Christian (being the seat of morality, perception, thoughts, reasoning, imagination, conscience, intentions, purpose, etc.) should be inhabited by the spirit of Christ and governed by the words of Christ (the Bible). But this is a far cry from the modern man-made sacrament of initiating salvation by a prayer of invitation.

The notion that Christ is some kind of Victorian gentleman tapping on the doors of our somewhat reluctant hearts, then placing His hands kindly behind His back patiently waiting for us to come to our senses (which some do and others don't for reasons inexplicable) is contrary biblical reality. The Bible, rather, has Him as an *invader of the heart*.

Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul (Acts 16:14).

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

God is more akin to one who performs heart surgery than one who sells Avon. This should be obvious to us, for man is more in need of heart a heart transplant than cosmetics.

Paralyzed

So dominant is this view, and woven into the fabric of my psyche, that I have often found myself somewhat paralyzed when confronted with a sinner who wishes to be saved. If we don't pray the sinner's prayer (Jesus come into my heart) then what is there to do? I remember having lunch with a minister who had two doctorates (one in systematic theology) who was beginning to have the same remedial concerns as myself. He wanted to know what we were to do if not try to get someone to pray the prayer. How do we present the gospel?

The sawdust trail is so simple, so convenient; it provides great spiritual closure—it's a done deal! Yet at the same time it has been proven quite ineffective. Very few people who pray the prayer are

still attending church after a year. The decline of western Christendom has corresponded very closely to the rise of this brand of gospel presentation. The church is fraught with confusion as to whether or not people have lost their salvation; after all, they prayed the prayer and yet no longer seem to be in the fold.

Unless someone sneaks a passage my way that I have not yet seen, asking Jesus into our heart is simply not the means by which the relationship between man and God gets under way. So how does it? What should we expect to be the touch point between sinful men and a holy God? When Christians (or preachers¹⁶) are called to blow the horn of warning (Ezekiel 33:6), what tune should they be playing? Is the tune, “The wrath of God abides, quickly ask Jesus into your heart?” The examples we see in Scripture are quite unlike this.

The Non-Formulaic Gospel

The presentation of the gospel in the Bible is hardly formulaic. The theology student will find many of Jesus’ presentations of the gospel lacking what would seem to be some principle elements. He doesn’t always mention repentance (though He usually does); He doesn’t always mention belief (though it is implied); He doesn’t always make it clear that you’re not saved by works (the clear teaching of the Apostle Paul).

Sometimes Jesus brings forth the gospel in virtually indiscernible parables (Matthew 13). Other times He simply asks His listeners if they believe in Him or what they believe about Him, e.g. to Martha He said, **“I am the resurrection...do you believe this” (John 11:25, 26)?** To Peter He said, **“Who do you say that I am?”** and after Peter’s answer Jesus pronounced him blessed (Matthew 16:15-17). Jesus seemed to be quite aware of His audience and what aspects of the gospel needed to be emphasized.

He would summarily dismantle those who had confidence in their own righteousness, e.g. the Rich Young Ruler (Mark 10:17-27), and the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-15). To those who were broken He would simply proclaim forgiveness, e.g. the sinful woman who wept at Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:48).

¹⁶ We will discuss later who should be delivering the message.

Flip Chart Gospel

Though the theology of the gospel is more didactically (intended for instruction) examined in the epistles, it still seems a bit artificial to carve it into a flip chart or tract that has simplistic appeal to the masses. Can these flip charts work? Yes they can. I am living proof that the power of gospel can penetrate all manner of foolishness. Of course this doesn't mean we should be committed to folly.

This type of mass appeal 'McChristianity' has burgeoned a society of paper Christians who can scarcely discern between a Happy Meal and the Lord's Table. Western Christianity (as evidenced by the society it is failing to bless or influence) is sliding down a helix and rapidly approaching the nadir (lowest point) of its existence.

Arguably, one of the biggest problems in modern Christianity is the surroundings and methods of new births. The modern gospel movements are delivery rooms with little seed, and what seed there is often is defective. Many of the spiritually reborn come into the kingdom with birth defects; hence the need for remedial instruction.

So, how should the gospel be presented? Again, what is the means by which the relationship between man and God gets under way? What should we expect to be the touch point between sinful men and a holy God? What is the message God calls His preachers to preach that actually makes their feet beautiful (Romans 10:15)?

The Biblical Gospel

Wishing to avoid becoming formulaic myself, I will simply mention those elements of the gospel which seem to be at the fore of the message. Keep in mind, I am not speaking here of those things which take place in the invisible realm (God's power to regenerate). I am speaking of those things that God has called His people to say and do. The elements include: a call to believe, a call to repent, a call to be baptized, a declaration of pardon, and a call to persevere.

A Call to Believe (Receive)

A call to believe is either explicit (clearly stated) or implicit (implied) in every gospel message. If you don't believe *in* Jesus, that

is, specific things *about* Jesus (mainly and He died for sins and rose again), you simply will not respond to anything else that involves faith in Him; why would you? Jesus' dialogue with Martha ends with a simple question:

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this" (John 11:25, 26)?

The Ethiopian Eunuch asked Philip (after Philip had preached to him),

"What hinders me from being baptized?" Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:36, 37).

Even the woman who wept and kissed Jesus' feet did so because of belief. The story ends with Jesus saying, **"Your faith has saved you. Go in peace" (Luke 7:50).**

Note that a proper definition of belief or faith includes knowledge (knowing, at least at some discernible level, what it is you're believing); assent (acknowledging that the knowledge is true and right); and trust (you appropriate it—make it yours).

Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, *even* to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God *to be* Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins (Acts 10:40-43).

People should be called to believe on the Lord.

A Call to Repent

The call to repentance is almost always included in Jesus' presentation of the gospel. To the woman caught in adultery, He said, **"Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more"** (John 8:11). To the man He healed at the pool of Bethesda, He said, **"Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you"** (John 5:14). In His instruction on the common sin of all men, Jesus warned, **"...but unless you repent you will all likewise perish"** (Luke 13:3). He taught that **"there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents"** (Luke 15:10). Jesus makes the clear assertion: **"I have not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance"** (Luke 5:32). It is also clear that the call to repentance was to be included in the preaching of, and to, others.

Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem (Luke 24:46, 47).

A Call to be Baptized

A very unpopular aspect of the presentation of the gospel today is the call to be baptized. One needn't search too far before they see this as part of the message. Peter preached, **"Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38).** The devout Ananias said to Saul (the Apostle Paul), **"And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).** We understand that men are saved by grace through faith. Remember, we are speaking here of the *outward* aspects of the faith; there is little doubt that Saul was already saved before meeting Ananias. The call to be baptized, however, is so closely linked to the gospel message that one who is not baptized is not to be considered (at least by outward observation) a believer. This may sound shocking to your ears. But I remember doubting a person's salvation because they hadn't participated in the

man-made sacrament of asking Jesus into their heart; I'll bet that resonates with most of you as well.

The ordinary means by which God saves people is in the church. A genuine personal and private relationship with Christ will always produce a person who recognizes, and associates himself with, the institution that Christ created—the church. The outward sign of association (or inclusion) with the church is *baptism*.

But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized (Acts 8:12).

Declaration of Pardon

The declaration of the forgiveness of sins is the great comfort of the gospel message. As I grow older there are different aspects of the church service which become more and more precious to me. The declaration of pardon has rapidly moved to the top of the list; it truly is good news! If the church is full of people who have genuine faith in a righteous and holy God, they yearn for these words of comfort.

When the paralytic was lowered through the roof by his friends (clearly an act of faith) Jesus' first words to Him were, "**Man, your sins are forgiven you**" (Luke 5:20). The first words of Jesus to the woman who wept at His feet were, "**Your sins are forgiven**" (Luke 7:48) followed by, "**Your faith has saved you. Go in peace**" (Luke 7:50). We are explicitly taught in Acts, "**Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins**" (Acts 13:38).

Though the declaration of pardon is not a call to action, the message of being pardoned provides the listener with the beauty of the gospel. It is an aroma that effectively draws God's people.

He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes *them* will have mercy (Proverbs 28:13).

The Call to Persevere

In Jesus' explanation of the Parable of the Sower, He explains,

But the ones *that* fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep *it* and bear fruit with patience (Luke 8:15).

Looking back on a religious experience with God is well and good. But Christians must also recognize that the gospel includes a call to *continually* believe and *continually* repent.

And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting *them* to continue in the faith, and *saying*, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:21, 22).

In verse 23 Paul uses the conditional “if”:

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight—if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister (Colossians 1:21-23).

Jesus seems to indicate that the willingness to persevere should be pondered right up front.

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has *enough* to finish *it* (Luke 14:28)?

Jesus also taught,

Now brother will betray brother to death, and a father *his* child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end shall be saved (Mark 13:12, 13).

The gospel is not to be thought of or presented as a momentary religious experience, as is so common today. We are to ever believe, ever repent, and though we are baptized only once, we are to ever feed at the Lord's Table and ever enjoy the pardon of sin. We are to persevere in all these things. And we are to ever praise God who sustains our hearts in this through the grace of faith. Amen.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are some of the problems with the notion of asking Jesus into your heart?
2. In what respect should Jesus dwell in the heart of Christians?
3. What are some problems with reducing the gospel to a sort of cookie-cutter formula?
4. If it is God who saves people, then why should we worry if the methods aren't as sound as they could be?
5. What are some of the elements we see at the fore of the gospel message in Scripture?
6. What is a proper definition of *belief* or *faith*?
7. Should the call to repentance be included in gospel? Why?
8. Does the call to be baptized mean to believe in salvation by works?
9. Why do you suppose people today view baptism as being unnecessary in the presentation of the gospel?
10. What is a declaration of pardon?
11. Discuss the implications of the call to persevere. How does this militate against many popular views of the Christian faith?

Part VII

The Nature of the Relationship Between Man and God: The Purpose of Our Relationship with God

May 24, 2003

Review

It never hurts to review. Up to this time in our *Remedial Christianity* series, we've discussed: 1) The need to have a starting place for knowledge. 2) That for Christians, the Bible is the starting place of all knowledge, ethics and truth. 3) The over-arching message of the Bible; that God brings glory to Himself through the redemptive work of the cross. 4) Why we should believe the Bible; that the Bible is self-authenticating. 5) The main topic of the Bible, God; that He is knowable and why we should believe in Him. 6) The means by which the relationship between man and God is to get under way. We will now discuss the purpose of our relationship with God.

Preview

What I would like to discuss in this portion of the *Remedial Christianity* series is: 1) What is the primary purpose of mankind—what is our reason for living? (The answer being to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.) 2) What happens when secondary reasons for living become primary? 3) What does it mean to glorify God?

What is the Primary Purpose?

Why Do Christians?

Why do Christians go to church? The question seems simple enough. Millions of professing Christians wake up every Sunday morning, get dressed, load up the kids and go to church. There are a variety of answers people give for participating in this discipline—many are noble. People wish to grow spiritually. They desire

fellowship with God and other believers. They want to learn more about God. They want to clean up a wanton or disheveled life. They want to know the peace of God. Maybe they just want to make new friends. As a remedial Christian, I remember boldly proclaiming the folly of too much prayer and liturgy. "I can pray at home; I come to church to learn!" Learning isn't bad. None of these things are bad, but none of them should be the main purpose for attending church.

Let's push the question a little deeper. Why do (or should) Christians (or people in general) do anything? What is the main purpose for a Christian to go to work, raise a family, go on vacation, do volunteer or charity work, join the military, vote, or even wake up in the morning? There may be all sorts of secondary reasons for doing things. I may wake up in the morning because one of my children needs breakfast. But why should I provide breakfast? One may answer because it is the responsible thing to do. But why should I do the responsible thing? Is it merely to stay out of jail? Although incarceration may be a legitimate motivation to do the right thing, for Christians it is generally not at the top of the motivational list. There must exist a greater purpose.

So, why do Christians go to church? Why do Christians do anything? There is a preponderance of Scriptural testimony regarding why Christians (or people in general) are to do anything. Secondary reasons aside, the primary reason man is to do anything relates to his relationship with God. It has been the uniform testimony of the great theologians of history (through their interpretation of Scripture) that man's primary purpose in life is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. I have listed just a few of the many passages in the Bible that give clear testimony to this truth.

Glorifying God

If anyone speaks, *let him speak* as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, *let him do it* as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 4:11).

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense,

either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which *are* by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:9-11).

...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10, 11).

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle *you*. To Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 5:10, 11).

...to God, alone wise, *be* glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen (Romans 16:27).

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Ephesians 3:20, 21).

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, *be* honor and glory forever and ever. Amen (1 Timothy 1:17).

To God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen (Jude 25).

Enjoying God

Return to your rest, O my soul, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you (Psalm 116:7).

You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand *are* pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11).

Oh, taste and see that the Lord *is* good (Psalm 34:8).

When Secondary Becomes Primary

Subordinate Purposes

That the chief end of man is to glorify God does not suggest that there aren't secondary or subordinate purposes in a person's life.

But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and *that* you may lack nothing (1 Thessalonians 4:10-12).

Work, family, rest, education, patriotism, virtue are all noble quests. But when they are viewed as the ultimate versus penultimate quest of man, the smoothness of their skin crackles with corrosion.

Who Do You Love More?

My children often muse at the notion that we are to love God more than each other. My four-year-old son often asks me the very difficult question, "Do you love God more than you love me?" To which I give the somewhat evasive, but true, answer, "It is because of my love for God that I love you so much." It is when God's glory becomes man's chief end that all other aspects of his life ascend. Imagine a huge balloon tied to masses of debris on the bottom of the

ocean. The balloon lifts all the debris attached to it up to the surface. If the debris were merely tied to other debris (no matter how beautiful the other debris might appear—perhaps sunken treasures), they would remain submerged.

Greater Nation, Love, Rest

The industry of a nation who does their work as unto the Lord rather than unto men (Colossians 3:23) will be more industrious than the nation that views *industry* as man's chief end. The family who is answerable to God over each other will have a greater love for each other (John 13:34). Those who rest from their labors, as God has determined, rather than seeking a life of leisure, will find their rest more satisfying **“For so He gives His beloved sleep” (Psalm 127:2).**

When the source of our motivation and the goal of our achievements are the goodness and glory of God, excellence and consistency are more efficiently produced. This is easily seen. If I am motivated by the goodness of my boss rather than the goodness of the Lord, the gaps in my boss' goodness will often leave me empty. If we love others the way they love us rather than the way Christ loves us, our love will find itself ebbing like the morning and evening tides it's seeking to imitate.

Tethered to Debris

If my chief purpose is education, patriotism or even freedom rather than the glory of God I will eventually consign myself, and those under my influence, to ignorance, tyranny and bondage. Many a treacherous villain has a wall laden with degrees. Few are more patriotic than Hitler, and freedom itself becomes a vague, ambiguous term of undefined borders and infringements upon the property and possessions of others. When we tie our hopes to these noble, yet fluid, impersonal and undefined entities we are tethered to the sunken debris.

When I was dating my wife she almost broke up with me because she thought that her relationship with God was somewhat stagnant. She told me that if she didn't perceive that she was becoming richer in her faith as a result of our relationship, there wasn't going to be much of a future for us. I found great comfort in the notion of marrying a woman who was more motivated and

answerable to God than to me. Marriages that tie their hopes to the brilliance of the partner rather than the glory of God are heading for the icebergs.

Worshipping Idols

The Scriptures are replete with warnings against placing even good things on too high a pedestal. The bronze serpent, which God told Moses to form in order to save the people from the serpents' poison, later became a false idol (Numbers 21:9; 2 Kings 18:4). The sons of Eli brought the Ark of the Covenant into battle as if it were their personal secret weapon. This resulted in their death and the defeat of Israel in battle (1 Samuel 4:11). Peter, because he was used by God to deliver the gospel, was briefly worshiped (Acts 10:25).

When man's chief end becomes something other than the glory of a holy, righteous, almighty God, it is step one on a path to destruction and chaos.

What Does it Mean to Glorify and Enjoy God?

How does one go about glorifying and enjoying God? Unfortunately, there aren't five simple steps to glorifying God in fifteen minutes or less. However, the Family Instructional Guides states it well:

When inwardly they have the highest estimation of him, the greatest confidence in him, and the strongest affections to him, this is glorifying of God in spirit. "Glorify God in your spirit, which is God's" (1 Cor. 6:20).¹⁷

To enjoy God, is to acquiesce or rest in God as the chief good, with complacency and delight. "Return unto thy rest, O my soul" (Ps. 116:7).¹⁸

¹⁷Vincent, T. 1996. *A family instructional guide*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic edition based on the first Banner of Truth ed., 1980). Christian Classics Foundation: Simpsonville SC

¹⁸Vincent, T. 1996. *A family instructional guide*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic edition based on the first Banner of Truth ed., 1980). Christian Classics Foundation: Simpsonville SC

To glorify and enjoy God means we have the loftiest estimations of Him. We seek to see and appreciate His perfection, purity, immensity, power, wisdom, holiness, counsel, righteous will, glory, love, grace, mercy, patience, abundant goodness, truth, justice, etc. It is in God and His attributes that we have our uttermost confidence, and it is toward Him that we are to devote our strongest affections. It is when the Christian is immersed in these things that he has the greatest joy, for he begins to grasp in whose hands his soul rests.

Found in Christ

As discussed earlier, the means by which this information is brought to the minds of men are the Holy Scriptures. What we will learn is that the greatest manifestation of God is found in the person and work of God the Son, Jesus the Christ, **“For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Colossians 2:9)**. We are to nurture our relationship with our Savior through proper participation in the means God has provided. What has God determined to be the means by which this relationship is cultivated and preserved? Next week we will discuss what God has determined to be man’s role in the nurturing of his relationship with God.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are some reasons people go to church? Do you remember why you first went to church?
2. What are some reasons people do anything? What are some of men's primary motivations in life?
3. What should be man's chief purpose for doing anything?
4. What are some of the dangers present when secondary purposes become primary purposes?
5. Why will the world be better in every way if men view the glory of God as their chief purpose?
6. What does it mean to glorify and enjoy God?
7. How has God most fully revealed Himself to humanity?

Part VIII

The Nature of the Relationship Between Man and God: Nurturing Our Relationship with God

June 29, 2003

Review

Reviewing our *Remedial Christianity* series, we've discussed:

- 1). The need to have a starting place for knowledge.
- 2). That, for Christians, the Bible is the starting place of all knowledge, ethics and truth.
- 3). The over-arching message of the Bible—God bringing glory to Himself through the redemptive work of the cross.
- 4). Why we should believe the Bible—that it is self-authenticating.
- 5). The main topic of the Bible, God—that He is knowable and why we should believe in Him.
- 6). The means by which the relationship between man and God is to get under way.
- 7). The purpose of our relationship with God—to glorify and enjoy God. Now we will discuss how the relationship between man and God is to be nurtured.

**He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High
Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I
will say of the Lord, "*He is my refuge and my
fortress; my God, in Him I will trust.*" Surely He
shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler *and*
from the perilous pestilence. He shall cover you
with His feathers, and under His wings you shall
take refuge; His truth *shall be your shield and
buckler* (Psalm 91:1-4).**

Prone to Wander

So Different Yet So The Same

So you have become a Christian! By the grace of God your eyes have been opened to the truth and glory of Christ and He has rescued you from death and darkness (Ephesians 2:1-5). By the blood of Jesus Christ the Righteous your sins have been pardoned (1 John 2:1), *amen!* But lo' your sin remains and is ever before you (Psalm 51:3). You feel quite similar today to the way you felt yesterday. The God who is your refuge and fortress doesn't seem to be protecting you from yourself. You're so different, yet so very much the same.

Oh how we long for that feeling of cleanliness, which subdued our souls that hour we first believed; when we felt that that sinful person—that old self—was truly a different person and we were new—a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). How quickly the old man came a-knockin'! What are we to do? How do we keep the flame alive? How do we nurture, feed and keep warm our relationship with our Savior? First, let us keep in mind that it is woven into our nature, even our new nature, to leave the God we love.

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it;
Seal it for Thy courts above.

Ever at His Feet

Are we to think that the woman of ill repute (Luke 7:36-50), who wept at Jesus' feet and was pardoned by the very words of the Savior (what incomparable absolution—remission of sins), did not shortly, in one way or another, sin again? To whom would she flee with her new sin? Did she once again weep at His feet? Would it not seem reasonable that she, that all, had need of taking permanent residence at the feet of Christ—taking residence there for both wisdom and assurance of pardon, for nurturing? How does this take place now that the Christ has ascended to the Father?

Again, how do we nurture, feed and keep warm our relationship with God? How do we dwell in that secret place of the Most High in such a way that the very sin—that in one sense is ever before us—is not allowed entrance? How do we give our hearts to God that He may seal it for His courts above?

Snake Oil Christianity

Elusive Tranquility

Here we have Remedial Christianity of historic proportions. From the ascetic (self-denial) obsessions of the desert fathers in the first few centuries of the church to the monks of Roman Catholicism to the modern emphasis on the disciplines (fasting, solitude, quietude, isolation, meditation) coming from modern pietists, men have been remarkably innovative and novel in seeking to find peace and enjoyment with God. Yet this joy and tranquility is ever so elusive.

There is, in all of us, a discomfort with our behavior, making us fodder for the litany of behaviors (many of them very good things) that are designed to make us feel better about our Christianity.

I've reached an age where I have become a bit more concerned about health, heart and longevity. Somehow I was put on a mailing list of people who have the same concern as I, and the purveyors of snake oil have begun to lay siege. There seems to be no end to the promises of strength, stamina, vim, vigor, vitality, good looks, etc. Who doesn't want all this? And many are willing to make the necessary investment to see if it truly works.

Similarly, since our sin continually haunts us, all Christians find themselves on the mailing lists of snake oil Christianity. Snake oil may have some very positive results. But it seldom (probably never) produces everything promised. So what kind of snake oil can we expect? Gird yourselves for snake oil Christianity that is closer than a brother. The things of which we need to beware are ever so near and, for the most part, good things in their proper usage. See if you can recognize some of the popular answers to a flat Christian experience.

Try This

Feeling estranged from God? Join a small group at church. *Sin got ahold of you?* Increase the length of your quiet time. *Desire to be more godly?* Come to our men's retreat. Learn to fast. Meditate. Discover your purpose. Organize your life more efficiently. Read the *Seven Habits of Highly Successful Cloister Nuns*, etc. etc. etc.

Notice that I didn't list anything evil (except for maybe the cloister nun book). I didn't suggest that you scream at your spouse or children or parents for the positive cathartic effects of releasing your own rage at the expense of your loved ones. Small groups, quiet times with God, retreats, proper fasting and meditation, and good books have their place. But they are no where near the top of the list if we're looking to Scripture to understand the means by which God has determined proper nurturing of His children take place.

Primary Biblical Nurturing

During radio broadcasts it wasn't uncommon for me to hear from callers who had serious problems. Many of them had bought all the snake oil and yet their sin was like flood-waters and they felt unanchored. I would often ask a question that most listeners felt was right out of left field—*when was the last time you took communion?* The common response being: *What does that have to do with anything?* Well, let me tell you, it has everything to do with everything.

How remedial have we become that we view as expendable that thing which is instituted by Christ Himself as a perpetual sacrament through which He bestows grace upon His bride! How true, and applicable, to us remedial Christians are the words of John Calvin,

The cure is prevented by no other cause than the length of time during which we have been accustomed to the disease.¹⁹

¹⁹Calvin, J. 1997. *Institutes of the Christian religion*. Translation of: *Institutio Christianae religionis*.; Reprint, with new introd. Originally published: Edinburgh : Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846. (vi). Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA

The notion of the Lord's Table truly having an impact on the lives of Christians has become passé—a truly antiquated notion. We have become so accustomed to its absence (or at least de-emphasis) that it's descended to the level of being dispensable. And the gap has been filled with lesser things.

God has instituted, for the nurturing of His bride, an organism called the church. It would do us well to examine just what the role of the church actually is.

The Marks of the Church

The Belgic Confession states,

The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church-- and no one ought to be separated from it.²⁰

In short, the marks of a true church are the pure preaching of the word, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline when necessary. Therefore, we can deduce that the primary biblical method for nurturing our relationship with God is to be a participating listener of the preaching of the word, a participating communicant at the Lord's Table and a participating member in good standing of God's covenant family.

Time and space prohibit me from demonstrating how truly biblical this statement is, for it is not a matter of merely marching out a few verses. If you read the whole Bible, you will discover some, but very little, space or emphasis devoted to fasting, small groups, retreats and the like. On the other hand, a great deal of space and

²⁰ Article 29 of the Belgic Confession.

emphasis is devoted to the three marks stated above. This, my friends, is God's method for nurturing and preserving His children.

Preaching

Paul's word to the young pastor Timothy was,

Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching (2 Timothy 4:2).

No less than 130 times is the word *preach* used in the New Testament. God's proclamation (usually through prophets, teachers, apostles, pastors) of His law and gospel floods the pages of Scripture. He doesn't give them "how-to" books. He doesn't send them on retreats. He seldom asks them to fast or to increase the length of their quiet times. He does, however, continually call His people to hear His word (law and gospel²¹) proclaimed in the assembly of the saints.

The law of God is the purest system of ethics. It is what God has determined to be good, right and true. The Apostle Paul states that "**...the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good**" (Roman 7:12). Of course, without the gospel the law is merely a minister of death (2 Corinthians 3:6) because no one can obey the law at the sufficient level to save himself.

The gospel is ever beautiful and should be ever before us. The gospel is salvific (the means by which God saves souls) and life-changing (Romans 1:16; Galatians 5:22, 23). With the peace of a properly preached monergistic (power of salvation coming from God alone) gospel one can embark upon seeking to obey the law without fear of judgment or banishment.

The gospel is not merely for the unsaved but for the saved as well. It is the great expression of God's love for His children. What is more nurturing than a child coming into a greater and deeper understanding of a parent's love? Pastors who seek to express the depth of God's grace and love will most effectively nurture the flock under their care.

²¹ The law is what God *demand*s; the gospel is what God *provid*es. All propositions in Scripture are one of these two things.

Again, this is done in the context of the visible church, under the oversight of pastors, elders, deacons, etc. Paul told Timothy, the pastor, to preach. The church is the institution created by God for His own glory and the nurturing of His children. It ought not be neglected.

Sacraments

And He took bread, gave thanks and broke *it*, and gave *it* to them, saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” Likewise He also *took* the cup after supper, saying, “This cup *is* the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you (Luke 22:19, 20).

Biblically speaking, you will not find many things more emphasized than the sacraments. This may not be readily apparent in our modern Christian culture with its de facto disdain for the Old Testament. But one can hardly read a few chapters in the Old Testament without stumbling upon a sacrifice, an altar, a memorial pillar, a ceremonial washing, and on and on.

The tome of references to all these Old Testament sacrifices and ceremonies is squeezed into the simplicity of the cup and the loaf, which contain the spiritual presence of Christ. The Apostle Paul calls this a cup of blessing.

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, *though* many, are one bread *and* one body; for we all partake of that one bread (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

We err when we think that the simplicity of the Lord’s Table compared to the Old Covenant sacrifices is a matter of de-emphasis. It should be emphasized all the more (Hebrews 7:22)! If the pure preaching of the gospel is nurturing and life-changing as it reaches our hearts through our ears, the pure participation in the sacraments (both baptism and the Lord’s Table)—these things we see, smell,

taste and touch—all the more imparts to us that powerful message of grace which saves souls and redeems lives!

Notice again that this is done in the context of the church. Paul writes, “**For we, though many,**” which implies a congregation, not merely an individual or small gathering.

Church Discipline

But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner— not even to eat with such a person. For what *have I to do* with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘*put away from yourselves the evil person*’ (1 Corinthians 5:11-13).

Accountability is still viewed as important, even among we remedial Christians. Here we have the ultimate in biblical accountability. The covenant member (who is hearing the preaching and participating in the sacraments) is now in a place where, if he becomes notorious and obstinate in his sin, will find the kingdom of God (the visible church) shut to him.

In short, the process of discipline involves a one-on-one confrontation of a verifiable sin. If, after this confrontation, there is no repentance, then there is a confrontation by two or three witness (along the line of Old Testament law). If there is still no repentance, the matter is taken, again, to the church. Then finally, as Jesus teaches, “**If he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector**” (Matthew 18:17).

There are many reasons for the process of church discipline. The confession (clearly backed by the Scriptures) teaches that it is:

...necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which

might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders. a. 1 Cor. 5; 1 Tim. 5:20; Matt. 7:6; 1 Tim. 1:20; 1 Cor. 11:27–34; Jude 23.²²

This much neglected, yet clearly biblical, admonition nurtures the bride of Christ in such a way as to deter others from similar offenses. It purges from the church the notion that certain behavior is acceptable to God. It removes occasion for Christ—and His gospel—to be dishonored (a very common occurrence today in the church). And it prevents the wrath of God to fall upon His church—a wrath which often involves God turning people over to their own sinful hearts (Romans 1:26).

For clarity, discipline is not implemented on those who fight the normal fight with sin before which we are all engaged. If such were the case, all churches would be empty. Rather, it is a warning against the obstinate, stubborn, willful adherence to that which is in clear violation to God’s law.

In today’s remedial Christian culture we obsess with taking normal Christians and turning them into Spirit-filled super Christians through snake oil Christianity. Yet we neglect the purity of Christ’s church, thus jeopardizing the glory of God and the souls of men. We strain at gnats while swallowing camels. What a wonderful experiment it would be for the church to implement the counsel of God—to test, as it were, the power of His guidance! As He said of the tithe,

“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,” says the Lord of hosts, “if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows (Malachi 3:10 NASB).

If this is true of the tithe—being a less weighty matter (Matthew 23:23)—how much greater the blessing when applied to His word, sacraments and discipline?

²²Smith, M. H. 1990; Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.). Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press: Greenville SC

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Is the presence of sin and feeling of estrangement from God things with which Christians shouldn't expect to contend?
2. What are some ways people have sought to overcome these feelings of sin and estrangement?
3. Why do you suppose there is such clamoring for these types of remedies?
4. What organism has God instituted for the nurturing of His bride?
5. What are the marks of a true church? What implications does this have in the life of a Christian?
6. What are the principle elements of preaching? Why?
7. In what respect does preaching nurture God's children?
8. Who is to preach?
9. What do you suppose the sacraments are so de-emphasized in the church today?
10. How are the sacraments a blessing to God's people?
11. What are the goals of church discipline?
12. What constitutes a disciplinary offense?
13. Discuss the common popular methods of nurturing God's people versus word, sacrament and discipline. Why are the latter neglected while the former emphasized?

Part IX

The Nature of the Relationship Between Man and God: Carnal and Spiritual Christians

July 6, 2003

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual *people* but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able *to receive it*, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere* men (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)?

Introduction

Let God Do It

Having just finished a semester at seminary I was preparing to embark upon my respective ministry with a para-church organization. Good-byes were being said with tears and enthusiasm. One young lady wished me well and I responded by saying I'd do my best.

With eyes rolling and frustration in her voice (as if I'd learned nothing in class) she admonishingly said, "Paaauuul, let God do it." To this day I am not exactly sure what that means. Does it mean I shouldn't do my best? Does it mean I should do my best at not doing my best? (Wouldn't I still be trying my best?) Does it mean I should do my best at letting God do it? Should I just go away?

Stratifying the Church

What actually seems to be going on among the vast majority of Christians today is a sort of stratification in the church. Some Christians are among the phylum of those who have made a great discovery, the discovery of the Spirit-filled life. Others are relegated

to the lower stratum of carnal Christian. This Christian caste²³ system is an unbiblical and unhealthy method of dividing the church between the haves and have-nots.

What Christian would not wish to avail himself of the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit? And since our culture is laden with remedial Christians, we become easy targets for those with this great formula whereby which we move up the Christian social order.

The Christian Experience

The real question before us is: what should we expect in terms of the power of the Holy Spirit? Is there really a formula or method where the normal, weak, failing Christian can tap into increased energy and become a living, vital Christian? What does it feel like to be a believer in Christ? And what should I expect my life to look like? Let's begin by examining the predominant view, the one which we must all unlearn. This is the view that stratifies the church.

The Spirit Filled Life

The Spirit filled life, in its most popular presentation, can be found in a tract put out by a para-church organization, which has influenced millions, if not tens of millions, of Christians in the past fifty years. It is entitled *Have You Made the Wonderful Discovery of the Spirit Filled Life?*

An Exciting Adventure

The struggling Christian, wallowing in the mire of his own mediocrity and wretchedness, is handed a short and simple tract which tells him that every day can be "an exciting adventure." If you know "the reality of being filled with the Holy Spirit...and live(s) constantly, moment by moment, under His gracious direction" you will be transformed from the mundane to something exciting. This of course begs the question, *why would a carnal person desire the direction of God?* Is not this something the Holy Spirit does?

²³ Caste—a social class separated from others by hereditary, professional or financial differences.

Nonetheless, what genuine Christian wouldn't wish to live "moment by moment" under the gracious direction of God? Is the fact that I fail to do this relegating me to carnal Christianity? Am I to suppose that the remainder of this tract will actually yield in me such moment by moment obedience and acquiescence to God that I can move to the front of the class and have the scarlet 'c' removed from my family crest?

I generally avoid questioning motives, but I have a strong suspicion that this tract was merely designed to get people within the para-church organization to be more productive—to obtain the prestige that comes with being the higher level Christian! Keep in mind that it is not a matter of seeking to be more obedient with all your heart, soul, mind and strength as Jesus teaches (Mark 12:29). It is actually becoming a Christian of a different kind.

Three Kinds of People

The tract goes on to classify people into three categories—categories, strictly speaking, that are unjustified by Scripture. There is the *natural man*—one who has not received Christ. This person is not a Christian at all. Certainly this is a type of person—a legitimate category.

Secondly, we have the *spiritual man*—one who is directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is the man we all wish to be. He has the mind of Christ and is capable of spiritually appraising all things (1 Corinthians 2:15). His life is "Christ-centered, empowered by the Holy Spirit." He "introduces others to Christ," has "an effective prayer life, understands God's word, trusts God, obeys God," and exhibits the fruit of the Spirit. At a certain level, we see this person in the Bible as well.

Finally, there is the *carnal man* (or 'carnal Christian')—one who has received Christ, but "who lives in defeat because he is trying to live the Christian life in his own strength." Remember: "Let God do it." The carnal Christian is described as "ignorant of his spiritual heritage." He or she is marked by "unbelief, disobedience, loss of love for God and others, poor prayer life, no desire for Bible study, legalistic attitude, impure thoughts, jealousy, guilt, worry, discouragement, critical spirit, frustration, aimlessness."

About now you must be feeling a little schizophrenic. I find myself bouncing between spirit-filled Christian and carnal Christian

from moment to moment. But to be classified as a carnal Christian might be pushing the issue too far. Studying the passages used to divide Christians into these categories might prove beneficial.

1 Corinthians 2:9-3:4

Spiritual Men Being Carnal

What we will find is that the spiritual man is synonymous with being a Christian man. What we will also find is that the spiritual man must continually be aware of and repent of carnal thoughts and actions. *To the Scriptures!*

The proof text for this third type of person (this mythical carnal Christian) is 1 Corinthians 3:1-3:

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual *people* but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able *to receive it*, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere* men (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)?

At first glance this seems plausible. He tells them they're still carnal. But if we wish to speak of categories (and I believe in the present context there are only two—the natural and the spiritual), let us examine the category in which Paul places his readers by backing up to the end of chapter two.

But as it is written: “*Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.*” But God has revealed *them* to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not

the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is *rightly* judged by no one. For "*who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?*" But we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:9-16).

The categories in which Paul's readers are placed are people to whom God has revealed great things (vs. 10) through His Spirit. They have received...the Spirit who is from God that they might know the things given to them from God (vs. 12). They have the mind of Christ (vs. 16). Do we dare categorize these people as carnal? Is Paul categorizing them as carnal? I think not.

What then do we do with Paul's subsequent chastisement and accusation of carnality? In the tract, 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 is quoted. The issue becomes muddled because verse four is left out. It states, **"For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal" (1 Corinthians 3:4)?** Paul is addressing a specific behavior—unnecessary factionalism. Certainly there are times when Christians engage in carnal thoughts and actions—all Christians do, and quite often. In this particular case Paul is addressing a behavior that was prevalent and gaining momentum in the church. But Paul is not putting them in this third category of carnal Christian. He is exhorting spiritual men to acknowledge and repent of a specific carnal practice.

Can you see the difference here? It is one thing to be told to stop gossiping or bitterly arguing or being lazy, etc. It is quite another thing to be told that you must enter into a different genus of Christian.

The Christian Life

False Promises

It is both dark and disheartening to hold some spiritual carrot before brothers and sisters in the Lord, promising them jedi-like powers. When they hit the atmosphere they burn like anybody else, then back to NASA for the latest technique. The fact is all Christians have the Spirit of God. If not they would not believe in Jesus, nor would they seek to obey His law. It is just those things which assure us that we are in Christ—trust in Him as Savior and Lord—trust in His word.

Back to the Real Question

Beyond that, you are in for the fight of your lives. Let's go back to the real question before us. *What should we expect in terms of the power of the Holy Spirit?* Is there really a formula or method where the normal, weak, failing Christian can tap into increased energy and become a living, vital Christian? What does it feel like to be a believer in Christ? And what should I expect my life to look like?

It amounts to this. Good and bad habits will come and go. Contending with being a lustful young man (or woman) will be replaced by contending with being a grumpy old man (or woman). Times of good works and a sense of great intimacy with God (like that of young David) will be followed by seasons of feeling distant and estranged (like old David).

By the grace of God and by the Spirit of God you will fight the world, the devil and your own flesh till God brings you home. The actual weapons of this warfare (which include truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, the word, prayer, watchfulness, perseverance, etc) we will discuss at a later time (although we did discuss the major arsenal of word, sacrament and church discipline). But make no mistake, it is a fight. Have you ever been in a fight? Fights hurt! Sometimes you feel like you're losing! Sometimes you get tired! Anyone promoting a formula suggesting ease in this is grossly unacquainted with the formidable foe of their own depraved heart.

Bad News, Good News

Fret not, beloved, for it is just this battle which continually brings God's people to thirst for His word and sacrament. You see, there's bad news and good news. The bad news is that you will never be the victorious Christian that these church-stratifiers promise with all their man-made laws and recipes. The bad news is, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Paul, Peter, Timothy et al, you will ever be at odds with your own weakness, lethargy, ignorance and sinfulness.

The good news is that you are *at odds* with your own weakness, lethargy, ignorance and sinfulness. The good news is that you do not immerse yourself in your own depraved nature. The good news is that, by the grace of God, you have not resigned yourself to abject carnality. And because of this, great blessings come to home, church and nation.

But over and above this, the good news is *the gospel*. The good news is the loaf and the cup. The good news is the battle is the Lord's. The good news is though we are weak, He is strong. The good news is that **“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21)**. May this, above all other things, be our comfort!

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are some of the qualities promised for those who discover the so-called Spirit-Filled life?
2. Discuss the theory that the Bible talks about three kinds of people. Is this true?
3. Examine 1 Corinthians 2:9-3:4. What is problematic with using this passage to categorize someone as a *carnal Christian*?
4. What are the dangers in promising Christians this sort of super spiritual life?
5. What does the Christian life actually look like?
6. Discuss the bad news and the good news for the Christian.

Part X

Led by the Spirit or by the Law?

July 13, 2003

A False Dichotomy

Somewhere in a sermon I had given the impression that people should try to obey God’s law. Shortly after the service a couple of young Christians stood before me with their Bibles opened. I must say, I admired their courage and resolve. I admired that their hands held Bibles. I admired that they sought to gently and lovingly correct me. This type of thing ought to happen to pastors with regularity. Unfortunately they, like so many of us, were remedial Christians. I was gently accused of seeking to put Christians under the law. *We are to be led, not by the law, but by the Spirit* was their thesis.

Pitting the Spirit of God against the Law of God may be one of the greatest errors promoted by the purveyors of Remedial Christianity. Logic books can use this error as an example of the informal logical fallacy of the false dichotomy—you’re either led by the Spirit or by the law—one’s gotta go. Remedial Christians have decreed: “Out with the law.”

The law of God is viewed among remedial Christians as cold, external and superficial. It is equated with the flesh and should be set aside by true believers—after all “**...the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6)**”. There are so many passages in Scripture which, if skimmed²⁴ instead of scanned²⁵, seem to place God’s Spirit at odds with God’s law that it makes God out to be a bit schizophrenic.

Preview

Presently, I would like to: 1) show that being led by the Spirit includes obedience to the law of God; 2) reveal what the passages

²⁴ To pass lightly and quickly over.

²⁵ To examine closely.

which appear to pit the Spirit against the law are actually seeking to accomplish; 3) give a brief description of the arsenal God provides for spiritual warfare.

Spiritually Obeying God's Law

Somehow we remedials came to the conclusion that reading God's law and doing our best (heart, soul, mind and strength) to obey it was a mistake—it was relying on our own strength. What Christians supposedly should do is trust in the power of the Spirit. Instead of excelling in obedience to the revealed law of God, one must excel in appropriating the power of the Holy Spirit.

Seeking to obey the law of God is actually just the opposite of relying on your own strength. It is relying on God's wisdom and strength. When I do what God's law says I ought to do instead of what I feel like doing (even if I try to interpret that feeling as something spiritual) I am being led by the Spirit. What we will find is that obedience to the law of God is a characteristic which reveals that the Spirit of God is working in us. This is one of those attributes the Bible teaches the gospel will produce in a person.

I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them* (Ezekiel 36:27).

Some might seek to argue that a statute is distinct from a law, but it would be a foolish argument; the words are synonymous.

***Statute, custom, law, decree* (ASV and RSV translate also ordinance, due and bound). The masculine noun *ḥōq* is from the root *ḥāqāq* which means “to scratch” or “to engrave,” hence “to write.”²⁶**

The Apostle Paul drives this point home with the rhetorical question.

²⁶Harris, R. L. 1999, c1980. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Page 317). Moody Press: Chicago

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it (Romans 6:1, 2)?

Paul continues:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace (Romans 6:12-14).

In a moment, we will address what it means to not be under law but under grace. For now it should be clear that a Spirit led person seeks to avoid sinning. And what is sin? We must let the Scriptures define it.

Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

Sin is defined as a violation of the law of God. Perhaps you've heard that when Jesus came he ended the law (a poor interpretation of Romans 10:4). What He actually taught was,

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill (Matthew 5:17).

Jesus also taught,

Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12).

Jesus said to him, '*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all*

your mind.’ This is *the* first and great commandment. And *the* second is like it: ‘*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus had ample opportunity to tell people to forget about the law, yet He never does. Hyper-remedials will advise Christians to forget about the law and merely imitate Jesus. But what is it about Jesus that we’re supposed to imitate? Jesus was born under the law (Galatians 4:4) and always did that which pleased the Father. It is His moral law-keeping that we are to imitate. In fact, there are many things Jesus did which we need *not* imitate (circumcision, dietary restrictions, etc.).

Paul also viewed God’s law as something holy.

Therefore the law *is* holy, and the commandment holy and just and good (Romans 7:12).

Notice Paul doesn’t shrink back from appealing to the law in his arguments about Christians’ behavior.

Do I say these things as a *mere* man? Or does not the law say the same also? ⁹ For it is written in the law of Moses, “*You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.*” Is it oxen God is concerned about (1 Corinthians 9:8, 9)?

James also has godly respect for the law of God.

But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does (James 1:25).

There are innumerable passages in both the Old and New Testaments which indicate that the spiritual man will seek to walk in the law of God. In fact, every command in Scripture makes the assumption that those led by the Spirit will regard God’s law as commands which are to be obeyed. And the remedials, though they

often argue against the law of God, will seldom put their theory to practice. They'll always agree that it's wrong to steal.

Bottom line here is that the man who is led by the Spirit in his ethics is led to know, agree and trust in God's law.

Spirit versus Law

So what do we make of the passages which appear to pit the Spirit against the law? Verses like,

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law (Galatians 5:18).

For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God (Galatians 2:19).

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God *did* by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:2, 3).

For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Romans 10:4).

Remember how I was accused of seeking to put Christians under the law? These are the verses. What does it mean that we are not under the law? When Saul of Tarsus fell to the ground having been confronted by Jesus—when he was converted—when he was delivered from the law—does anyone actually think Paul's response to this was that he was now given a green light to disobey God's moral law?

Did Paul say to himself, "Thank goodness I can finally follow false gods, worship with idols, use God's name in vain, ignore the pesky Sabbath, dishonor my parents, murder, commit adultery, steal, lie and covet?" I think not.

Time does not allow me to go into detail, but a brief examination of the context of these passages should illuminate the matter.

Under the Law

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law (Galatians 5:18).

The context of this verse is found (practically in the entire epistle) in the opening verses of the chapter.

You have become estranged from Christ, you who *attempt to be justified by law*; you have fallen from grace (Galatians 5:4).

Paul is not arguing that Christians shouldn't seek to obey the law. He is arguing against the folly of seeking to obey the law in order to be justified. Now we remedials are bothered to find out what justification is. Justification is God's declaration of acquittal. Those who put their faith in Christ alone have been pardoned by His blood. Those who trust in their own efforts are still under law.

In short, being under law or under grace is referring to the terms of a covenant. Are you under a covenant of law? Do you trust in your own efforts to stand approved before God? If such is the case, you are surely fallen. Are you under a covenant of grace? Do you trust in the cross of Christ? If such is the case, you will not be judged. Jesus said it plainly:

He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:18).

In other words, using the law to try to save yourself leads to ruin. Conversely, using the law as a system of ethics is holy and good. If I tell you to run to get in shape it might be good advice. If I tell you to run to the moon...well, you get the picture.

Dead to the Law

We see the similar thought in the next verse.

For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God (Galatians 2:19).

Notice the context.

I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness *comes* through the law, then Christ died in vain (Galatians 2:21).

Again, if I think I can be declared righteous before God through the law, Christ died in vain. Paul died to the law in terms of seeking to keep it to save himself—not as a rule of ethics.

The Law of Sin and Death

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God *did* by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:2, 3).

What is the law of sin and death? It is the law, or covenant, which states that if you sin you die. It is the one given to Adam. God told Adam, “**On the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.**” What we were too weak in our flesh to do, God did by sending Jesus. This has nothing to do with whether or not we should abandon our efforts to obey God’s law. We’re instructed to have faith in the law-keeper.

End of the Law

For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Romans 10:4).

This verse is continually quoted as if Christians should ditch the Ten Commandments. Again, look at the context.

For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness,

have not submitted to the righteousness of God (Romans 10:3).

Paul is addressing people who are trying to “**establish their own righteousness.**” Paul’s point is that the Old Testament (whether “law” refers to ceremonial laws or the entire Mosaic system doesn’t really matter here) had Christ as its chief end; *end* meaning *purpose* (telos in the Greek), not extermination.

Conclusion

The end of the matter is this: If one thinks he is spiritual while ignoring the law of God, he deceives himself. The person who is led by the Spirit will, among other things, have the same view of the law as Paul.

Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good (Romans 7:12).

The person led by the Spirit will have the same view of the law as David:

The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of *coins of gold and silver* (Psalms 119:72).

This needs to be understood, however, in the light of weakness of the law to save. When one views their keeping of the law as their hope of righteousness, the law becomes their executioner. Praise God, One was executed on our behalf. Amen.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Is seeking to obey God with all your heart the same as relying on yourself rather than on God?
2. How is it “spiritual” to seek to obey God’s law?
3. Define *sin*.
4. Was Jesus for or against the law? What about Paul or James?
5. What does it mean to be “under the law”?
6. In what respect are we to be “dead” to the law?
7. What is the law of sin and death?
8. How is Christ the “end” of the law?
9. Sum up how the law should and should not be used.

Part XI

Spiritual Warfare

July 20, 2003

Yelling at the Devil

The prayers at the Bible study were getting more aggressive. It finally reached a fever pitch where the young prayer warriors were screaming at the devil, "I REBUKE YOU." This, I was informed, was spiritual warfare. It consisted of aggressive, verbal abuse of Satan. Is it fact or fiction that Luther threw his inkwell at the devil? Do you think it actually hurt the prince of darkness? What if the devil has a sticks-and-stones policy? Inkwell or yelling? Which works best?

Then one man wrote a book teaching people how to sense the presence of the devil. A woman had been working on mastering this skill when she sensed Lucifer at the pool. She turned just in time to see her child falling in the water. She rescued the youth. But what of the poor women who have lost children? How sad and guilt-ridden they must be for not having learned this satanic sixth sense.

A best-selling Christian novel has demons digging their talons into unsuspecting civilians. They must be prayed off. A man I know had alienated his wife and children. He confessed to having the spirits of lust, anger and murder. I was asked to assist in his deliverance. Instead of repenting and asking God for forgiveness he pointed to his shoulder and asked that we intercede to remove said apparitious vermin. I felt more like a ghost-buster than a pastor!

Break the bondage of Satan! Be delivered from darkness! Pray in the Spirit! All of this is more reminiscent of *End of Days* with Arnold Schwarzenegger than biblical Christianity. Remedial Christianity par excellence!

Yet we are called to spiritual warfare. We are also told of an arsenal with which we are to do battle against the wiles of the devil. Of what does true spiritual warfare consist? What is the weaponry? How is it to be used?

Identifying the Enemies

First, let's identify the enemies of our soul. Three ever-present enemies are our own flesh, the world and the devil.

For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish (Galatians 5:17).

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him (1 John 2:15).

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8)

Not only do these verses reveal the enemies of our souls, they give brief instruction regarding how we are to engage. When the things we “**wish**” to do are at odds with God’s revealed law, we should not do them. We should not have undo allegiance or affections for the fleeting things of creation (the world). We should be sober (self-controlled) and vigilant (watchful) in order to avoid the wiles of the evil one. These are uncomplicated and yet very difficult thing to do.

Wisdom in Battle

The Scriptures offer much wisdom in terms of our engagement with these enemies.

Watch Your Company

Engagement includes wisdom in terms of avoiding those venues that are conducive to failure.

Do not be deceived: “Evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Corinthians 15:33).

If you're a drunk, don't go to bars. If you're violent, don't carouse in rough neighborhoods. If you're lustful, get rid of the internet. Don't keep company with those who desire your ruin. Don't overestimate your own intestinal fortitude.

Confession and Prayer

Engagement also includes accountability and prayer.

Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much (James 5:16).

Find another sinner (that shouldn't be too hard), confess and prayer for one another.

Know God's Law

It is quite important to know right from wrong.

Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You (Psalm 119:11).

If you are unaware of what sin actually is, it's hard to see it creeping up on you. All these and more are necessary functions in the battle against the flesh, the world and the devil. These enemies work together and we need not worry about isolating them into distinct fronts. In other words, when you lose to one, you lose to them all. This is why Paul equates lying, anger and stealing with giving a place to the devil (Ephesians 4:25-29).

Quintessential Warfare

If this all sounds way too practical, let's go to the quintessential spiritual warfare passage (Ephesians 6:10-18) to see if it is any less practical.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might (Ephesians 6:10).

(Indulge me, as I will treat this introductory admonition in due time.)

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil (Ephesians 6:11).

Wiles literally means “**schemes sought out**” for deceiving. The devil is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). Keep this in mind when you’re criticized for your obsession with truth. We are to put on the whole armor, not just some of it. The great promise is that we will “**be able to stand.**” Why the armor of God and not the armor of man?

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12).

That our foes seem to be these spooky beings of the netherworld does not mean we should seek to astral plane out of our material bodies with light saber in hand. A spiritual warfare cross-reference gives us the nature of this contest.

For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4, 5).

Remember the power—the weapons—of these dark rulers is primarily *deceit*. They’re liars and they seek to get people to believe the lie. These lies must be revealed as the falsehoods that they are. And the truth, in both person (Christ) and proposition (His word) must be inserted.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand (Ephesians 6:13).

Partial armor is insufficient. Manmade armor (even if it is presented as spiritual) is also lacking. It says *take* up the armor, not *make* up the armor. We now have the list or equipment. I do not believe this list is exhaustive, nor should we over-analyze how each piece of armor relates to the particular virtue. As Calvin wrote,

Nothing can be more idle than the extraordinary pains which some have taken to discover the reason why *righteousness* is made a *breastplate*, instead of a *girdle*.²⁷

I will briefly exegete what should be painfully obvious to us all.

Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness (Ephesians 6:14).

If you wish to avoid giving the devil a foothold in your life, know, believe and profess the *truth*—truth which includes sincerity of mind and heart. Don't be a liar or think that it's okay to lie. The whole armor would mean being truthful in every aspect of life.

Righteousness means having a devout and holy life. Don't merely avoid doing wrong things, but also pursue good and holy things. Love God and love your neighbor. Care for the widows and orphans. Do *good* unto evil. Know God's commandments and keep them. Pursue a genuine piety in your worship of God and devotion to His word and sacraments.

...and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15).

²⁷Calvin, J. 1998. *Calvin's Commentaries: Ephesians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Eph 6:14). Ages Software: Albany, OR

As we shall shortly see, entering into this battle apart from the gospel is an exercise in futility. Man cannot climb one rung on Jacob's ladder with footwear other than the gospel. Apart from the Gospel (faith in Christ as Savior and Lord) you'll never have peace with God or the peace of God. Paul writes,

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).

This peace, at one level or another, produces another peace.

You will keep *him* in perfect peace, *whose* mind is stayed *on You*, because he trusts in You (Isaiah 26:3).

The ability to stand in this battle requires ever trusting in the gospel of Christ. This is clearly put forth in the next battle command.

...above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one (Ephesians 6:16).

One must never abandon his faith in God as Lord or Savior in an effort to win battles in life. The shield of which Paul writes was a **“large oblong oval door-like shield of the Romans, four feet long by two and a half feet broad”**.²⁸

We see ancient war movies where the archers let their arrows fly while the men in their ranks take refuge behind their shields. Those who fear or lack faith in the shields surely perish. Christians don't run for the hills. Fiery darts, which could include tribulation, anguish, persecution, famine, doubt, lust, greed, vanity, envy, etc. will eventually be quenched and not merely deflected.

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying

²⁸Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. 1997. *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Eph 6:16). Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA

always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints (Ephesians 6:17-18).

An increased awareness and assurance of our salvation grants strength and courage for the people of God. How much faster can we run when the finish line, with all its attending prizes, is clearly before us?

If we abandon or synthesize the word of God our integrity becomes compromised. Churches that lose the Scriptures have lost every battle. They have no sword. They have replaced the power of the word with human innovation and have become their own enemy.

And finally we must *persevere in prayer*, praying that God will supply all our needs according to His riches and that we might have His grace to stand against in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

The Proper Battle Perspective

If there ever was a single passage spelling out the proper arsenal for spiritual warfare *this is it*. But before we start donning that chainmail which makes us able to stand against the wiles of the devil, let's put ourselves in the proper place in terms of battle.

It is not as if naked you are taking on the naked devil in the octagon down at the ultimate fighting ring. That would not be a very long fight. It would be reminiscent of the account of spiritual warfare in Acts.

Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so. And the evil spirit answered and said, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded (Acts 19:13-16).

So much for thinking the devil is intimidated by strong language.

The Defeated Enemy

Before we discuss buckling our armor and engage in our battle, let us recognize the current (*defeated*) nature of our enemy. Let us also take refuge in the One who defeated him. Writing of the Messiah to come, Isaiah prophesies,

Then the Lord saw *it*, and it displeased Him that *there was no justice*. He saw that *there was no man*, and wondered that *there was no intercessor*; therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him; and His own righteousness, it sustained Him. For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak (Isaiah 59:15-17).

Strong language concerning the formidable nature of the conquest of Christ is most often seen in the prophets and apocalyptic language of the Revelation. There is no man who can take rank against the enemy of God's people and succeed. No man has the power or righteousness to intercede for God's people in such a battle—no man but the Lord Himself. And He does so with garments of vengeance, and clad with zeal as a cloak. As Luther wrote,

**The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure;
One little word shall fell him.**

The *word* being Jesus, as stated in the previous stanza:

**Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right man on our side,**

**The man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He,
Lord Sabaoth His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.**

Indeed, it is only when we have trusted in the One whose breastplate is righteousness that we can even think of entering the battle with success. Disenfranchised from *the man of God's own choosing* would consign us all to the realm of wounded and naked fools!

David and Goliath

The enemy stands as Goliath—taunting God's elect (1 Samuel 17). The people of Israel have a warranted fear of a destiny of death and slavery should they confront the giant man of war. Yet a seemingly frail and meek David (the anointed one of God) takes it upon himself to defeat those who God's people could not. David slew him with a stone and relieved him of his head, reminiscent of how the seed of the woman was to crush the head of serpent (Genesis 3).

It was then, and only then, that God's people could successfully enter the battle. As is recorded:

And when the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled. Now the men of Israel and Judah arose and shouted, and pursued the Philistines (1 Samuel 17:51-52).

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might (Ephesians 6:10).

The initial verse that I left untreated exhorts us, as it were, to be clothed in the power of His might. Apart from faith in the anointed one of God, all battles are lost before they begin. But those who have put their trust in Him will stand! Amen.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Who are the enemies of the souls of men?
2. What is good biblical wisdom for confronting these foes?
3. What is the quintessential spiritual warfare passage?
4. Define *wiles*.
5. What are the weapons of the dark rulers?
6. Discuss the virtues necessary for successful spiritual warfare.
7. What would happen if we sought to do battle with the devil on our own?
8. What is the nature of our enemy?
9. How was he (that is, the devil) defeated?
10. How do David and Goliath illustrate Christians and Jesus?

Part XII

So, What's a Covenant?

July 27, 2003

Now it happened in the process of time that the king of Egypt died. Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged *them* (Exodus 2:23-25).

In the same manner *He* also *took* the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me” (1 Corinthians 11:25).

A Covenant

I forget the question that was asked, but I remember the answer the pastor gave. It was: “Because we serve a covenant God.” I wasn’t sure what he meant by that answer. When I was a Baptist, one man asked me, “Why do you think our children are excluded from the covenant?” I had no idea what he was talking about.

So, *what’s a covenant?* Here we have a word that is used no less than three hundred times in the Bible. There are people of the covenant (Genesis 9:9); the sign of the covenant (Genesis 9:12); the establishment of the covenant (Genesis 17:17); the keeping of the covenant (Genesis 17:9); the breaking of the covenant (Joshua 7:11); God remembering His covenant (Exodus 2:24); the blood of the covenant (Exodus 24:8); the book of the covenant (Exodus 24:7); the vengeance of the covenant (Leviticus 26:25); the ark of the covenant (Numbers 10:33); and so on. The entire Bible is often thought of as broken into two parts—the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

I am not sure, for me, if it was a matter of being remedial as much as just pure ignorance of what this is all about. You'd think that something so prominent in the Bible would be a matter of emphasis for Christians, but I was lost. And the times I heard teaching on the covenant (usually by people with a brand of theology called Dispensationalism) it was so confusing that I couldn't make heads or tails of it.

Our goal here is to understand the idea of *covenant*. What does the word mean? What is the covenant of works? What is the covenant of grace? What is the difference between the Old and New Covenants? Of what must we beware regarding covenant morphing? And what difference does this all make to me?

Define Covenant

What does the word *covenant* actually mean? There are multiple ways it can be used.

It can be used between nations as a treaty or an alliance of friendship. It can be used between individuals as a pledge or agreement. It can be used between a monarch and subjects regarding certain obligations, often relating to a constitution. It's a contract of sorts.

Primarily in the Bible the covenant is between God and man.²⁹ This God-initiated covenant is accompanied by signs, sacrifices, and a solemn oath that sealed the relationship with promises of blessings for keeping the covenant and curses for breaking it.³⁰ Roughly put, mankind has a contract with God to live a certain way. If we live that way we'll be blessed, if not we'll be cursed.

Covenant of Works

We first see a covenant (commonly referred to as a *covenant of works*) made with Adam.

Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. And the

²⁹ Though not always. Job made a covenant with his own eyes (Job 31:1).

³⁰ Harris, R. L. 1999, c1980. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Page 128). Moody Press: Chicago

Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:15-17).

Seems simple enough. If you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you are demonstrating rebellion against God, have broken the covenant and will suffer the consequences. Here we have a pretty reasonable explanation for why there is a one hundred percent casualty rate among humans. The Apostle Paul explains,

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned (Romans 5:12).

Therefore, as through one man’s offense *judgment* came to all men, resulting in condemnation (Romans 5:18).

Adam’s sin has affected and infected the entire race. In other words, we’re all guilty because of his offense and because of our offense as well. There’s simply no escaping our humanity.

When we get right down to it, this covenant of works has become pretty bad news. We are all sinful and cursed individuals in a sinful and cursed race.

Covenant of Grace

But praise God, the Scriptures almost immediately reveal the covenant of grace! Question 30 of the Westminster Larger Catechism expresses things nicely:

God doth not leave all men to perish in the estate of sin and misery, into which they fell by the breach of the first covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Works; but of his mere love and mercy delivereth his elect out of it, and bringeth them into

**an estate of salvation by the second covenant,
commonly called the Covenant of Grace.³¹**

It isn't too long after the fall of man that we read of the covenant of grace. There is an immediate proclamation by God in which He promises to win back, through the seed of the woman (that would be Jesus), that which was lost through Adam's disobedience. Speaking to the serpent God says,

He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel (Genesis 3:15).

Some Common Mistakes

Let's avoid some mistakes here. We are not to think that the covenant of works is no longer in play. Nor should we think that the covenant of grace applies indiscriminately to the entire human race as did the covenant of works. In other words the covenant of works is still in effect to those who are not under the covenant of grace—that is, people who reject Jesus. They prefer, if you will, to remain part of Adam's deal.

Let's also avoid another huge mistake. The covenant of grace does not supplant or nullify the covenant of works. It is not as if God no longer requires absolute, perfect obedience to His holy law as our necessary contribution—as our part of the deal. God is immutable; He changeth not (Malachi 3:6). What He once required He always will require. The covenant of grace rather fulfills the covenant of works.

The Scriptures read as if God is hunting for someone to undo what Adam has done.

Then the Lord saw *it*, and it displeased Him that *there was no justice*. He saw that *there was no man*, and wondered that *there was no intercessor* (Isaiah 59:15, 16)

³¹Smith, M. H. 1990; Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. *Larger catechism of the Westminster Confession Standards*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.). Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press: Greenville SC

Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?” And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it. So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it (Revelation 5:2-4).

But both of these passages end wonderfully. Isaiah records that God wondered that there was no intercessor (representative for men),

Therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him; and His own righteousness, it sustained Him. For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak (Isaiah 59:15-17).

The human race had no hero, no deliverer, so God would do it Himself.

John wept because no one worthy. The text continues,

But one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals” (Revelation 5:5).

Of course, this refers to Christ, the eternal Son of God made flesh. So, the covenant of grace is not God changing His mind about the covenant of works as much as it is God *fulfilling* the covenant of works by sending His own Son. Jesus taught,

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill (Matthew 5:17).

Briefly, God made a covenant with mankind that He must live in perfect obedience or suffer the eternal consequences. Men rebelled. But God, because of the great love with which He loved us,

chose not to leave us in a state of rebellion and death. So He, by sending His own beloved Son, kept our part of the deal. We failed in our righteousness; Jesus did not fail. We could not escape the due punishment of sin—eternal death and misery—He bore it for us on a tree (1 Peter 2:24).

It is not as if God reposed in heaven barking out impossible orders to miserable sinners (something, by the way, He would have been perfectly just to do). No, He became an active participant in producing and procuring that which we had abandoned and disdained. He is not merely a covenant *making* God—He is a covenant *keeping* God. He kept both sides of the covenant.

As a righteous, holy and just God He promised to punish sin. That He did. As a gracious, merciful Savior, God the Son—Immanuel, God with us—He chose to bear the punishment and freely grant His covenant keeping righteousness to sinners—this is known as *grace*. How much more glorious is it to God when we realize that the covenant of works was not dismissed but fulfilled by Christ!

Distinctions Between Covenants

What then are the distinctions between the covenants we see in the Bible? A brief explanation:

If you are under the covenant of works, you are trusting in your own efforts to stand justified before a Holy God. This is just about the most foolish thing a person can do. They either have an over-inflated view of their own righteousness or an under-inflated view of the righteous judgments of God.

If you are under a covenant of grace you are trusting, not in your own works, but in Christ's righteousness. He is the law-keeper. He is the intercessor (the mediator between man and God). He is the giver of life. He is our deliverer—the covenant keeper.

Two Covenants of Grace

Here is something that most Christians don't realize. Both the old covenant (seen in the sacrifices, and ceremonies of the Old Testament) and the new covenant (seen in the works of Christ in the New Testament) are covenants of *grace*! The covenant of works was given to Adam. What we see given to Abraham, Moses, David etc. in the Old Testament is all grace.

The old covenant is often referred to as *the law*. But that doesn't mean those under the old covenant were saved by keeping the law. It only means that it was during this period that the full expression of the law was given. Similarly, the new covenant is referred to as a covenant of grace. Even though there is much instruction on righteous living in the new covenant, the full expression of grace is seen in Christ.

So what's the difference? Essentially, the difference between the old covenant and new covenant is a matter of foreshadow versus fulfillment. The old covenant had priests, which foreshadowed our High Priest who is Christ (Hebrews 7:24). The old covenant had sacrifices, which foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ (John 1:29). In the old covenant God preserved the nation of Israel because it was through that nation that Christ would be born (Genesis 18:22).

But the heart of the old and new covenants is the same: That God would send His Son to redeem His people to His own glory. The new covenant is represented among the people of God in a much simpler way. There is the preaching of God's word, the administration (not of blood sacrifices—Jesus already bled) of the sacraments (baptism and Lord's Supper), and the pursuit of the overall purity of Christ's church through necessary discipline.

Beware of Covenant Morphing!

Finally we must beware of the covenant morphers (people who seek to change a covenant of grace into a covenant of works). The Apostle Paul dealt with these people quite often. They told church-members they had to be circumcised in order to actually obtain salvation thus turning a covenant of grace into a covenant of works (saved by human effort).

This is seen in its most blatant forms today by cults and Roman Catholics who teach salvation by water baptism or some other meritorious function performed by the person or a priest.

In its most insidious form this is seen in most of evangelicalism today where men are taught that they aid in their own salvation through autonomous volition—more commonly known as free will decisions for Christ. But this leads us back to the covenant of works. Hear A. A. Hodge,

The Arminian (salvation by human choice) view is, that Adam having lost the promise and incurred the penalty of the covenant which demanded perfect obedience, Christ's death having made it consistent with the claims of absolute justice, God for Christ's sake introduces a new covenant, styled the covenant of grace, offering to all men individually the eternal life forfeited by Adam on the lowered and graciously possible condition of faith and evangelical obedience. According to this view, the new covenant is just as much a covenant of works as the old one was; the only difference is that the works demanded are far less difficult, and we are graciously aided in our endeavors to accomplish them. According to this view, also, faith and evangelical obedience secure eternal life in the new covenant in the same way that perfect obedience did in the old covenant (parenthesis mine).³²

It is not too hard to see how this robs glory from God, granting room for boasting among men. It also will eventually lead men to have confidence in their own ability to make righteous choices rather than throwing themselves upon the mercy of a gracious God.

Beware of the covenant morphers! Creation is governed by a covenant God. This is a glorious and inescapable fact. You will either seek to keep the covenant yourself (an endeavor you've already failed at a million-plus times) or you will trust in God's own arm of salvation—the Son of God the Son of man—Jesus the Christ!

The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins (Romans 11:26, 27).

³²Hodge, A. 1996. *The confession of faith : With questions for theological students and Bible classes*. With an appendix on Presbyterianism by Charles Hodge. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed. based on the 1992 Banner of Truth reprint). Christian Classics Foundation: Simpsonville SC

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are some different examples of covenants in the Bible?
2. Define *covenant*.
3. What is a covenant of works?
4. What is a covenant of grace?
5. What are some common mistakes regarding the relationship between the covenants of works and grace?
6. Who kept the covenant of works?
7. Give some brief descriptions of the different covenants.
8. Is the old covenant a covenant of works or grace? Explain.
9. What kind of covenant morphing do we see in churches?
10. Why is it important to have a proper understanding of the covenant?

Part XIII

How Come I Never See a Miracle? A

August 3, 2003

Preface

Expect a Miracle?

I was a guest on a radio talk show. The subject was, “*Are you disappointed in God?*” The question we threw out to the listening audience was, “Has the Christian faith been presented to you in such a way as to make you think that you are not getting some things that the Bible promises you should get?” Two of our earliest callers were women who were blind. My question for them was, “When you became a Christian and started acquainting yourself WITH the gospels, noticing that nearly everybody was healed—including the blind—did you expect that this should happen to you?” They both answered, “No.”

Was that a faithless answer or a proper answer? When we read the pages of Scripture and see supernatural things take place, should we expect those things to be happening in our lives today? Should we, as the bumper sticker indicates, “*Expect a Miracle*”?

What’s a Miracle?

The issue before us can be classified as *signs and wonders*.³³ We usually call them *miracles*. These are supernatural things. They are miraculous. We are not talking about amazing coincidences or the beauty of childbirth or something wondrous or astonishing. Hodge defines a miracle as something that

...take[s] place in the material world, i.e., in the sphere of observation of the senses...and...are

³³ The word *miracle* is not actually in the Bible.

**produced or caused by the simple volition of God,
without the intervention of any subordinate cause.³⁴**

In other words, the podium rises to the ceiling without strings or anything else helping it except the word of God Himself. Walking on water is done without skis, sufficient speed or any flotation device. Water becomes wine without the necessary interval of time or additives. People speak languages they were never taught. People heal others by the mere word of their mouth. People know things without having received the knowledge through ordinary means. And all of this can be observed by anyone with the required senses of observation—whether they have faith in the miracle worker or not.

Introduction

Topics

In this portion of the series on Remedial Christianity I intend to address a number of subjects as they relate to the miraculous: 1) I intend to show that Christians should not expect miracles—at least in the way we saw them performed by Jesus or the apostles.³⁵ 2) With this, I intend to show why there were miracles performed in the Scriptures. 3) I will show the principles for cessation—the ceasing of certain types of events or actions we see in Scripture. 4) We will address the error of believing in the second blessing of the Holy Spirit or subsequent baptism of the Holy Spirit—which was accompanied by miraculous things. 5) Along with this we will examine the baptism of the Holy Spirit versus the baptism of fire. 6) We will finish with an examination of 1 Corinthians 12-14, which is the flagship passage used to argue for the continuation of these miraculous activities in the church.

³⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, (Eerdman, reprinted 1989), p. 618.

³⁵ I will state here that I am not suggesting that God doesn't heal in a response to prayer. But there is that chance that He may not heal. When Peter, however, was confronted by the lame man at the temple asking for alms, Peter did not pray for his healing and wait for a (possibly negative) response from God. He simply declared "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk" and *immediately* the man was healed (Acts 3:1-11). There was no way that man was not going to be healed. There was simply no possibility at that moment that God would not heal him.

What we will find to be at stake in all of this is the very foundation of the Christian faith—*Sola Scriptura*. In other words, if Christ is the cornerstone of our faith, and the foundation the apostles and prophets—i.e. their message is the foundation (Ephesians 2:20)—then once you’ve cracked the foundation then all hell can break loose. And this has that not been the case!

Among Brothers

Allow me to state up front, that my thesis for this message runs on a head-on collision course with what is generally called *Pentecostalism*—or, the doctrine of the Charismatics. And it is not merely at odds with these forms of Christianity but with those who have been influenced by them; for their influence is strong and wide.

I would, therefore, like to preface this sermon (or sermons) with a couple of words on confrontation and debate. But even before that, I would like to put forth that although I am in disagreement with Christians—commonly known as Neo-Pentecostal, Full Gospel, Charismatic, or Second Blessing believers—it would be wrong, and uncharitable, to consign these people to the ash can of paganism.

An examination of the doctrines of the Assemblies of God, or many other Pentecostal denominations, shows much orthodoxy in their belief systems and understanding of Christianity. Furthermore, I think the enthusiasm and energy many of our Charismatic brothers and sisters exude on behalf of the gospel is to be admired and emulated. I say this with all sincerity, and not merely as an obligatory prelude to my criticisms.

Error is Destructive

I must still insist, however, that the (what we will call) Charismatic view of the work the Holy Spirit is faulty. And because it is faulty it is destructive. I don’t necessarily have to connect the dots as to why doctrinal error is destructive. As Christians, we know by faith that it is. One need not look too far or too hard, though, to see the destructive nature of this approach to the faith.

As I was preparing for this series, I was sitting in my office and received a phone call. A man in his mid-fifties, dying of cancer, was on the other end of the line. One year earlier his wife had taken ill and had died. He had a number of children, including a twelve-

year-old daughter. He was raised in a Pentecostal church and believed in divine healing. His wife died and he was about to die. He conveyed to me that all he had been taught was a lie. He had departed from the faith and wasn't about to go back to church.

I sought to comfort him to the best of my ability. Not *everything* he had been taught was a lie. I tried to explain to him that God doesn't promise to always heal. But He *does* promise that whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. As delicately as possible I explained God's divine justice and Christ's substitutionary atonement—i.e. the gospel. He wondered why he hadn't been taught these things as a child. Believe me, I shared in his lament.

I bring this up to show one possible damaging effect of an improper understanding of what we should expect God to do—what God promises and what He doesn't promise. And although truth cannot be determined by anecdotes (even true anecdotes) we must all agree that an unbiblical notion of Christianity, no matter how well-meaning, is destructive. I can bring up scores of examples (maybe not as intense as the one just mentioned) where an improper view of how God interacts with mankind has caused disruption in and alienation from the church.

A Spirit of Division

The irony of the issue before us—the work of the Holy Spirit—is how it appears to do just the opposite of what the Holy Spirit promises to do, which is bring unity to the church. But *peace at all costs* cannot be the marching song of the church. Sadly, peace at all costs has been the swan song of many churches. The apostle Paul did not hesitate to bring strong and, at times, harsh correction to churches in error. In His seven letters to the seven churches, Jesus constantly brings warnings to God's people. In order for there to be genuine unity, there must be division. Otherwise the church merely becomes the church of the lowest common denominator.

Observe the words of Jesus to the church at Pergamum.

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 stumbling block 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; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth (Revelation 2:14- 16).

In light of these statements we must surmise that, although all churches have error, to persist in error is a dangerous course, a course which may finally bring a church to the point where it is no longer a church at all.

Along with this I might point out the remedial nature of thinking Christians ought not to argue. It is true that contentious and meaningless arguments are to be avoided (1 Timothy 1:4). There is no shortage, however, in the biblical record of Christians confronting other Christians due to issues of life or doctrine (Galatians 2:11). It should not be thought harmful to God's kingdom for an unbeliever listen to Christians debate over critical issues; when doctors and lawyers debate it does not impugn law or medicine. When Christians debate it does not impugn God's kingdom. Let us pray, however, that the debates are scholarly.

Goals

Let us not lose sight of the goals of the task before us. It is not merely to be right, and it certainly is not to become puffed up with a sense of intellectual or doctrinal superiority.

Avoid Stratification

First, our goal is one of unity. This unity will be promoted by attacking a brand of theology that seeks to stratify the church between those who do (and those who do not) have the Spirit and access to these miraculous phenomena. Certainly, in some senses the church is stratified. There are elders, deacons, and members. There are people who are more, or less, mature. There are people who are more, or less, knowledgeable, etc. But what I wish to address is an approach to Christianity which creates tiered levels of Christians that are not based on maturity, knowledge, wisdom, etc., but rather are based upon those who either have or don't have the Spirit—or more specifically, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I intend to show that

there is no “second blessing” or subsequent baptism of the Holy Spirit which, according to the General Counsel of the Assemblies of God,

...is an empowering gift from God the Father that is promised to every believer (Matthew 3:11; Luke 11:13; 24:49; Acts 2:33, 38). It helps the Christian to live a holy life and also brings a new devotional attachment to Jesus Christ, making Him very real and precious. The primary purpose of the Baptism is to give greater power for witnessing (Acts 1:8). Other benefits include a greater joy in spiritual service, and a heightened sense of one's mission to the world.³⁶

It is not because I want to hamshackle the Holy Spirit that I denounce this teaching. Holy living, power, joy and devotional attachment to Jesus Christ are certainly good things. I denounce the doctrine simply because I don't believe it is biblical. I denounce it also because I believe it presents a false view of the uniform, Scriptural expectation of the Christian experience.

Many believers are looking for the e-train of Christian experience. “If I could just find the ticket, I could get out of the streets and alley-ways of life and ride the monorail of victorious Christian living.” We are asked if we have made the “wonderful discovery” of the Spirit-filled life. So, like Columbus or Magellan we need to find this “new land” of Christian experience. And until we find it, we remain woefully on the lower tier of Christian experience. This teaching must be rebuffed.

Encourage the Genuine Charismatic Life

In addition to avoiding this stratification, I wish to encourage Christians in the genuine, biblical, charismatic life. *Now that I believe in Jesus, what should my life feel like?* What should I expect? What is the genuine fruit of Christianity? How should I expect the gifts (*charisma*) to be functioning in my life, in my church? It is not that I want us to become lackadaisically content. I suspect most

³⁶Assembly of God Web Page—Assemblies of God Beliefs. The General Council of the Assemblies of God.

people who fall into charismatic churches do so because they desire to serve the Lord more fervently—or have access to greater power. But I also think it is a shame that so many are seeking to climb a ladder leading nowhere. There is this false promise that at the top of the ladder is the super-Christian experience. I am going to argue that the normal Christian, charismatic,³⁷ experience is both more difficult and more glorious.

Intelligible Christianity

Third, I will address the dangers of supposing the unintelligibility of the Christian faith. This is not to say that His ways are not above our ways. But there are aspects of the charismatic movement—specifically the modern notion of tongues—where the intellect is supposedly by-passed. There is a notion that there is this inner-spirit of man connecting with God that is completely separate from the mind or soul. The faith then becomes very mystical and visceral. I will argue that this, instead of being the leading of the Spirit, is being led by various impulses (2 Timothy 3:6). The Christian faith is God’s message to the world. He has revealed it (infallibly and authoritatively) through His word—*in writing*. The writing consists of words, sentences, and paragraphs. There is syntax and structure. It is to be known through study.

I have been told that God is above logic, and that seeking to understand logically, what can be understood of God, is thinking as man thinks. God is not above logic; logic is an expression of the character and nature of God. If I can’t trust that God is logical, how can I trust Him when I read **“whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord will be saved”**? What if I get to the tribunal of God and He says, “That’s not what you thought it meant?” Unintelligible Christianity is no Christianity at all!

Sola Scriptura

What is equally at stake is the foundational credo of *Sola Scriptura*. For if God is still operating the way He did during the time of Jesus and the Apostles, the canon³⁸ is still open. The word of God

³⁷ The charismata merely means the gifts.

³⁸ Referring to the number of books in the Bible.

is still (infallibly and authoritatively) being unveiled. God confirmed the authority of His word through the signs and wonders of the people who delivered His word (Acts 14:3; Hebrews 2:3, 4). If the signs and wonders are still operating the same way today as they were during the age of the apostles, the word is still coming as well. Benjamin B. Warfield writes of the supernatural gifts,

These gifts were not the possession of the primitive Christians as such; for that matter of the Apostolic Church or Apostolic age for themselves; they were distinctively the authentication of the Apostles. They were part of the credentials of the Apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the church. Their function thus confined them to distinctively the Apostolic Church, and they necessarily passed away with it.³⁹

It is no wonder that nearly every cult has its prophet and its continuing revelation. This teaching continually pounds the walls of orthodoxy. This is yet one more effort at exposing it for what it is.

Method

The following will be the method by which I will approach the subject:

The Ultimate Authority

The first thing we must all recognize is that the Bible is the ultimate authority on any subject or any experience. You may have had an experience you've interpreted as the second blessing or speaking in tongues or prophecy or divine healing by a divine healer, etc.; but the primary experience of the Christian (in terms of knowledge of God) is the Scriptures. So if the Scriptures indicate that what you experienced is not, in fact, that biblical phenomenon, we must all be willing to subordinate whatever subsequent personal

³⁹ Benjamin B. Warfield , *Counterfeit Miracles*, (Charles Scribner's Son, 1918), p. 6.

experiences we have had to the primary experience of acknowledging the truth of Scripture.

Some Cessation

We must also acknowledge that at least some of the things that happened in the Bible are not still happening now. Jesus is not still walking around on the earth. There are no Apostles—the requirements for an Apostle being one who had been with the Apostles the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among them beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from them.⁴⁰ An Apostle had to be one who was able to give witness with the other Apostles of Christ’s resurrection (Acts 1:21, 22). There were also signs of an Apostle; these being the ability to perform signs, wonders, and miracles (2 Corinthians 12:12).

We also must acknowledge that the canon of Scripture was not complete during the apostolic period. There is a clear precedent for some cessation of the activities we see on the pages of Scripture. The accomplished work of redemption, for example, is not something we should think would continue to extend into history. We don’t believe Jesus is always being crucified on a hilltop in Jerusalem or that He is ever ascending to the right hand of the Father. It must be obvious to us all that our observation of what was happening during the time of Christ was, in some respects, historically unusual. The real question then is not *have certain things ceased*, but instead *how do we know what things have ceased?* In order to answer that question we need to find out why these things existed in the first place.

Examining Pentecostal Claims

We will also look at some of the claims deployed by the charismatic movement, and whether or not the Scriptures actually support these claims. Since I detest the idea of building and demolishing straw men, I will take the claims directly from the General Council of the Assemblies of God. The Assemblies of God are probably a good source since they are not, generally, extreme in

⁴⁰Except for the Apostle Paul who argues as “one being born out of time” (1 Corinthians 15:8).

their views. I would also like to examine how the influence of Pentecostalism is found in conservative Protestant churches.

Studying the Scriptures

Finally, I would like to examine the Pentecostal flagship passages in Scripture to determine what these passages actually teach. A misunderstood passage doesn't merely mean we have learned the wrong thing, it means we haven't learned the right thing. These passages will include a survey of Acts, 1 Corinthians 12 through 14, and other pertinent passages.

The Glory of God

Again, it is not our goal to merely lay siege to false doctrines but instead to promote and preserve that which is glorious to God. Signs and wonders were a means to an end—that end being the glory of God. They confirmed a message. The message is that there is a God in heaven from whom we have been estranged by our transgressions. He is a God who sent His Son to bring us back into union with Him.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Should Christians expect miracles today the same way we saw them in the Bible? Discuss.
2. Should Christians avoid discussing disagreements? Explain.
3. Why is it harmful to have an improper understanding of what Christians should expect from God?
4. Does the Spirit cause unity or division?
4. How does an improper understanding of the Spirit stratify the church?
5. What do you suppose the genuine charismatic life looks like?
6. Why is the notion of unintelligible Christianity dangerous?
7. What is *sola scriptura* and how can it be undermined by an improper understanding of the work of the Spirit?
8. What is the ultimate authority for the Christian? How should this affect other experiences in our lives?
9. What is *cessation* and why is it an important concept to understand?
10. Why were their signs and wonders?

Part XIV

How Come I Never See A Miracle? B

August 10, 2003

Then Moses answered and said, “But suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice; suppose they say, ‘The Lord has not appeared to you.’ ” So the Lord said to him, “What *is* that in your hand?” He said, “A rod.” And He said, “Cast it on the ground.” So he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Reach out your hand and take *it* by the tail” (and he reached out his hand and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand), “that they may believe that the Lord God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.” Furthermore the Lord said to him, “Now put your hand in your bosom.” And he put his hand in his bosom, and when he took it out, behold, his hand *was* leprous, like snow. And He said, “Put your hand in your bosom again.” So he put his hand in his bosom again, and drew it out of his bosom, and behold, it was restored like his *other* flesh. “Then it will be, if they do not believe you, nor heed the message of the first sign, that they may believe the message of the latter sign. And it shall be, if they do not believe even these two signs, or listen to your voice, that you shall take water from the river and pour *it* on the dry *land*. The water which you take from the river will become blood on the dry *land*” (Exodus 4:1-9).

Why Signs and Wonders?

What is, or was, the purpose for miracles? Jesus would walk through towns, the sick would be laid in the marketplace, and as many as would touch the hem of his garment were healed (Mark 6:54-56). Groups of people were healed by Peter’s shadow (Acts 5:15), and by Paul’s aprons and handkerchiefs (Acts 19:12). Paul had the ability to raise Eutychus from the dead (Acts 20:9), and Peter could supernaturally execute church discipline on Ananias and Sapphira without a trial or any due process (Acts 5).

How are we to view these miracles? It didn't seem as if the people being healed had any special faith or ability. Some had no faith at all, such as the lame man at the temple (Acts 3) or the blind man in John 9. Some were dead. I have spoken to more than one Christian today who desires their shadow to heal people. Is this a realistic expectation? Is it a realistic expectation that mobs of people should be miraculously healed today the way they were during the time of Christ? Those things certainly doesn't seem to be taking place, so *what's wrong?*

Some argue that this is happening in Africa or the darkest places in South America. But in the Scriptures we see this happening in the bosom of the church. A common accusation is the lack of faith of the people. That's quite an indictment against the vast majority of Christendom in history—including martyrs who were burned at the stake while their families watched! Is it reasonable that one who is faithful enough to die for his faith wouldn't be faithful enough to exercise the miracles of the first century church? Again, in the Scriptures it didn't seem as if great faith was necessary to be involved in the miraculous.

The Goal

It is not my desire to rob people of the hope of being healed of a sickness or delivered from some trial in life. I certainly would not seek to limit the power of God in any respect whatsoever. God is perfectly able to heal and deliver at He sees fit.

But what is at stake is the very foundation of the Christian faith—the apostles and the prophets (Ephesians 2:20)—the word of God. The foundation has been laid by the apostles (1 Corinthians 3:10) and we are not to add to that foundation but rather build on it. The types of miracles we read of in the Bible were unique in that they were not necessarily answers to prayer as much as they were authoritative actions performed by specific people for a specific purpose. And if we believe those types of faith-healers and miracle workers still operate today in the same manner as the apostle Paul, then we must bow before the message they give as absolute! It is just this type of mystical miracle pursuit we see in Roman Catholicism—the face of Jesus or Mary appearing someplace or a bleeding statue or wine turning to blood, etc. Romanists realize this is necessary for them to claim that the authority of the Pope and church are equal to

Scripture. This is no small matter. If there is no agreement as to sole ultimate authority, i.e. the Scriptures, then there is no hope for the church.

Add to this how easy church members can be victimized by modern false apostles. Peace with God is no longer a result of the wonderful promises of Scripture but rather one's ability to experience sufficient wonders to justify the legitimacy of their faith. How many sad souls, under this spiritual tyranny, have had to face their toil with the increased indictment of faithlessness!

Preview

What I intend to show is: 1) Miracles were designed to confirm the authority of the message of the person performing the sign. 2) These miracles were done (in the New Testament) initially by Jesus. 3) Jesus conferred this power to His apostles to confirm the authority of their message—thus completing the canon of Scripture. 4) False miracles have as their design a false message. 5) The miracles in the New Testament ushered in the turning point of history and should not be the expectation of the uniform and perpetual Christian experience.

Signs of Confirmation—Initially by Jesus

What we must realize is that miracles were not done willy-nilly or vagrantly. There was a specific purpose and design for signs and wonders—to confirm the message of the one performing the sign. There is no shortage of passages that convey this idea. Let us begin to make our biblical argument with a very well-known miracle performed by Jesus:

So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.” And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, “This Man blasphemes!” But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are

forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’? *But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins*”—then He said to the paralytic, “*Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.*” And he arose and departed to his house (Matthew 9:1-5, Italics mine).

Jesus confirmed the authority of His teaching by the power of His actions. Observe how Jesus authenticates Himself to John the Baptist.

And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?” Jesus answered and said to them, “*Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see 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*” (Matthew 11:2-5, Italics mine).

Jesus confirmed His Christ-hood by His supernatural actions; He tells the two disciples to tell John what they saw—miracles. This proved that Jesus was the Christ. This was obvious to Nicodemus.

This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that *You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him*” (John 3:2, Italics mine).

Nicodemus recognized that the miraculous signs established Jesus as a teacher from God. Jesus gives explanation for the purpose for miracles.

But I have a greater witness than John’s; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me (John 5:36).

The supernatural works of Jesus bore witness that the Father sent Him. In the many records of Jesus' miracles we often miss the reason given for the miracle; for example, the feeding of the five thousand.

Therefore they gathered *them* up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. Then those men, *when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world"* (John 6:13, Italics mine).

The sign—the feeding of the five thousand—confirmed Jesus' office as Prophet. There was a common and legitimate expectation regarding a person with divine authority.

Therefore they said to Him, "What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do" (John 6:30)?

The request assumes that the legitimate Messiah would have the ability to do miraculous things. This is stated multiple times.

But many of the multitude believed in Him; and they were saying, "When the Christ shall come, He will not perform more signs than those which this man has, will He" (John 7:31 NASB)?

Another well known miracle, the raising of Lazarus, had a specific goal.

Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" Then they took away the stone *from the place* where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up *His* eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, *but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me.*" Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud

voice, “*Lazarus, come forth!*” And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Loose him, and let him go” (John 11:40-44, Italics mine).

The raising of Lazarus was done that those standing by might believe Jesus was from the Father. The chief priests understood the threat of a miracle-worker.

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, “What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation” (John 11:47, 48, Italics mine).

The chief priests and Pharisees feared that people would believe because of the signs. The signs and wonders of Christ were a two-edged sword.

If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father. But *this happened* that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law, ‘*They hated Me without a cause*’ (John 15:24, 25).

The signs Jesus performed so confirmed His message that they left His detractors with greater accountability. Peter explicitly states the reason for signs and wonders.

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know...(Acts 2:22).

Jesus was attested (to affirm to be genuine) by God through miracles. Of course, Jesus wasn't the only miracle worker! But the

reason for the miracles remained the same—to confirm the authority of the messenger.

Conferred to the Apostles

The ministry of Christ would continue through His apostles. One might argue that His ministry continues throughout history. This is true. But there is a specific aspect of His ministry that did not continue throughout history—the compilation of the books and letters we refer to as the Bible. *Sola Scriptura* is the (epistemological⁴¹) foundation of the Christian faith. Let us keep in mind Jesus’ words to His apostles.

These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you (John 14:25, 26).

“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning” (John 15:26).

The Apostles would be endowed with a Spirit-given knowledge of all the things Jesus said to them. If this weren’t such a misused passage I wouldn’t find it necessary to point out that no one living today has ever been in the physical and audible presence of Jesus’ instruction, nor have any of us been with Christ from the beginning.

The work of redemption would not be fully accomplished until Christ ascended and sent His Spirit to secure the message of His victory. Again, we call this *the Bible*. Along with the apostles’ supernatural prophetic knowledge came the supernatural signs to confirm the knowledge. Speaking to the eleven apostles (not all His

⁴¹ Epistemology is the theory of knowledge—how we know what we know.

followers) Jesus promises to confer supernatural power to them—and that for a specific reason—to confirm their message.

Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. *And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.*” So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. *And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen* (Mark 16:14-20, Italics mine).

Tongues, immunity to serpents and poison, healing by the laying on of hands were all signs that confirmed the message. In Acts we see examples of miracles following those who believe. Again, this would confirm the authority of the apostles as the mouthpieces of Christ.

In the second chapter of Acts we read of the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to the apostles.

And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul,

and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles (Acts 2:40-43).

They continued in the Apostle's doctrine, and signs and wonders were done through the Apostles. Again, we see the signs confirming the doctrine.

“Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29, 30).

Peter recognized that his own authority and boldness of speech was dependent upon God's confirmation through miraculous signs. His prayer was answered.

And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch. Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid *them* on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed (Acts 5:12-16).

No one dared join them—words for the modern faith healer. Of Paul and Barnabas we read,

Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred

up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. Therefore they stayed there a long time, *speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands* (Acts 14:1-3, **Italics mine).**

The Lord was bearing witness of their authority through signs and wonders. Notice what always goes hand in hand in Paul's writings.

For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through me, in word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient—*in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ* (Romans 15:18, 19, **Italics mine).**

I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds (2 Corinthians 12:11, 12).

Signs and wonders accompanied the preaching of the gospel. See again how God bears witness of His word.

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the *first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of*

the Holy Spirit, according to His own will (Hebrews 2:1-4, Italics mine)?

God bore witness of what was first spoken by the Lord, then by those who heard Him (the Apostles) with signs and wonders.

Signs and wonders, as we read of them in Scripture, had a specific purpose. They confirmed the absolute authoritative message of the miracle worker. For those who believe in *Sola Scriptura*, miracles have served their purpose. The message of God has been sufficiently and once for all delivered to the church. The quest for miracles has been more of a burden than a blessing to the church and those who claim access to this power are to be cautioned against.

Again, this is not to say that God cannot or does not supernaturally heal or deliver from toil or respond to prayer. The distinction we make is the power and authority of the *human instrument*, i.e. apostle or prophet. When Moses threw his staff down he wasn't praying God would turn it into a serpent. The miracle was absolute as was Moses' word as a prophet of God.

False Signs for A False Message

Since it was common knowledge that the message of Christ would be confirmed through signs and wonders, it follows that those who sought to put forth a false message would seek to confirm their message through lying signs and wonders.

“Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘Look, He is there!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. But take heed; see, I have told you all things beforehand” (Mark 13:21-23).

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the *lawless one* is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the

love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness (2 Thessalonians 2:8-12).

It is not beyond the realm of a Christian world view to recognize that supernatural things might be done through evil. In the following passage we see it as a test.

If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods’—which you have not known—‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 13:1-4).

Here we read of an apparent miracle. But the table is turned a bit. The legitimacy of the miracle worker is tested by his doctrine. Similarly, the Apostle Paul warns the New Testament church at Corinth.

If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:37).

The authority of the Apostles is ultimate. Praise God He has preserved their message on the pages of Scripture!

Non-Apostolic Miracles?

We will read of non-apostles doing miraculous things, but what is conspicuously present in these accounts is the laying on of the hands of the Apostles. Warfield points out,

...in the entire New Testament we meet with no instance of the gifts showing themselves—after the initial instances of Pentecost and Cornelius—where an Apostle had not conveyed them.⁴²

Of course, all the Apostles were at Pentecost, and in Acts 10 we clearly see Peter superintending all that took place with Cornelius and his household. Unless we are to maintain that the Apostle's presence (and laying on of hands) is merely coincidental, rather than causal—and since, as we have earlier established, there are no longer Apostles, it seems that these are not repeatable events.

Turning Point in History

The supernatural phenomena we read of in the New Testament were signs of the turning point in history—the coming, and work, of Christ. The new covenant (especially in terms of the revelation of the work of Christ and its international beginnings) were kicked off, as it were, at Pentecost. These were signs of a fulfillment of a promise made by God. This is why Peter (regarding the events of Pentecost) taught,

But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:
'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy. I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: Blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass that whoever

⁴² Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, (Charles Scribner's Son, 1918), p. 23.

calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:16-21).

The coming of Christ ushered in both deliverance and judgment. The changing of the covenants—the turning point in history—BC to AD. All this would be accompanied by wonders and prophecy. These wonders would start with Jesus. Then we would see them done by the apostles and through the direct contact of the apostles. The modern fascination with miracles and miracle workers has become a blight to the church. Instead of immersing ourselves in the sin-bearing glory of the miracle worker, we ask for a sign. The sign has already been given; let us trust in its attending message.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Did miracles require great faith on the part of the recipient?
2. What was the purpose of miracles?
3. Why did Jesus confer this power to the apostles?
4. Will the Holy Spirit teach me (the same as the apostles) everything Jesus taught? Explain.
5. What is the purpose of false signs?
6. What about miracles performed by non-apostles? Should we expect to perform these types of miracles today? Why or why not?
7. Discuss miracles as they relate to the turning point in history.

Part XV

How Come I Never See A Miracle? The Second Blessing (1)

August 17, 2003

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and *one* sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1-4).

Introduction

Examples of the signs and wonders that accompanied the coming of Christ (the new covenant) were the abilities to heal the sick by the laying on of hands, raise the dead, speak in foreign tongues, prophecy, etc. Outside of the actual physical presence of Jesus, these events seemed unavailable to Christians apart from the special work of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

The assertion among Pentecostals today is that the Holy Spirit will grant believers the same abilities as we read of in the book of Acts in the Bible—hence the name *Pentecostals*—referring to Pentecost (Acts 2).

We will now question whether or not this subsequent pouring out of the Holy Spirit (whereby which miracles are granted) should be expected to be the uniform Christian experience throughout history. Is Pentecost part of the *accomplished work of redemption* (like the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ) and thereby not expected to be repeated, or is Pentecost part of the *applied work of redemption* (like the preaching of the gospel or baptism of the Lord's Supper) which extends throughout history?

It will be my argument that Pentecost is part of the accomplished work of redemption. It is that aspect of Christ's work where He pours out His Spirit to bring to remembrance to His apostles all that He taught (John 14:25). The message, as we learned

last time, was confirmed by their ability to perform signs and wonders. When God had determined the message to be complete, the canon of Scripture was closed and the accomplished work of redemption was *accomplished*.

Causing Division

No doubt, I will once again be accused of being divisive by attacking a brand of Christianity which is embraced by millions. Please understand me, it is not part of my thesis that these people are not genuine believers. It is, however, part of my thesis that they do not understand the Scriptures correctly. It is part of my thesis that this improper understanding is harmful. I have little doubt that in time, similar to Roman Catholicism, this form of Christianity will bring these churches and their members to disregard the authoritative uniqueness of the Bible and the gospel will be dispensed with—for as we learned last week, it was these signs and wonders which confirmed the authoritative message of the miracle-workers.

We already live in an age in Protestantism where the Scriptures are being supplanted by human sentiment. The recent Episcopalian decision to ordain a homosexual pastor was accompanied by an Episcopalian representative publicly stating that the Bible is not their sole infallible authority—they have a community of believers filled with the Holy Spirit. On national television the mic was lifted to the mouth of one woman who uttered (in support of the homosexual pastor): “I ask only one question—what would Jesus do?” Clearly the means by which she determines what Jesus would do is not the Scriptures!

All this aside, I intend to show that the Pentecostal view of the second blessing (the Holy Spirit falling upon believers subsequent to their initial faith in Christ) causes an unhealthy and unbiblical stratification in the church. We have millions of Christian on what amounts to be a spiritual wild goose chase. Signs are the rage and the quest to be miracle workers have supplanted true and persevering faithfulness in Christ. Everybody wants power-religion and quite frankly nobody’s getting it. “Go out for a pass” says the boy with the football in his hands to his unsuspecting victim, “Further, further, further;” but, alas, the ball is never thrown.

Examining the Stratifying Assertions

Let us take a quick look at some of the assertions of Pentecostalism that, arguably, stratify the church, bringing great insecurity and frustration to its victims. The following are statements taken from the General Council of the Assemblies of God.

Missing the Spirit of God

...one of the greatest outpourings of the Spirit began early in the 20th century. Several small holiness groups whose members were seeking a fuller experience with God witnessed a renewal of the Holy Spirit's gifts. In their meetings they saw miracles similar to those recorded in the Book of Acts. Those who experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit spoke in tongues, gave prophecies, prayed for the sick with miraculous results, and began a new surge of missionary ministry that soon reached around the world.⁴³

If the Pentecostals are correct, I will be the first to say, in all sincerity, that we should all repent. But if they are wrong, the church is not merely categorized by denominational distinctions, but becomes stratified between those who have (and those who don't have) the outpouring of the Spirit of God Himself. I can view my Baptist brothers as vital contributors to the Great Commission, though I think they err in their view of the sign of the covenant; but how can any Christian, or Christian church, be vital in their contribution to the Great Commission, or any other work of God, without the Spirit?

Notice the emphasis on "experience." It will be a recurring theme. Those who experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit evidenced it by speaking in tongues, prophecy, and other miracles. This is not merely a disagreement on the interpretation of a passage in

⁴³Assembly of God Web Page—Assemblies of God Beliefs. The General Council of the Assemblies of God.

Scripture—it is the assertion that there are churches (specifically, professing Christian people) who have access to the mind of God (prophecy) versus those who do not. According to this view there are people who believe in the risen Savior and seek to obey Him with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, yet must view themselves as missing the fuller experience with God.

Selective Wind of the Spirit

Then in the 1960s another wave of revival spread the blessings of Pentecost. Many Lutherans began speaking in tongues and praying for the sick. Many Roman Catholics raised their hands in worship and prayed in the Spirit. Upon Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, Brethren, Disciples of Christ -- the wind of the Spirit was blowing across the entire spectrum of the Church.⁴⁴

The wind of the Spirit was blowing across the entire spectrum of the church—Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, etc. But the wind was obviously missing some Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, etc. Let us compare this to the biblical account of Pentecost.

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and *one* sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1-4).

This passage teaches that the tongues of fire sat upon each of them and they were *all* filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues. If Pentecost is a model for every age of the church, what are we to make of those Methodists who did not speak in tongues?

⁴⁴Tbid.

Logically, they must either belong to that class of people who were outside of the church and therefore needed to be baptized into the church (Acts 2:37-39) or they were among the mockers (Acts 2:13).

We see the stratification becomes even wider. It is not merely a matter of the more powerful Christian versus the less powerful Christian; it is a sign of those in the church against those outside of the church. To their credit, the Assemblies of God do not push their exegesis to its logical conclusion, but some Pentecostals do—if you don't speak in tongues, some say, you're evidencing that you're not saved.

Serious Christians

Today believers from all fellowships who are serious about their faith are looking again at the "promise of the Father." This experience, distinct from and following salvation, brings the believer into the richness of the Spirit-filled life.⁴⁵

The church is now stratified between those who are, and are not, serious about their faith—those who have a richer Spirit-filled life and those who do not. It is not enough to place all your hope in Christ as Savior and all your trust in Him as Lord. There is an experience, distinct from and following salvation, which must be sought. Just what is this experience and how do we determine the legitimacy of it?

Warming the Heart

The General Council of the Assemblies of God advises,

Questions are best answered and controversies settled by allowing the Spirit to warm the heart and draw the soul into intimate fellowship with God.⁴⁶

This sounds strangely similar to the Mormon's appeal to the burning of the bosom. Woven into this very pious appeal is a foot-in-

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

the-door sales tactic—as soon as I warm my heart to this notion, it’s halfway in. Is it true that the warming of the heart and the drawing of the soul is the best way to answer questions? How warm must the heart be before we can be confident that the answer is correct?

Doctrinal Stratification

Even the Assemblies of God Council recognizes this as a flawed method. Therefore, their next paragraph reads,

However, there are misunderstandings concerning the doctrine of the baptism in the Holy Spirit that are hindering many sincere believers from entering into this blessed experience. There are legitimate questions that call for answers. Against the foregoing historical backdrop, let us consider some of these questions and seek for biblical answers.⁴⁷

As noble as this statement seems to be, it leaves us with the sense that a grasp of proper doctrine is necessary for the “blessed experience”. Now the church is stratified between those who have strong enough doctrine for the blessed experience and those who don’t. But is this in harmony with Scripture? Peter was in the middle of a sermon to the gentiles in Acts 10...

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God (Acts 10:44-46).

Amazing, is it not, that the doctrinal short-comings of the great theologians, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Benjamin B. Warfield, et al, disqualified them from the blessed experience—but all these fledgling gentiles (not to mentioned the aforementioned Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, etc.) had the Holy

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Spirit poured out on them! Truly, it is virtually impossible to make the argument that misunderstandings concerning doctrine would hinder the work of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, it is the Holy Spirit, by the word of God, who grants sound doctrine.

Levels of Stratification

In review, we see dramatic stratification. Some believe tongues is the necessary fruit of salvation; this stratification is Christian versus non-Christian (this being the logical necessity of Pentecostal exegesis—since all believers at Pentecost, at some level, participated in speaking in tongues).

There is a less dramatic stratification according to the Assemblies of God. This is observed by: 1) those who have the Spirit and therefore a supernatural access to the mind of God (with gifts of prophecy and tongues) versus those who do not; 2) those who are serious about their faith versus those who are not; 3) those who have a warm heart versus those who do not; 4) those who are doctrinally sound enough to receive the blessed experience versus those who do not; and so on.

There is an even less dramatic distinction among those who, though perhaps not claiming to have any sign gifts per se, live under the impression that they have intimate access to God that is either unavailable to, or less efficient in, others. These are people who, aside from the Scriptures and revealed providence, view their own wisdom and discernment (though these might be gifts from God) as direct information from God. It is one thing to be gifted by God with compassion and easily discern a brother in toil. It is quite another thing to interpret that gift as prophetic information from God.

Baptism of the Holy Spirit

How are we, therefore, to understand the biblical instances of the baptism of the Holy Spirit?

A Subsequent Experience

According to The General Council of the Assemblies of God, the baptism of the Holy Spirit is an experience subsequent to salvation. In their question and answer section we read,

Do Christians receive the Holy Spirit when they are saved? If so, how is this experience different from the baptism in the Holy Spirit?

Yes, when persons accept Christ, the Holy Spirit begins a great work in their lives. The Spirit convicts them of sin, convinces them of righteousness, and dwells within them (John 6:44; 14:17; Roman 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:13). No one becomes a Christian without this gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

However, there is an additional and distinct ministry of the Holy Spirit called the baptism in the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸

According to the Council, this second blessing is something **"all believers are entitled to, should ardently expect, and earnestly seek."⁴⁹**

Now speaking in defense of Pentecostalism, there is undeniable, biblical evidence of an experience of the Holy Spirit subsequent to salvation. Passages to support this include,

Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17).

And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples he

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” So they said to him, “We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.” And he said to them, “Into what then were you baptized?” So they said, “Into John’s baptism.” Then Paul said, “John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.” When they heard *this*, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. Now the men were about twelve in all (Acts 19:1-7).

I am not sure where we get the idea that all Christians are entitled to, should ardently expect, and earnestly seek what seemed to supernaturally fall, or come upon them.⁵⁰ But setting that aside for now, how are we to understand the record of these ‘second’ experiences in Scripture? What is conspicuously present in both of these accounts is the laying on of the hands of the Apostles. Warfield points out,

...in the entire New Testament we meet with no instance of the gifts showing themselves—after the initial instances of Pentecost and Cornelius—where an Apostle had not conveyed them.⁵¹

As discussed earlier all the Apostles were at Pentecost, and in Acts 10 we clearly see Peter superintending all that took place with Cornelius and his household. Again, unless we are to maintain that the Apostle’s presence (and laying on of hands) is merely coincidental, rather than causal, and since, as we have earlier

⁵⁰ All seven accounts of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; Acts 11:16; 1 Corinthians) are *indicative* and not *imperative*. This is to say, there is no exhortation to be baptized by the Holy Spirit, rather there is an indication of what would, or did, happen.

⁵¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, (Charles Scribner’s Son, 1918), p. 23.

established, there are no longer Apostles, it seems that these are not repeatable events.

Applied Versus Accomplished

How should we understand the pouring out of the Spirit in the early church? First, let us review the distinction between the accomplished work of redemption and the applied work of redemption. The accomplished work of redemption is not to be repeated—the applied work of redemption extends into history

The accomplished work of redemption, for the most part, is easily recognized. It includes the life, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. We should not expect these things to be repeatable events. But there is one more aspect of the accomplished work of redemption. It involves the terminating of the Old Covenant and the establishing of the New Covenant—a single event not to be repeated. It also involves the securing of the message of salvation in the Scriptures with Apostolic authority—a single event not to be repeated. This event (a baptism of revelation) is inextricably attached to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

A Baptism of Revelation

In the midst of the gospel of John, Jesus says something that's quite hard to grasp.

“He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:38, 39).

This can be very confusing. If the Holy Spirit had not yet been given, how were the saints of the Old Testament saved? Certainly, they were not saved by works or pure intestinal fortitude! For that matter, what of the Apostles prior to Pentecost?

And they worshiped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in

the temple praising and blessing God. Amen (Luke 24:52, 53).

Realizing the dangers of the temple for a Christian, this certainly doesn't appear to be the behavior of men devoid of the Spirit of God.

So we must understand that it was merely in a certain sense that the Holy Spirit had not yet been given. Why hadn't the Holy Spirit been given? He hadn't been given because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:39). The glorification of Jesus would be the penultimate (second to last) accomplished act of redemption (the giving of His Spirit being the ultimate or final act). If the job of the Holy Spirit was to give witness of Christ (at least in the sense of the full expression of Christ in the new covenant), it wouldn't make sense that the Holy Spirit would be given before Christ had completed His redemptive work.

In short, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit would happen after the glorification of Christ. And it would be done after the glorification of Christ to give an accurate record of what Christ had accomplished.

After the washing of the disciple's feet and the last supper and announcement of the betrayer, Jesus taught of the coming of the Holy Spirit,

These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you (John 14:25).

The coming of the Holy Spirit was a matter of revelation. The Holy Spirit would teach them "all" things and bring to the Apostle's remembrance "all" the things Jesus had said to them. Hopefully we're beginning to see that this is not a repeatable event. Certainly, we are not going to claim that the extent of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives is this full and infallible! The Apostles would become the authoritative message bearers for Christ. They are therefore referred to as the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). Very few Pentecostals will assume this level of responsibility.

Jesus appeared in the midst of the Eleven (Luke 24:33) and gave this message regarding the Promise of the Father:

Then He said to them, “These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me.” And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:44-49).

“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning” (John 15:26).

Again, the message to the Apostles is revelatory. He would open their understanding to have, arguably, infallible understanding of the Scriptures. Again, this is a claim very few are willing to make today. Hints that this is not a repeatable event, but rather part of the accomplished work of redemption are: 1) They are told to tarry in the city of Jerusalem until the power comes. Certainly this isn't a command given to all Christians throughout history. 2) That the witness-bearing is unique to those who had been with Christ from the beginning.

Acts 1

Having seen all the preparatory remarks for the coming of the Spirit, we now look at the event itself.

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. And being assembled together with *them*, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” *He said*, “you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:1-8).

Examining the opening words of Luke we see, again, specificity in who is being addressed. Jesus had given a commandment through the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, to whom He had presented Himself after His suffering by infallible proofs. He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the Promise of the Father at which time they would receive power and be His witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

This passage is often thought to be applied to the power expected by every Christian as they seek to fulfill the Great Commission. And in one sense I would agree. To the extent that the Christian is presenting a gospel consistent with the Apostles, the power is there. But we make a critical hermeneutical⁵² error when we assign to ourselves that which was unique to the Apostles.

⁵² Hermeneutics are the principles of how to interpret the Scriptures.

And arguably, at least in some sense, they were *actual witnesses* to the ends of the earth.

And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5).

A Historically Unique Subsequent Experience

Let us go back to our goal of understanding the subsequent experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. With all this information as our backdrop we can understand this baptism as part of the accomplished work of redemption—namely a revelatory aspect of redemption. The accomplished work of Christ would not be much help to His church without their knowing about it—without the Scriptures.

In a very intimate setting the Apostles received the Holy Spirit when Jesus breathed on them (John 20:22). In a more public, and international, setting the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost producing the miraculous ability to proclaim a message in foreign languages (more on this later).

But it did not end there. Continual affirmation of apostolic authority took place as the Apostles went out from Pentecost and laid their hands on others who were not at Pentecost. The promise was made to the Apostles, the power was given to the Apostles, and during the apostolic age there was the subsequent pouring out of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the Apostles' hands. In an undiminished capacity (in terms of signs, wonders, and message), the power and authority of Christ was conferred to His Apostles.

Trying to Make it Work

Let us now seek to answer some of the assertions made by The General Council of the Assemblies of God.

It is quite in order, assuming the presence of proper understanding, to lead a new convert into the baptism in the Holy Spirit. While "tarrying" (waiting on God in prayer) is often necessary for heart preparation and understanding, it is not

improper for new believers to move quickly into the fullness of the Spirit.⁵³

There is no indication that “tarrying” in anticipation was anything but being at Jerusalem (Luke 24:49). To suggest it means waiting on God in prayer is a fabrication.

Is there proof that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit experienced today is genuinely biblical?

The proof is the same proof that supported the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. On that occasion the apostle Peter stood up and defended the outpouring by showing that it was a fulfillment of Scripture. He began his explanation by saying, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). What we are experiencing in our day is that which was prophesied by Joel and which began to be fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost.

A comparison of the Book of Acts with what is happening in the modern outpouring of the Spirit reveals striking similarities in pattern and purpose. The impact of the early church, newly equipped by the power of the Holy Spirit, changed the world of that day. Similar changes are being made in human lives today through Spirit-filled servants of God. Christ is preached. Sinners are saved. The sick are healed. The kingdom of God is greatly increased. We can say, with Peter, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel," though we have not yet seen the full extent of the spiritual awakening for which we are praying.⁵⁴

As discussed earlier, the proof offered in Acts was signs and wonders done by the hands of the Apostles. There are very few genuine similarities between what was happening in Acts and what is

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

happening in today's Pentecostal churches when you consider the raising of the dead and the establishment of the canon of Scripture. The fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel was a once-for-all fulfillment. It is exegetically questionable to extend a singular historically fulfilled prophecy into history. And since Joel's prophecy included revelation, *Sola Scriptura* is lost.

Who Should Be Baptized in the Holy Spirit?

When the believers were assembled in prayer on the Day of Pentecost, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them" (Acts 2:4). Not one was left out. It was not just the apostles who were filled, but all the men and all the women in that company of 120 persons. Then the apostle Peter addressed the onlookers and told them that they should be filled. He said, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off -- for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39).

As Peter said, the baptism in the Holy Spirit is for every believer in every generation. It is an all-inclusive promise of universal dimension. The baptism in the Holy Spirit is promised to every Christian believer.⁵⁵

Where does Peter say that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is for every believer in every generation? If it is indeed promised to every Christian believer (remembering that it is always in the indicative and not imperative), why does not every believer have it (at least according to the Pentecostal view of it)?

Why are some people baptized in the Spirit immediately, while other seek so long without receiving the experience?

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Just prior to His ascension, Jesus told His disciples, "In a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5). Some 20 days later they were filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:4). Earlier the Lord had said, "I am going to send you what my Father promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). No doubt the disciples obeyed this directive; they remained in Jerusalem and spent much time in prayer. There was a "waiting" for the Spirit to come. However, once the Spirit had fallen there was no further incident of "waiting" or "tarrying." Today there is no longer any reason for waiting, except as "waiting" may relate to the preparation of the heart for the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

Some believers have received the Baptism almost immediately; others have waited for various periods of time. Why? (1) Because the Holy Spirit is sovereign, He will move and work only as He chooses. (2) Because the Holy Spirit does not impose himself on any believer, some will require a period of waiting before they are prepared to yield themselves fully to His divine control. (3) Because "filling" may involve a process, there are some believers with an authentic baptism in the Spirit which may have been preceded by wonderful and meaningful times of waiting in God's presence. Seekers should realize that any period of "waiting" only brings them closer to the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon their lives.⁵⁶

All these answers are foreign to the accounts of the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Scripture. Granted, He (the Holy Spirit) will move and work as He chooses. But this seems inconsistent with the Pentecostal explanation that the person has not yet fully yielded himself to His divine control. Who has ever done this? That is quite a high standard! Of course, the Holy Spirit certainly did impose Himself on those who were under the preaching of Peter and Paul.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word (Acts 10:44).

When they heard *this*, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied (Acts 19:5).

The Council continues,

When an individual is seeking the baptism in the Holy Spirit, can anything be done to prepare his life or environment that will quicken the infilling?

The question is often asked: "What can I do to claim the promise of the baptism in the Holy Spirit for my life?" One thing the believer should do is to seek the Baptizer rather than the Baptism. It is Jesus who baptizes believers in the Holy Spirit. Seekers should focus their attention on Him rather than on an experience. There are other steps that, if taken, will assist seekers. (1) Understand that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is a gift from God. It should be received with gratitude and giving of thanks to the Giver. It cannot be earned or merited. It can only be accepted with an open and willing heart.

But did we not just learn that the failure to yield oneself fully to His divine control will inhibit the process? Is this not a system of merit?

(2) Be fully persuaded that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is both biblical and doctrinally correct.

Is this not a bit manipulative? Doctrinal accuracy was *never* a prerequisite for the baptism of the Holy Spirit!

(3) Confess any known sins in your life and resolve to live a righteous life with God's help.

I thought this was what you had to do at conversion. Confession of sin and personal righteousness was never a prerequisite for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. When the people were greatly amazed at Peter's power: **Peter saw *it*, he answered unto the people, Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk (Acts 3:12)?**

(4) Begin to worship the Lord with expressions of praise and adoration.

Is this not a result of the filling of the Spirit rather than a means of acquiring it?

(5) Express to the Lord, who is the Baptizer, a desire to be filled with the Holy Spirit for His glory.

Never in the Scriptures are we called to do this!

(6) Yield to any deep "welling up" within your spirit and allow that inner surge to break through in expressions of worship, praise, and adoration in a language unknown to you but meaningful to God.⁵⁷

This is perhaps the most dangerous aspect of Pentecostalism: the dispensing with rational thought and succumbing to the inner surge. This sounds strangely similar to Paul's warning to Timothy, where he warned of false teachers taking advantage of those led by various impulses (2 Timothy 3:6).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Conclusion

The baptism of the Holy Spirit (as seen at Pentecost) was a unique historical event. Its design was to confirm the once-for-all message of the gospel and should not be sought as the normal Christian experience throughout history. The shoddy exegesis utilized to make this system work should stand as a warning to Christians. Unfortunately, we live in a day and age of irrationalism and anti-intellectualism in the church. Sadly, what we have left to guide us are inner surges and various impulses.

Justification by faith, the blood of Christ, the cross of Christ, divine satisfaction—glorious concepts—have been lost. May we repent of this neglect and bring the glory of the cross back into His church!

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Define the accomplished versus applied works of redemption.
2. In what respects can division be harmful/necessary in the church?
3. How does the Pentecostal view of the baptism of the Holy Spirit stratify the church?
4. Is there evidence in the Bible of a subsequent experience for Christians of the Holy Spirit?
5. How is the baptism of the Holy Spirit a baptism of revelation?
6. How are many of the events in Acts historically unique?
7. Discuss the arguments given by the General Council of the Assemblies of God.

Part XVI

How Come I Never See A Miracle? The Second Blessing (2)

August 24, 2003

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and *one* sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1-4).

Review

Before we plunge ourselves too deeply into the details of this, the second [third] part of a subsection of Remedial Christianity which I have named *How Come I Never See a Miracle*, let us do a quick review so as to not lose the big picture.

First, it is my initial assertion that Christians should not expect miracles—at least, not in the way we saw them performed by Jesus or the apostles.

Now, I am not suggesting that God doesn't heal in a response to prayer. But there is the chance that *He may not heal*. When Peter, however, was confronted by the lame man at the temple asking for alms, Peter did not pray for his healing and wait for a (possibly negative) response from God. He simply declared "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk" and *immediately* the man was healed (Acts 3:1-11). There was no way that man was not going to be healed.

A miracle is something supernatural. We are not talking about amazing coincidences or the beauty of childbirth or something wondrous or astonishing. Hodge defines a miracle as something that

...take[s] place in the material world, i.e., in the sphere of observation of the senses...and...are

**produced or caused by the simple volition of God,
without the intervention of any subordinate cause.⁵⁸**

In other words, the podium rises to the ceiling without strings or anything else helping it except the word of God Himself. Walking on water is done without skis, sufficient speed or any flotation device. Water becomes wine without the necessary interval of time or additives. People speak languages they were never taught. People heal others by the mere word of their mouth. People know things without having received the knowledge through ordinary means. And all of this can be observed by anyone with the required senses of observation—whether they have faith in the miracle worker or not.

Second, we discussed why there were miracles performed in the Scriptures—they confirmed the authoritative message of the miracle worker. So if we are going to believe in the perpetuity of miracles we also must believe that the canon of Scripture is still open.

Third, we briefly discussed the principles for cessation—the ceasing of certain types of events or actions we see in Scripture. There is the *accomplished* work of redemption and the *applied* work of redemption. Those things which relate to the accomplished work of redemption should not be thought of as normative for the history of the church. These things include the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and pouring out of the Spirit of Christ. The applied work of redemption would include preaching, sacraments, church discipline, non-miraculous gifts, etc.

Fourth, we briefly discussed the baptism of the Holy Spirit versus the baptism of fire.

Fifth, our current topic is addressing the error of believing in the second blessing of the Holy Spirit or subsequent baptism of the Holy Spirit—which was accompanied by miraculous things. Our argument is that this is to be included in the accomplished work of redemption.

Sixth, we will finish this portion of the series with an examination of the flagship passage used to argue for the continuation of these miraculous activities (especially tongues) in the church, 1 Corinthians 12-14.

⁵⁸ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, (Eerdman, reprinted 1989), p. 618.

Goals

Let us also remember our goals in this study. It is a goal of unity which can only come when there is a common source of knowledge and authority. I cannot possibly have unity with someone receiving their own secret messages from God to which I have no access.

We have a goal of avoiding the stratification which necessarily follows a view of Christianity which has spiritual and carnal Christians.

We have a goal of avoiding the dangers of unintelligible Christianity. The claim that the mind can be by-passed in our communications with God is a very dangerous pursuit. There is no better way to defeat an enemy than to get them to quit thinking.

In short, what's at stake here is *sola scriptura*. Let us not underestimate what a glorious gift God has given us in the Scriptures. In them, and in them alone, we have access to the mind of God. The propositions are clear and authoritative above all authorities. And since *sola scriptura* is at stake, the unhealthy (even malevolent) manipulation of God's people is at stake as well. For God's people find themselves (as in Roman Catholicism) in confusion, and sometimes at odds, with their spiritual leaders who claim apostolic authority.

God rescued His people from this oppression during the Reformation but, like the Israelites, we find ourselves disobediently crying out for a king.

The Second Blessing

Currently we are examining whether or not Christians should expect the same subsequent pouring out of the Holy Spirit as seen in Acts (whereby which miracles are granted) as the uniform Christian experience throughout history. Is Pentecost part of the accomplished work of redemption (like the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ) not expected to be repeated, or is Pentecost part of the applied work of redemption (like the preaching of the gospel or baptism of the Lord's Supper) which extends throughout history?

I've been arguing that Pentecost is part of the accomplished work of redemption. It is that aspect of Christ's work where He pours out His Spirit to bring to remembrance (to His apostles) all that He taught (John 14:25). The message, as we learned last time, was confirmed by their ability to perform signs and wonders. When God had determined the message complete, the canon of Scripture was closed and the accomplished work of redemption was accomplished. The pursuit of this second blessing, therefore (and at very least), is a fool's errand.

Examining the Stratifying Assertions

But worse than it being a fool's errand, it brings an unhealthy and unbiblical stratification to the church, causing great insecurity and frustration to its victims. The levels of stratification, having examined the General Council of the Assemblies of God, were numerous:

Some believe (not the Assemblies of God) tongues is the necessary fruit of salvation; this stratification is Christian versus non-Christian (this being the logical necessity of Pentecostal exegesis—since all believers at Pentecost, at some level, participated in speaking in tongues).

The less dramatic stratification, according to the Assemblies of God, is observed by: 1) those who have the Spirit and therefore a supernatural access to the mind of God (with gifts of prophecy and tongues) versus those who do not; 2) those who are serious about their faith versus those who are not; 3) those who have a warm heart versus those who do not; 4) those who are doctrinally sound enough to receive the blessed experience versus those who do not; and so on.

There is an even less dramatic distinction among those who, though perhaps not claiming to have any sign gifts per se, live under the impression that they have intimate access to God that is either unavailable to, or less efficient in, others. These are people who, aside from the Scriptures and revealed providence, view their own wisdom and discernment (though these might indeed be gifts from God) as direct information from God. It is one thing to be gifted by God with compassion and easily discern a brother in toil; it is quite another thing to interpret that gift as prophetic information from God.

A Subsequent Baptism of the Holy Spirit

We discussed the biblical instances of the subsequent baptism of the Holy Spirit: How all seven accounts of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; Acts 11:16; 1 Corinthians) are *indicative* not *imperative*. This is to say, there is no exhortation to be baptized by the Holy Spirit; rather, there is an indication of what would or did happen. So, seeking the baptism of the Holy Spirit (an idea very prominent in Pentecostalism) is foreign to Scripture.

We learned that the subsequent baptism of the Holy Spirit was always superintended by the Apostles. We learned that the baptism of the Holy Spirit involved the securing of the message of salvation in the Scriptures with Apostolic authority—a single event not to be repeated. This event (a baptism of revelation) is inextricably attached to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

We learned that when Jesus was fully glorified (John 7:38, 39) He would pour out His Spirit to remind the Apostles of all He taught them with infallible accuracy. He would also grant them the ability to perform signs and wonders to confirm the message.

Acts 1

Having seen all the preparatory remarks for the coming of the Spirit, we now look at the event itself.

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. And being assembled together with *them*, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” *He said*, “you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” Therefore, when they had come

together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:1-8).

Examining the opening words of Luke, we see, again, specificity in who is being addressed. Jesus had given a commandment, through the Holy Spirit, to the Apostles, to whom He had presented Himself after His suffering by infallible proofs. He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the Promise of the Father at which time they would receive power and be His witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

This passage is often thought to be applied to the power expected by every Christian as they seek to fulfill the Great Commission. And in one sense I would agree. To the extent that the Christian is presenting a gospel consistent with the Apostles, the power is there. But we make a critical hermeneutical⁵⁹ error when we assign to ourselves that which was unique to the Apostles. And arguably, at least in some sense, they were *actual witnesses* to the ends of the earth.

And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5).

A Historically Unique Subsequent Experience

Let us go back to our goal of understanding the subsequent experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. With all this information as our backdrop we can understand this baptism as part of the accomplished work of redemption—namely a revelatory aspect of redemption. The accomplished work of Christ would not be much help to His church without their knowing about it—without the Scriptures.

⁵⁹ Hermeneutics are the principles of how to interpret the Scriptures.

In a very intimate setting the Apostles received the Holy Spirit when Jesus breathed on them (John 20:22). In a more public, and international, setting the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, producing the miraculous ability to proclaim a message in foreign languages (more on this later).

But it did not end there. Continual affirmation of apostolic authority took place as the Apostles went out from Pentecost and laid their hands on others who were not at Pentecost. The promise was made to the Apostles, the power was given to the Apostles, and during the apostolic age there was the subsequent pouring out of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the Apostle's hands. In an undiminished capacity (in terms of signs, wonders, and message), the power and authority of Christ was conferred to His Apostles.

Hopefully we see the sense of this. It is by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that we all have access to the word of God. It is part of the accomplished work of redemption and we have all benefited by it. This comports well with Scripture and makes sense of why we don't see miracles today the way we did in Scripture.

As I said before, if I am wrong about this I am more than willing to repent, for it is the very mind, power and Spirit of God that are at stake. Let us now examine what concessions need to be made in order for the Pentecostal view to be correct.

Trying to Make it Work

Let us now seek to answer some of the assertions made by The General Council of the Assemblies of God as they try to make their system work.

It is quite in order, assuming the presence of proper understanding, to lead a new convert into the baptism in the Holy Spirit. While "tarrying" (waiting on God in prayer) is often necessary for heart preparation and understanding, it is not improper for new believers to move quickly into the fullness of the Spirit.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Ibid.

There is no indication that “tarrying” in anticipation was anything but being at Jerusalem (Luke 24:49). To suggest it means waiting on God in prayer is a fabrication. AOG states,

Is there proof that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit experienced today is genuinely biblical?

The proof is the same proof that supported the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. On that occasion the apostle Peter stood up and defended the outpouring by showing that it was a fulfillment of Scripture. He began his explanation by saying, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). What we are experiencing in our day is that which was prophesied by Joel and which began to be fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost.

A comparison of the Book of Acts with what is happening in the modern outpouring of the Spirit reveals striking similarities in pattern and purpose. The impact of the early church, newly equipped by the power of the Holy Spirit, changed the world of that day. Similar changes are being made in human lives today through Spirit-filled servants of God. Christ is preached. Sinners are saved. The sick are healed. The kingdom of God is greatly increased. We can say, with Peter, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel," though we have not yet seen the full extent of the spiritual awakening for which we are praying.⁶¹

As discussed earlier, the proofs offered in Acts were signs and wonders done by the hands of the Apostles. There are very few genuine similarities between what was happening in Acts and what is happening in today’s Pentecostal churches when you consider the raising of the dead and establishment of the canon of Scripture. The fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel was a once-for-all fulfillment. It is exegetically questionable to extend a singular historically-fulfilled

⁶¹ Ibid.

prophecy into history. And since Joel's prophecy included revelation, in this view *Sola Scriptura* is lost.

Who should be baptized in the Holy Spirit?

When the believers were assembled in prayer on the Day of Pentecost, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them" (Acts 2:4). Not one was left out. It was not just the apostles who were filled, but all the men and all the women in that company of 120 persons. Then the apostle Peter addressed the onlookers and told them that they should be filled. He said "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off -- for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39).

As Peter said, the baptism in the Holy Spirit is for every believer in every generation. It is an all-inclusive promise of universal dimension. The baptism in the Holy Spirit is promised to every Christian believer.⁶²

Where does Peter say that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is for every believer in every generation? It is the Abrahamic Covenant (promise) that is promised. If it is indeed promised to every Christian believer to be baptized by the Holy Spirit (remembering it is always in the indicative and not imperative), why does not every believer have it (at least according to the Pentecostal view of it)?

Why are some people baptized in the Spirit immediately, while other seek so long without receiving the experience?

Just prior to His ascension, Jesus told His disciples, "In a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5). Some 20 days later they were filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:4). Earlier the

⁶² Ibid.

Lord had said, "I am going to send you what my Father promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). No doubt the disciples obeyed this directive; they remained in Jerusalem and spent much time in prayer. There was a "waiting" for the Spirit to come. However, once the Spirit had fallen there was no further incident of "waiting" or "tarrying." Today there is no longer any reason for waiting, except as "waiting" may relate to the preparation of the heart for the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

Some believers have received the Baptism almost immediately; others have waited for various periods of time. Why? (1) Because the Holy Spirit is sovereign, He will move and work only as He chooses. (2) Because the Holy Spirit does not impose himself on any believer, some will require a period of waiting before they are prepared to yield themselves fully to His divine control. (3) Because "filling" may involve a process, there are some believers with an authentic baptism in the Spirit which may have been preceded by wonderful and meaningful times of waiting in God's presence. Seekers should realize that any period of "waiting" only brings them closer to the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon their lives.⁶³

All these answers are foreign to the accounts of the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Scripture. Granted, He (the Holy Spirit) will move and work as He chooses. But this seems inconsistent with their explanation that the person has not yet fully yielded himself to His divine control. Who has ever done this? That is quite a high standard! Of course, the Holy Spirit certainly did impose Himself on those who were under the preaching of Peter and Paul.

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word (Acts 10:44).

⁶³ Ibid.

When they heard *this*, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied (Acts 19:5).

The Council continues,

When an individual is seeking the baptism in the Holy Spirit, can anything be done to prepare his life or environment that will quicken the infilling?

The question is often asked: "What can I do to claim the promise of the baptism in the Holy Spirit for my life?" One thing the believer should do is to seek the Baptizer rather than the Baptism. It is Jesus who baptizes believers in the Holy Spirit. Seekers should focus their attention on Him rather than on an experience. There are other steps that, if taken, will assist seekers. (1) Understand that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is a gift from God. It should be received with gratitude and giving of thanks to the Giver. It cannot be earned or merited. It can only be accepted with an open and willing heart.

But did we not just learn that the failure to yield oneself fully to His divine control will inhibit the process? Is this not a system of merit?

(2) Be fully persuaded that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is both biblical and doctrinally correct.

Is not this a bit manipulative? Doctrinal accuracy was never a prerequisite for the baptism of the Holy Spirit!

(3) Confess any known sins in your life and resolve to live a righteous life with God's help.

I thought this was what you had to do at conversion. Confession of sin and personal righteousness was never a prerequisite for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. When the people were greatly amazed at Peter's power,

Peter saw *it*, he answered unto the people, Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk (Acts 3:12)?

(4) Begin to worship the Lord with expressions of praise and adoration.

Is this not a result of the filling of the Spirit rather than a means to acquire it?

(5) Express to the Lord, who is the Baptizer, a desire to be filled with the Holy Spirit for His glory.

Never in the Scriptures are we called to do this.

(6) Yield to any deep "welling up" within your spirit and allow that inner surge to break through in expressions of worship, praise, and adoration in a language unknown to you but meaningful to God⁶⁴.

This is perhaps the most dangerous aspect of Pentecostalism: the dispensing with rational thought and succumbing to the inner surge. This sounds strangely similar to Paul's warning to Timothy where there will be false teachers taking advantage of those led by various impulses (2 Timothy 3:6).

Conclusion

The baptism of the Holy Spirit (as seen at Pentecost) was a unique historical event. Its design was to confirm the once-for-all message of the gospel and should not be sought as the normal

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Christian experience throughout history. The shoddy exegesis utilized to make this system work should stand as a warning to Christians. Unfortunately, we live in a day and age of irrationalism and anti-intellectualism in the church. What we have left to guide us are inner surges and various impulses.

Justification by faith, the blood of Christ, the cross of Christ, divine satisfaction—glorious concepts—have been lost. May we repent of this neglect and bring the glory of the cross back into His church.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Define the accomplished versus applied works of redemption.
2. In what respects can division be harmful/necessary in the church?
3. How does the Pentecostal view of the baptism of the Holy Spirit stratify the church?
4. Is there evidence in the Bible of a subsequent experience for Christians of the Holy Spirit?
5. How is the baptism of the Holy Spirit a baptism of revelation?
6. How are many of the events in Acts historically unique?
7. Discuss the arguments given by the General Council of the Assemblies of God.

Part XVII

How Come I Never See A Miracle?

Speaking Into the Air

1 Corinthians 12

August 31, 2003

Introduction

We will finish our discussion on modern-day miracles with a look at the flagship chapters (1 Corinthians 12-14) utilized by Pentecostals to argue for the continuation of miracles—especially revelatory miracles, e.g. tongues, prophecy, word of knowledge. I don't plan to embark on an overly detailed study of these three chapters. That is, I don't intend to define every gift mentioned or do word studies on the Apostle Paul's definition of love, etc. I have a two-fold goal in this portion of our study.

First, I would like us to absorb the Apostle Paul's motif throughout these chapters, i.e. the purpose of and disposition we should have toward gifts and orderliness in the church. It is my prayer that we will be greatly ministered to by Paul's encouragements and admonitions contained on these pages. Paul's exhortations to foster unity are unsurpassed in his metaphorical description of the church as a body. His definition of love and gentle rebuke of exercising gifts apart from love should challenge us all. And his call to orderliness in the church will be very illuminating and will undress improper dispositions we have toward approaching God.

Second, I would like to pause and reflect upon certain passages in terms of how they speak to the continuation of sign-gifts. Since it is not the Apostle's purpose to argue for the continuation or cessation of gifts in these chapters, what we learn regarding the continuation or cessation of miraculous gifts will be by inference or implication.

For example, Paul lists all sorts of gifts, including miraculous gifts, for what appears to be the common use in the church at Corinth. Does this imply that these gifts are available in their totality to churches today? We will learn that all Christians are baptized in the

Holy Spirit. How does this fit with the Pentecostal notion of a subsequence baptism of the Holy Spirit? In short, we will evaluate whether or not these chapters argue more strongly for or against the continuation of sign-gifts.

Without further delay, let us launch into a prayerful and meaningful pursuit of understanding of God's word.

1 Corinthians 12

No Dumb Idols Allowed

Now concerning spiritual *gifts*, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant: You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (12:1-3).

Paul is about to instruct on spiritual gifts. It is important that the Corinthians are not ignorant (verse 1); then he mentions their past (formerly carried away to dumb idols). He is not merely trying to be insulting here. It is very likely that he mentions this because of their propensity to fall back into that similar practice. Mystical pagans have a habit of becoming mystical Christians. God calls us to be mature in our understanding (1 Corinthians 14:20). Perhaps the improper use of spiritual gifts had so run amuck in Corinth that those claiming these spiritual gifts were actually calling Jesus accursed: a caution to us all regarding the general acceptance of those claiming Christian leadership. Paul's desire is to protect the church from its own various impulses.

That this church is receiving a letter from Paul is one of the first arguments for the cessation of sign-gifts. If a twenty-first century church were to run amuck (as some have) with the improper use of sign-gifts (or any error), they should not expect to get a letter from an apostle. Continuous Pauline epistles are not normative for the applied work of redemption. If you disagree with me, you must make your argument from the canon of Scripture. You cannot write a letter to the Apostle Paul and send him after me.

It would be short-sighted here to think that Paul is addressing mere verbalization—certainly, Satan can mouth “Jesus is Lord”. Jesus makes this point quite clear when He says,

These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me (Matthew 15:8).

Paul’s initial point is the control and power of the Holy Spirit over the theology and faith of men. Implicit in “**no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit**” is that no one can *believe* in Jesus as Lord except by the Holy Spirit. This passage, and hundreds like it, obliterate the notion that belief, or faith, originates in man. Rather, God is to be praised for the very faith by which man is saved!

Unity and Mutual Edification

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another *different* kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills (12:4-11).

I will not, at this point, discuss all the details of the gifts listed. We stipulate that in the first century church all gifts were in use; it’s a given. Paul is emphasizing what we might call the differential distribution of gifts by the Spirit. He has, at least, two reasons for making this point:

First, Paul is emphasizing unity—“**Same Lord, Same God, Same Spirit.**” He will pursue this more fully in the words to follow. Here he teaches that gifts, while diverse, flow from one source, the Spirit of God.

Second, Paul gives the reason for the manifestation or gift. The manifestation “**is given to each for the profit of all**” (verse 7). This must be highlighted in our minds. *The mutual edification of the church is the purpose of Spiritual gifts.* This will run head-on with the proposition of the gift of a private prayer language; more on that later.

All Had Been Spirit-Baptized

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many (12:13, 14).

Paul now begins his “body” illustration, but not until he makes a critical point—that by one Spirit all the members of the church have been baptized into one body. To suggest that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a subsequent experience is to tear Paul’s unity argument asunder. There is no notion allowed in Paul’s argument that some had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and others hadn’t. The glue for Paul’s argument is the assertion that “**by one Spirit (they) were all baptized into one body.**” And, as verse 30 will indicate, not all spoke in tongues; again, more on that later.

It would be best to understand the baptism of the Holy Spirit as something poured out on the church as an organism—a body. And when we, by the grace of God, become part of that organism we are made to drink into that one Spirit. So, it is not me on an island (or tarrying in prayer) waiting to be baptized by the Holy Spirit. Rather, when God grants me faith and I am brought into the church of Christ—the body of Christ—I become part of a baptized body.

This may be illustrated by thinking of people in a pool (the church) and others outside the pool (the unconverted). The pool is the baptized organism. The people outside the pool don’t make their own

pools or seek to splash water on themselves. When, by the grace of God, they enter the pool they enter a baptized body, enjoying all its graces.

All Have, and Should Exercise, Gifts

If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body *were* an eye, where *would be* the hearing? If the whole *were* hearing, where *would be* the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they *were* all one member, where *would the body be*? But now indeed *there are* many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those *members* of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable *parts* have greater modesty, but our presentable *parts* have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that *part* which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but *that* the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with *it*; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with *it* (12:15-26).

Paul now fully expresses the “body” illustration. Again, let us not miss these ministering words of Paul. We are all part of one body and we are in need of one another. Church members who live their lives detached from the body are remiss in two ways: They are not availing themselves of God’s provision for themselves, and they are failing to aid those in need. They are a finger, as it were, detached from the hand, arm and body and therefore extremely limited

regarding any genuine profitable contribution to God's kingdom. In addition to this they are the missing finger in God's church which leaves a deed undone. The body and the finger both suffer (verse 26). We should be so attached to the local church that its suffering is ours and vice-versa. If such is not the case with you, you are overly disenfranchised.

I might point out that since the lists of gifts vary in letters to different churches these lists are not meant to be exhaustive. Hence, I don't think it is even necessary to classify your gift, which is such a popular practice today. The fact is you have something to offer God's people and should have your eyes, ears and heart open to being a participating member in Christ's local church. This may be formal or descript, such as a deacon, elder, worship leader, Sunday school teacher, etc. or it may be very informal or in-descript, such the offering of kind words, prayer, inviting someone to dinner, helping when a need arises and so on.

If too much time goes by and you find that you have contributed nothing and have receiving nothing from your church, look first to whether or not you have estranged yourself from the body of Christ.

Paul also makes the point that those with the seemingly more impressive gifts should not belittle those with the seemingly less impressive, or vice-versa. Suffering and honor should both be viewed as belonging to the entire body. An overly developed sense of self-honor or prestige has always plagued Christ's church.

How does this passage address the topic at hand (sign gifts)? It must be stated that even when the sign (or miraculous) gifts were clearly present in the church there was no indication of a sub-section of *unbaptized-by-the-Spirit* Christians. What part of the body would they be? At very best they would be a paralyzed limb. Paul's description allows for no such thinking.

Not All Speak in Tongues and There Are No More Apostles

Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? *Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all*

workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way (12:27-31).

Though we are part of a body, we do maintain our individuality (verse 1). Paul then lists some gifts of a more spectacular nature, his point being that even during the apostolic era not everyone had, nor should they have expected to have, these gifts. The implied answers to these rhetorical questions are “no”. This is to say that not all Spirit-baptized Christians (verse 13) spoke in tongues (verse 30). There is a stark contrast between Paul’s teaching and the articles of faith taught by the General Council of the Assemblies of God which states,

Tongues is the same evidence today when believers are baptized in the Spirit. *All believers, when they are baptized in the Spirit, will speak in tongues.*

There are those who give testimony to a dynamic and life-changing encounter with the Holy Spirit who have never spoken in tongues. Nevertheless it cannot be said that they are filled with the Spirit in the New Testament sense of the term. There is an essential link between that experience and speaking in other tongues....,

Yet another argument for cessation comes when we notice that Paul has *apostles* on his list (verse 28). Unless we are going to reduce the term apostle to the level of comparative meaninglessness, we must understand it in its unique sense.⁶⁵ Paul opens every epistle (except 1 & 2 Thessalonians) by announcing his God-given office of apostle. It is his declaration of this office that demands the recipients of the letters respect his writings as the word of God. Unless we are going

⁶⁵ Meeting the requirements pronounced by Peter when Judas was replaced by Matthias: “Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection” (Acts 1:21, 22).

to argue for the continuation of this office (an argument very few are willing to even attempt) we must acknowledge a precedent for cessation.

Though we will stop here, it is readily apparent that this entire chapter is preparatory for chapter thirteen, the love chapter—the **“more excellent way.”**

Before we pursue chapter thirteen let us recognize that a misunderstanding and improper use of spiritual gifts, as with all doctrines that go astray, impugn the character of God. God is the one who grants faith (1 Corinthians 12:3); true saving faith produces unity and mutual edification (1 Corinthians 12:4-11); unity and mutual edification flows from a baptized church which is the very body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13, 14), a body of which we are all integral members (1 Corinthians 12:15-26).

If we, as Christ’s body, are to suitably extol our Creator and Redeemer, we must seek to properly acknowledge what He has already accomplished in our lives (He has baptized us by/in His Spirit and granted with that baptism all its attending graces and gifts). We must also appropriate that which He has provided (i.e., operate as a gifted member). This brings benefit to God’s people and glory to His Name. This will be more fully pursued in the next chapter.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How does the fact that Corinth received a letter from the apostle Paul contribute to the argument of cessation?
2. Why would Paul remind them of their past concerning following dumb idols?
3. From where does man's faith and theology come?
4. Give two reasons why Paul mentions the differential distribution of gifts by the Spirit.
5. If some Christians are not baptized by the Spirit, what does this do to Paul's unity argument?
6. Discuss ways to understand the baptism of the Holy Spirit.
7. Of what are Christians remiss when they detach themselves from the local body?
8. How do you know what your gift is?
9. If there are Christians who are not baptized by the Holy Spirit, what are the implications in Paul's body metaphor?
10. Did all Spirit-baptized Christians speak in tongues? How does this comport with the statement of the Assemblies of God?
11. How does Paul's inclusion of apostles on his list in 1 Corinthians 12:28 contribute to the argument of cessation?
12. What is at stake when we misuse or misunderstand the Bible's teaching regarding the Holy Spirit?

Part XVIII
How Come I Never See a Miracle?
A More Excellent Way
1 Corinthians 13
September 7, 2003

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. 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, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

Introduction

It has been said that presentation is everything. In a fancy restaurant they don't merely pour the chocolate sauce on the dessert, they zigzag it on. While it may not be true that presentation is everything (if the chef accidentally uses salt instead of sugar the beauty of the presentation will be short-lived) it certainly is something. Dismissing the message because of the messenger is something people tend to do with great ease. If your speech is gruff or coarse people will generally have little interest in what you might have to say.

I remember gravitating toward those who gave me winsome smiles and could convey the genuine impression that they truly cared for me. Over the years I have grown to have a bit of distrust and even disdain for those who have mastered the art of the compassionate veneer. Not that there is anything necessarily foul about a charitable facade, but it is so often displayed at the expense of true content. When it comes to matters of faith, I have come to appreciate *prophets* over *pals*.

Nonetheless, both content and presentation have their place in Christian fellowship. The apostle Paul exhorts us not merely to speak but to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

Often quoted at weddings, this “love” chapter actually has, as its context, the proper use of spiritual gifts. This chapter has little to say regarding continuation or cessation of the supernatural gifts (our larger topic), but we would be remiss in our study of these gifts if we omitted the chapter designed to govern our disposition in the use of them.

The apostle Paul began his discussion of spiritual gifts in chapter twelve of 1 Corinthians. He ended that chapter promising to show us a “more excellent way.” It is a *more excellent way* for Christians to interact, edify, challenge and nurture one another. And because the body of Christ more properly functions when this excellence is pursued, God is more properly glorified.

This more excellent way is not actually a gift per se, but rather a virtue which is to be present in the exercise of all gifts. The more excellent way is, of course, love. Does anybody mind if we speak of love for a bit? It is quite startling how high this virtue ranks.

If I Have Not Love

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. 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, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

Messengers Don't Nullify Messages

Paul's main point here should be obvious to us all: love is to adorn every attribute. If love does not adorn my other gifts then I am a clanging cymbal, I am nothing and it profits me nothing. Let me be quick to say, however, that the indictment is against the messenger and not the message. My lack of ability to be loving does not pardon

the hearer any more than a father's poor leadership gives license to his child's insubordination.

It is the tongue-speaker, the man of knowledge, the man of great faith, the good-deed-doer and the martyr who become nothing. Their loveless disposition in no way impugns the actual claim the prophetic message has on the hearer. In other words, if I speak the truth—but it is not spoken in love—it is still the truth and is therefore still binding upon the hearer. What I am guilty of when speaking in an unloving manner (like the father who exasperates his child) is tempting my hearer to disregard the message.

The use of gifts (any gifts) for notoriety, prestige, or to legitimate or elevate oneself is disgraceful. If we do not have love, the exercise of spiritual gifts is neither impressive to God nor profitable to us.

Tongues of Angels?

How does this passage speak to the issue of sign-gifts? Some use verse one as a proof-text for the incoherent babble⁶⁶ of the modern tongues movement—the tongues of angels. Paul may be speaking poetically here, but even if he isn't there is no account of an angel speaking anything but a discernable language.

The Truth About Love

Christians are to exercise the gifts given to them by God in a loving manner. *So, what does it mean to love? Do I get to define it myself?* Some pit love against truth. They say, "Give me love and the truth will come." After all, as we shall see, love is greater than faith and hope! Would you rather live in a church, home or nation full of love or full of truth? Most people would say 'love'—dangerous answer.

So far from being mutually exclusive, love and truth are interdependent. In other words, without truth, love becomes indiscernible and is generally reduced to passion. It is not uncommon for the concept of love to be thrown around by those who desire sexual promiscuity. Is that true love? Apart from knowing the truth about love how can we question this?

⁶⁶ I don't use these terms in a derogatory but technical way.

True love flows from genuine, biblical truth. Since the presentation of the true gospel is the power of salvation (Romans 1:16) we can conclude that truth doesn't merely define love, it is the means by which true love is produced. An undefined false love produces mere chaos and licentiousness. The apostle Paul, realizing this, puts forth his doctrine (truth) of love.

Love Is...

Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

It would be overly ambitious at this point to pursue an exhaustive study of love. The nuts and bolts of loving God and loving our neighbor are found in summary in the Ten Commandments;⁶⁷ what we have before us is the lubricant. Love most assuredly consists of outward duties, but it also has an inward temperament.

There will be a repetitive theme of love's *patience*—it “suffers long.” *Love* is defined by Vines as “a quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation which does not hastily retaliate or promptly punish; it is the opposite of anger, and is associated with mercy.”⁶⁸ James puts it nicely:

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God (James 1:19, 20).

I personally have a forty-eight-hour rule. If I find myself offended I (if possible) give it two days (a time when I pray, calm

⁶⁷ This is not to say that the Ten Commandments do not include the inward temperament. But the inward temperament seems to be Paul's main emphasis.

⁶⁸ Vine, W. 1981; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. *Vine's Expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words*. Revell: Old Tappan NJ

down and seek counsel) before responding. Some may need only a few minutes, others may need weeks.

Love is not passionately reactionary, but rather it is *kind*. That is to say, genuine love should have a mildness to it. This, of course, naturally flows from patience or long-suffering.

Love does not *envy*. Joseph's brothers envied his father's love for him, leading them into great evil (Acts 7:9). A lack of godly contentment inhibits true love. When our friends have good fortune, we should rejoice with them and resist becoming bitter because we feel short-changed.

Love does not *parade itself* or put itself forward or vaunt its works. In other words, a person who is acting in true love doesn't put a shingle on his forehead announcing his great love. It's not a show. This becomes especially difficult when you've been making the silent effort of loving and are accused of neglect. Don't be tempted to hang the shingle. If you don't resist this temptation you will violate the next law of love which is to avoid being *puffed up* or arrogant; put in modern terms, avoid being full of yourself.

Love does *not behave rudely*, shamefully or unbecomingly. A loving person is circumspect. He is aware of his surroundings and considers those surroundings in his speech and manners. There was a woman who used to openly criticize her spouse in public venues. Her criticisms may or may not have been valid, but her lack of propriety was rude and not an act of love toward her husband.

Love does *not seek its own*. In other words, genuine love is not searching for reciprocation. The reason we fail in every aspect of love leading up to this (patience, envy, parading oneself, being puffed up, and rudeness) is because we have a secret agenda of reception. And when due time has gone by and our ship has not come in our paltry love is revealed for what it is.

It is this type of false love that is *easily provoked*. If I am not concerned with what I get in return I am not tempted to rage when it doesn't come. It is also this type of false love that *thinks evil*. The New American Standard translates this as, "does not take into account a wrong *suffered*;" and cleverly rendered by one theologian, "it meditateth no mischief." In other words, true love does not keep a ledger for retaliation. As the man said, "When my wife gets mad she doesn't get *hysterical*, she gets *historical*."

True love does *not rejoice in iniquity*. I should not be happy when I find my suspicions about my acquaintances were true and

indeed they were evil. We are to lament at evil and rejoice when truth prevails.

What does it mean that love *bears, believes, hopes and endures all things*? Does this mean love is not wise? That it does not discriminate? Certainly not! That *love bears all things* mirrors that long-suffering of which we have already spoken; that love believes all things does not mean love believes contradictions, but that love is not overly suspicious. Calvin wrote,

...that a Christian man will reckon it better to be imposed upon by his own kindness and easy temper, than to wrong his brother by an unfriendly suspicion.⁶⁹

To hope all things is the kind of love that recognizes God's power to change lives and grant repentance. Matthew Henry explains,

And when, in spite of inclination, it cannot believe well of others, it will yet hope well, and continue to hope as long as there is any ground for it.⁷⁰

And yet a third time Paul puts forth the notion of patience. True *love endures*. It is this emphasis which leads into Paul's next point.

Love Never Fails

Love never fails. But whether *there are* prophecies, they will fail; whether *there are* tongues, they will cease; whether *there is* knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put

⁶⁹Calvin, J. 1998. *Calvin's Commentaries: 1 Corinthians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (1 Co 13:7). Ages Software: Albany, OR

⁷⁰Henry, M. 1996, c1991. *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (1 Co 13:4). Hendrickson: Peabody

away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1 Cor. 13:8-13).

When the Perfect Comes

There is some debate as to what Paul means by “when that which is perfect has come.” It very likely refers to the Second Coming. There is no strength in using this passage as an argument for the cessation or continuation of gifts so I will not pursue that here. Paul’s point is the transitory⁷¹ and inferior nature of gifts compared to faith, hope and love.

Grow Up

There appears to be an accusation in the tone of Paul’s writing that they are treating their gifts like children. It is truly awkward and sometimes disheartening when we buy a nice gift for our children only to find them arguing about who gets to play in the box. Paul’s point seems to be that they are viewing the gifts as an end in themselves and that these wonderful gifts they prize so highly will one day evaporate. It is a childish endeavor to exercise the gifts of God in such a way as to forget the love of God.

Faith, Hope and Love

Faith is the knowledge of God and His divine will. Hope is the perseverance in that faith. These both, of course, will no longer be necessary in glory. Love, however, is eternal. A loving use of gifts facilitates faith, hope and love as well. Let us prayerfully consider whether or not this is the actual case in our lives.

And it well may oil the gears of our love even further to ponder the words of Jesus,

⁷¹ This also refutes the notion that the immutability of God requires the immutability of gifts.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another (John 13:34).

I was doing a radio broadcast on the five points of Calvinism⁷² when a caller sought to gently chastise me. “When are we going to quit discussing ‘-isms’ and talk about *love*?” I could almost here the grumblings of the entire radio audience give their hearty *amen*! But is it not obvious that we cannot begin to know how to love others until we begin to understand how Christ loves us! We need to know what we are imitating.

A love which has the imitation of Christ at its heart will truly be an enduring love—a true love—a more excellent way.

⁷² That man is totally depraved, dead in his sins, and can offer nothing to God, not even his own faith; that God’s love and election for us was without condition—He doesn’t love or choose us because of some quality or attribute He saw in us; that the atoning work of Christ on the cross was effective to save those who were the objects of God’s love and election; that the love of God, by His Spirit, would irresistibly overcome our rebellion; and that God’s love is so enduring that His true children would persevere in this grace unto glory.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How are Christians to speak the truth? Why is this important?
2. What is the context of the “love” chapter?
3. If you exercise great gifts without love, what are you?
4. Does a loveless messenger actually nullify the message?
5. Are the *tongues of angels* in verse one a good argument for an indistinguishable language?
6. What’s more important, truth or love? Explain.
7. Discuss the aspects of godly love.
8. Why does Paul bring up the idea of being like a child?
9. Define faith and hope.
10. What is one important reason for understanding the doctrines of grace (Calvinism)?

Part XIX

How Come I Never See a Miracle? Speaking into the Air 1 Corinthians 14:1-19 September 14, 2003

Introduction

We will finish up our ‘How Come I Never See a Miracle’ section by studying 1 Corinthians 14. It seems that Paul’s primary goal in this chapter was that there be order in the church—especially as it related to supernatural, revelatory/prophetic gifts. This is the flagship chapter used by Pentecostals to argue for the continuation of miraculous sign-gifts. Since it is not Paul’s goal to argue for the cessation or continuation of miraculous gifts in this chapter what we learn will be by inference or implication.

We will find that much of what is happening in the church today *a la* sign gifts is in violation of this chapter. We will also find that the very nature of the chapter will militate against the continuation of sign-gifts since sign-gifts were a sign of a historically unique event that has already taken place: the transfer of the kingdom from Israel to the church (Matthew 21:43).

There is one other major issue we should keep in mind as we study the details of this chapter—that tongues, prophecy, word of knowledge were ‘word’ gifts which revealed the mind of God. If we believe in the continuation of these gifts we, of necessity, do not believe the Bible to be the sole, infallible and authoritative message of God to mankind. This is an inescapable dilemma for those who believe in continuation but proclaim *sola scriptura*.

Preview

When portions of the chapter address the continuation or cessation of sign-gifts, we will address them. In the meantime, we will prayerfully seek to observe and apply the clear instruction of the text.

The following are topics addressed in verses 1-19 of this chapter:

- 1). True spirituality requires understanding. No less than seven times in this chapter Paul will harp on the necessity of understanding. Any world view or form of religion that seeks to dump the mind is to be avoided.
- 2). The notion of a private prayer language?
- 3). Tongues and interpretation?
- 4). Praying in the Spirit versus praying with understanding?
- 5). How God is to be approached in worship.

Prophecy is Superior—True Spirituality Requires Understanding

Pursue love, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy. For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands *him*; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification (1 Cor. 14:1-5).

The Mind of God

Common in many religions (including large portions Christianity) is the pursuit of a relationship with God based upon mysticism, passions, sentiment and various forms of anti-rationalism. It is proposed that God is so big that He cannot be known the way we know other things. We, therefore, seek to engage in communion with God in a manner completely foreign to all other relationships.

It is a mistake, however, to think that since God is incomprehensible in a quantitative sense (for example, He has infinite knowledge) that He must be incomprehensible in a qualitative sense

(His knowledge is of a different kind). I may not know *everything* about baseball (quantitative), but that doesn't mean I don't know *anything* about baseball (qualitative). The umpire may know all the rules, but everyone in the stands knows a home-run when they see it. Passions and sentiment may have their place—but, as we shall soon see, they must play second fiddle to proper understanding.

With a brief reminder of chapter thirteen (pursue love—verse 1) Paul continues his instruction regarding spiritual gifts. At the top of the list is prophecy. There is nothing more important to the church (to mankind) than to know the mind of God—prophecy. Through prophecy God graciously unveils His Fatherliness, His holiness, His righteousness, His mercy, etc. When we know these things we know the mind of God and we know He is worthy of all glory and honor and praise. Knowledge of these things also edifies, exhorts and comforts His children (verse 3).

As Christians we can grow frustrated when we see the world's lack of understanding (a lack of understanding which flows from rebellion—Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:18) the mind of God resulting in things like abortion, homosexuality, pornography, etc. Dispensing with the mind of God regarding these issues has proven to be devastating.

Paul's initial point is that prophecy is superior to tongues. Why is prophecy superior? Because it can be *understood*. Paul will continually emphasize the value of understanding. He will also expose the folly of thinking there is any value in engaging in so-called spiritual exercises that by-pass the human mind.

Before us are the most detailed instructions regarding tongues found in the Bible. A couple of points bear mentioning. Tongues, in terms of what they actually were, are only defined one place in Scripture. At Pentecost the gift of tongues was the supernatural ability to speak a foreign language. There is no good reason to think it is anything but that here. Paul never says, "Now concerning the special or different or unique gift of tongues..."

Paul is not denouncing the use of tongues for the first century church, but clearly places prophecy as a greater gift—unless the tongue is interpreted—indicating that tongues is un-interpreted prophecy. We will learn that if tongues (even when it was still extant) are not interpreted, they are useless.

Private Prayer Language?

Some use this passage as an argument for yet another kind of tongue—the private prayer language. This is inconsistent with what we have already learned—that gifts are for the mutual edification of the body (1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:12). The Apostle Paul is known to use sarcasm as an instructive tool—especially with the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:10). I believe he is doing that here. I don't believe Paul is condoning some private prayer language, but is rather ridiculing those aiming for personal exaltation and using God's gift for themselves rather than for others, which is its expressed design. Calvin states,

But whatever is done in the Church, ought to be for the common benefit. Away, then, with that misdirected ambition, which gives occasion for the advantage of the people generally being hindered! Besides, Paul speaks by way of concession: for when ambition makes use of such empty vauntings, there is inwardly no desire of doing good; but Paul does, in effect, order away from the common society of believers those men of mere show, who look only to themselves.⁷³

When Paul speaks of mysteries and then says, “**He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself,**” he is speaking by way of chastisement. He is not giving the prescription for some new sub- or supra-intellectual form of prayer. Nor, I would argue, is he actually encouraging tongue-speakers to go speak in tongues at home or privately. Suppose someone was improperly utilizing the gift of hospitality and Paul said, “Go home and be hospitable to yourself,” the sarcasm would be much more easily seen. Insert other gifts such as exhorting, showing mercy, etc. and you come up with the same result.

When I was about seven years old I apparently kept asking my dad for money. One day, in order to teach me a lesson, he handed me a \$10 bill (a lot of money in those days) and said, “Go ahead, spend it.” He hoped that I would get the picture, be shamed and hand him

⁷³ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. XX* (Baker Book House, reprint 1993), p. 436.

back the cash. I didn't. I spent it all! Again, we are to quit thinking like children.

An Uncertain Sound

But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle (1 Cor. 14:6-8)?

If there was ever an argument against the modern view of tongues (that being incoherent gibberish⁷⁴) it is found in these words. Paul's point is that if you can't understand what is being said, it is of no profit. The bugler must play a discernable tune in order for the troops to have direction. Even when the gift of tongues existed they were without profit unless there was something revealed, known, prophesied or taught.

Speaking Into the Air

So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them *is* without significance. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks *will be* a foreigner to me. Even so you, since you are zealous

⁷⁴ The more scholarly Pentecostals believe that gibberish is proper (where we would hold that tongues is not gibberish but a foreign language), but that it must be interpreted along Paul's guidelines given in this chapter.

for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel (1 Cor. 14:9-12).

Not merely understandable but easy to understand—this is the exhortation of the Apostle Paul. If people don't understand what you're saying you are speaking into the air and your words have no value.

There is no language that is without significance (verse 10). Arguably, the ability to discern the meaning of uttered sounds is what makes it a language. In this chapter, Paul seems to be addressing what amounted to be mass confusion generated by Christians improperly speaking not gibberish but numerous discernible languages at the same time.

Pandemonium at Church

So what was actually going on at the church of Corinth with its tongue-speakers and interpreters? It is not uncommon today to see preaching in a church communicated to the deaf through someone up front doing sign-language. Since it is silent it is not very distracting.

Corinth was a multi-cultural port where many languages were spoken. At the church in Corinth there might have been a dozen members with the gift of tongues speaking the various languages all at the same time. If such was the case, there would have been others with the gift of interpretation seeking to interpret whatever languages were being spoken into the language of their particular audience seated in various places in the congregation. This would result in pandemonium.

Paul's instruction would be to limit the number of tongues speakers and interpreters to facilitate order. So you might have three people speaking in tongues to a congregation that had six different languages represented. Then you might have three interpreters translating the tongues for the benefit of all. For example (using language we're familiar with), the three tongue-speakers might be speaking Greek, French and Spanish. But the congregation also had people who only spoke German, Italian and English. The interpreters would interpret the Greek into German, the French into Italian and the Spanish into English. Then everyone would understand (which was Paul's major concern).

Re-Gifting

We see again in verse twelve that gifts are for the edification of the church. God grants gifts to be used for the benefit of others. When little children go to a birthday party and mom gives them a gift to give to their friend, it is a difficult lesson for them to learn that the gift is not for them. The headlong pursuit of using gifts for oneself rather than for others is the childish notion Paul is seeking to correct.

Praying in the Spirit? How Can I Say Amen?

Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is *the conclusion* then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified (1 Cor. 14:13-17).

Is Paul making an argument for two kinds of prayer—with the spirit and with the understanding? Not at all! He is asserting just the opposite.

In the present passage the person who is praying (likely public prayer) in the spirit is exercising the supernatural gift of tongues (verse 14). If he is Greek and speaking Spanish, he may not even understand what he is saying and it is, therefore, unfruitful to him (verse 14). He should, therefore, pray that he may interpret so he can pray with his understanding also. Paul is not arguing for two kinds of praying here. He is pointing out the incomplete nature of seeking to utilize a spiritual gift (whether prayer, singing, instruction, etc.) apart from understanding.

You may walk into a religious service that appears to be very Christian. But Paul’s point here is that if you can’t understand what is being said, you cannot give a genuine “Amen”. For all you know you may have walked into a cult.

Five Against Ten Thousand

I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue (1 Cor. 14:18, 19).

Paul now drives the point home. He is not forbidding speaking in tongues (at least not for this first century church). He speaks in tongues himself (no doubt submitting himself to the same guidelines he lays down for others).⁷⁵ But, again, if there is no understanding it is worthless. When Paul says he would rather speak five words with understanding versus ten thousand words in a tongue, he is not saying tongues are 1/2000 as valuable as words of understanding. He is saying that words you can't understand have no value at all. The spirit of Paul's instruction should inform all who seek to speak in gibberish in any age of the church.

An old '60s love song said, "*We tried to talk it over but the words got in the way.*" This is how tongues are viewed by many in the church today. God gave us tongues, it is postulated, because of our limitations of intellect, vocabulary or the ability to express concerns and feelings. There is no biblical warrant for holding that view. There are times when I can't think of the next line to write in a sermon. Occasionally I will just pound the keys...ajklsdaljk;kldfjas (like that). It feels good. It may be psychologically purging. But there is nothing spiritual about it. Paul's entire point is that a lack of understanding renders tongues useless. You will be speaking into the air.

Church Service

And finally, since the context of Paul's letter is the worship service, we must learn that God desires we approach Him in an orderly manner. We will pursue this further next week. For now we

⁷⁵ Some argue that Paul is referring to his own use of a private prayer language here. As if he were saying "I pray my private prayer language at home, but at church I would rather teach." But home and church aren't the only options. Paul may have spoken in tongues evangelistically in his missionary journeys.

will merely set forth that the maxim, “It’s not how you worship but who you worship” is at odds with biblical Christianity.

The gospel is news—good news. And news is information about events. God has done good things. He has made us and redeemed us. Creation was an actual event, the fall was an actual event and the cross of Christ was an actual event where real things took place. He has informed us of these glorious things and we are to praise Him for it. And we are to be wary of any form of Christianity which seeks to muddy these propositions in the name of spirituality.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why is there a dilemma for those who believe in *sola scriptura* and yet also believe in modern-day prophecy?
2. Explain God's incomprehensibility.
3. Why is it important to know the mind of God?
4. How do we know the mind of God?
5. What are tongues?
6. Discuss whether or not Paul is giving a prescription for a private prayer language.
7. Why must language be discernible?
8. Discuss the use of tongues and interpreters at the church in Corinth.
9. Discuss *praying in the spirit* versus *praying with understanding*.
10. Why is gibberish an inappropriate way to conduct worship?
11. What's the good news?

Part XX

How Come I Never See a Miracle? Decently and In Order 1 Corinthians 14:20-40 September 14, 2003

Introduction

It has been said that “Church government is the best security for Christian liberty.”⁷⁶ Many Christians today would scoff at such a proposition. Government is cold, rigid and bureaucratic; it is unwieldy and inflexible in its administration. This is unlike our relationship with God, which is alive and fluid—unhindered by boards and councils.

But it is the church government (hopefully with Scriptures in hand) that determines the liturgies and doctrines of the church. And as un-tethered as we all fantasize ourselves being from the influence of men—even godly men, things we understand to be the truth about God are primarily influenced by (not our personal Bible reading) those who have ascended to levels of theological influence.

This can easily be seen by the vast numbers of today’s media-driven Christians who hold views they believe to be biblical but lack warranted scriptural precedent (e.g. asking Jesus into your heart, baptism as a sign of my decision to believe in Jesus, the law is not for today’s Christian, it is God’s plan that the world must get worse, it is God’s will that everyone be healed and on and on). My inspiration for this current series was the recognition that most of what I was taught, and believed, as a young Christian was incorrect.

The majority of these types of errors in Christendom are doctrines people believe to be truly scriptural. They believe this because those in authority in the church have presented these notions as if they were clear teachings in the Bible. And since it is the very

⁷⁶Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. 1997. *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (1 Co 14:40). Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA.

nature of error (especially misrepresentations about God) to cause turmoil and bondage, the above quote proves quite true.

The Apostle Paul is addressing a church that had lost control of itself. Things were hopping down at the Christian center in Corinth. God was alive and at work! They inventoried themselves as very spiritual! But Paul's letter was designed to illumine them that they were missing the mark. Spontaneity and hoopla do not equal spirituality, even in true churches where the true Spirit of God is truly operating. Things must be done decently and in order. What is at stake here is not merely my Sunday morning experience but my entire view of God, His world and my place in it.

The Power of God's Word in the Church

**Brethren, do not be children in understanding;
however, in malice be babes, but in understanding
be mature.**

In the law it is written:

*“With men of other tongues and other lips
I will speak to this people;*

And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,”

says the Lord.

Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe. Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in *those who are* uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on *his* face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you (1 Cor. 14:20-25).

An Immature Church

Once again Paul condescendingly rebukes the church at Corinth. Numerous were their errors: unnecessary factions (chapters

1-3); unchecked gross immorality in the church (chapter 5); frivolous lawsuits (chapter 6); marital problems (chapter 7); insensitively eating food sacrificed to idols (chapters 8, 10); stinginess in giving (chapter 9); abusing the Lord's Supper (chapter 11); and finally the issue before us—the improper and infantile brandishing of the Spiritual gifts.

Paul exhorts them to be mature in their understanding but childlike regarding malice—they were just the opposite. Mature Christian knowledge was expendable and as a result the church was descending to the Lord of the Flies (governed by malevolent children). And such will always be the case when the church is committed to ignorance.

The Sign of Tongues

Light is shined on the reason for tongues—a light all but ignored by many popular expositors and Pentecostals. **“With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people...”** is a quote from Isaiah 28. It is a passage where God is declaring His judgment upon Israel by a foreign nation. They would not heed God's call to repent and, therefore, would hear from God by way of alien oppressors.

Tongues were a sign, a sign of impending judgment not for the believer but the unbeliever—not for the one who would willingly repent but for the one who bulled his neck against God's goodness. In the same way the parables hid the kingdom of God from the hardened hearts of apostate Israel, tongues hid the gospel from apostate Israel. We see this foretold in the initial sermons of John the Baptist and also with the statement made by Simeon regarding Jesus.

Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this *Child* is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel” (Luke 2:34).

There is little doubt that many Jews came to faith as a result of this prophetic sign, but others fell. The destruction of the temple and the siege of Jerusalem by Rome in AD 70 were utterly devastating to Jews who had rejected Christ (Matthew 24). Paul is reminding them of one of the dramatic purposes for tongues. It should have been sobering for them to recognize that their gift was a sign of judgment.

And it is strained exegesis to argue that practicing the sign of judgment (a judgment that already happened) should be the normal observation throughout the history of the church. In other words, if tongues were a sign of the judgment of Israel, and Israel was in fact judged, there is no longer any need for the sign. Signs point to things. And the thing to which tongues pointed has already taken place. In short, tongues was a sign that BC was about to end and AD was about to begin.

The Power of God's Word

Paul's point in the passage above is that the confusion of not understanding tongues is for the hardened unbeliever and that understanding is for the believer (or potential convert), hence the superiority of prophecy (or interpreted tongues). If a person, by the grace of God, enters the church, they should be able to understand what is being said. The uninformed upon hearing the very word of God (see Hebrews 4:12) becomes convinced, convicted and falls on his face before God. He will also be able to give a report that God is truly in that place. Paul never strays too far from the power of the propositions of God.

Edifying Words

How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. If anyone speaks in a tongue, *let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret* (1 Cor. 14:26, 27).

Hard to Imitate

Since we discussed this last week I will not go into detail here. Paul's main point is that the church service ought to operate in such a way that everyone be edified by understanding what is being said. You may wonder why the church throughout history never adopted the above model for its order of worship. And the few churches that have attempted to imitate Corinth have ended in deplorable

theological failure. The answer relates to our topic of our series—the cessation of supernatural gifts.

We must be aware of the fact that at the time of the writing of 1 Corinthians the New Testament had not yet been completed. So the means of revelation was quite unique and not what one should expect once the canon of Scripture was complete. Today we are not receiving prophecy beyond what is written because we have the full and sufficient prophetic word of God contained in the Scriptures.

We might initially lament at this. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be continually receiving these prophetic insights? But as the church has grown to be an international force, we recognize that it is actually to the church's advantage not to have a multitude of prophets since a multitude of prophets would also burgeon a multitude of false prophets. God has so protected His church that we can easily know someone to be a false prophet simply by their claiming to be a prophet at all. The church has one glorious prophetic source which is sufficient to meet all genuine spiritual needs—*the Bible*.

Keep Silent

But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God (1 Cor. 14:28).

This is another verse often used to advocate a private prayer language. But since *tongues* is actually *speaking* and Paul's exhortation here is to *keep silent*, one can hardly understand this to mean any type of verbal utterance. Paul is simply instructing a person who has the gift of tongues not to use that gift if there is no interpreter. He is to remain silent and engage in silent prayer.

The Spirits of the Prophets

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if *anything* is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not *the author of*

confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints (1 Cor. 14:29-33).

Controlled Prophecy

It shouldn't take too much ciphering to conclude that this type of worship simply could not be the norm for the perpetuity of the church. Prophets were speaking the word of God in the church but since false prophets were a possibility, they needed to be ferreted out through the judgment of others. When one considers the poor spiritual climate of this church we can surmise that this was not always done at an efficient level. Praise God for the closed canon of Scripture!

Be that as it may, Paul's instruction was one prophet at a time that all may learn (again the importance of understanding) and be encouraged. When Paul tells them **"the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets"** he is not saying that the prophets have authority over the content of what they say. The context informs us that Paul is telling the prophets that they have control over the manner in which they utilize their gift. Simply because it was the actual prophetic gift does not mean they had to bark out their prophecy at the moment they received it. To do so would result in confusion.

Women in the Church

Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but *they are* to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church (1 Cor. 14:34, 35).

The context of this very controversial passage is the exercise of prophetic gifts in the church. There were women prophets (Acts 2:17; 21:19) but they, apparently, were not to exercise that gift in the context of the church. Adding to the pandemonium at Corinth was women asking questions during church. Paul instructs them to do this at home with their husbands.

Implied here is an order of propriety in the church service. People talking or interacting, or children crying at a level which is so

distracting that it hinders the order of the service, should be avoided. For this reason, churches have implemented extensions of the sanctuary such as cry-rooms or toddler training rooms—we can probably add cell phones, video games and beepers to the list of modern distractions.

So You Think You're Spiritual

Or did the word of God come *originally* from you? Or *was it* you only that it reached? If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord. But if anyone is ignorant, let him be ignorant. Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:36-40).

There is a bit of sarcasm in Paul's tone when he asks if the word of God originated with them; are they supposing that they were the beginning of all truth? Even when prophetic gifts were extant the prophets had to acknowledge that the word of God did not originate in them but was rather a gift given to them.

The apostle Paul, because of the greatness of the revelations given to him, was given a thorn in the flesh that he might not exalt himself. There is a temptation for those who represent God to get too big for their britches. Heaven forbid that men who handle the word of God forget where it ends and they begin!

Paul appeals to his apostolic authority in addressing the order of worship. This is yet another argument for cessation. Paul is not available today to address the specific errors of so-called prophetic utterances. It is supposed that we can distinguish today between true and false prophets by checking them against the Scriptures. But this is a short-sighted remedy. *If it is already in the Scriptures, why do I need the prophet?* And if it is so specific that the Scriptures don't address it, *how can I check it?* If the modern-day prophet says you should quit lying, all he has done is quote the Scriptures. Conversely,

if he says you should move to Orange County, how can you check that against the Scriptures?

If people wished to willfully ignore Paul's writing, so be it— Paul writes, **“Let him be ignorant.”** But that person shouldn't delude himself into thinking he is being spiritual. Certainly Paul allowed prophecy and tongues at the church at Corinth. All must stipulate to this. But, again, that does address the continuation or cessation of those gifts throughout history.

Review

Reviewing some of the main points of 1 Corinthians 12-14, we learned:

1). Christians should avoid using the same methods governing the church that they used to govern their lives as unbelievers (12:1-3).

2). Differential distribution and mutual edification are essential to understand the gifts. The church is a body with multiple gifts (12:4-11).

3). The entire church has been baptized into one “body” even though not all speak in tongues (12:13, 14, 30).

4). There is no biblical reason to think there are multiple types of tongues.

5). Love must be the controlling disposition in the use of gifts (chapter 13).

6). Prophecy is superior to tongues because it can be understood (chapter 14).

7). Interpreted tongues are prophecy (14:5).

8). Language needs to be understood in order to be valuable (14:6-8). Understanding was necessary even in the first century (14:14-16).

9). Tongues were a sign of judgment (14:20-25).

10). A church service should be orderly and well-understood (14:26-40).

It has been the headlong pursuit of the enemies of Christ's church to quell, pervert or eliminate altogether the glorious message that there is a good, holy God who saves sinners by grace through faith. It is the zenith of human endeavors to apprehend the depth of

such glorious news. Let it continually be our pursuit! Herein lies the heart of the Apostle's prayer for us:

...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated *Him* at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come (Ephesians 1:17-21).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why is proper church government important?
2. Discuss some of the shortcomings of the church at Corinth.
3. Of what was tongues a sign?
4. Why is it difficult to use Corinth as a model for the church throughout history?
5. In what respect are the spirits of the prophets subject to the prophets?
6. What is the context of women remaining silent in the church?
7. Discuss propriety in the church service.
8. What is a temptation for people with high profile spiritual gifts?
9. Review chapters 12 through 14.
10. What is the greatest pursuit of man?

Part XXI

A Promise for You

Genesis 12:1-3

September 28, 2003

Preface

This morning I wish to address a monumental subject—God’s *covenant of grace*. It is my opinion that the covenant, or promise, of grace is best appreciated from the perspective of what is called *covenant theology*.⁷⁷ In *covenant theology* we see the proper continuity of God’s unfolding grace throughout time.

The impact a proper understanding of this subject will have in the life of a Christian is inestimable. The confusion and discontinuity many of us experience in our reading of the Scriptures will begin to ebb. The morning fog of understanding the plan of God—both visible and invisible—temporal and eternal—will slowly burn away. God’s provision and man’s proper response to that provision will have added clarity. Our Christian conduct as citizens, family members and church members will be more properly perceived. And much, much more.

What is God’s *covenant of grace*? Why is it glorious to God and profitable for man? How is it administrated (or worked out in a practical way) and what kind of effects should we expect it to have? These are some of the questions we will seek to answer in this series. This morning we will merely put our toe in the water, but in time we will see ripples extend across the entire lake.

It is my prayer that an examination of the broad footings of God’s covenant will yield in us greater sagacity (quickness of thought, shrewdness, discernment) in the specifics of our relationship with Him. Church, evangelism, pietism, marriage, parenting, politics, etc. are all brought to greater light via a proper understanding of God’s covenant.

⁷⁷ Covenant theology over and against the paradigm of dispensationalism.

Introduction

Time began and will end with paradise. In the beginning a good God formed a good creation from the breath of His mouth (Genesis 1, 2); and a good God will be the glorious and eternal light of heaven for His servants when time comes to a close (Revelation 22). In between the first and second paradise we have the pomp, panoply and treachery of human history.

This history chronicles the love, hate, good and evil of men; his successes and failures; his noble efforts and his shameful passivity. But more than this, history reveals man's never-ending yet fruitless quest for autonomous significance and self-actualization. It is this quest for human sovereignty that our Creator responds to in Psalm 2 when, in His fury, He declares:

**Why do the nations rage,
And the people plot a vain thing?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
And the rulers take counsel together,
Against the Lord and against His Anointed, *saying*,
“Let us break their bonds in pieces
And cast away their cords from us.”
He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;
The Lord shall hold them in derision.
Then He shall speak to them in His wrath,
And distress them in His deep displeasure (Psalm
2:1-5).**

We are loathe to find a viable political candidate to whom these words do not apply.

Be that as it may, between the two paradises we also have the Creator's intervention in the very history He produced. It has been the uniform testimony of Bible scholars that God's purpose in history, contrary to man's purpose, is to bring glory to that which is the only reasonable object of glory: *Himself*—“**Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God**” (1 Cor. 10:31).

History, therefore, from the Christian perspective is designed for the glory of God and everything works toward that end—even things we might not suspect.

**The Lord has made all for Himself,
Yes, even the wicked for the day of doom (Proverbs
16:4).**

So, the events and passions of history, both good and evil, will bring glory to God. We must therefore understand that even the fall of man, for which Adam and his descendents are fully culpable, was designed for the rich glory of God.

When we know fully, as we are fully known (1 Cor.13:12), it will become apparent that the corruption, bloodshed, oppression and heartbreak inflicted on humanity by humanity had a just and holy end—*the glory of God*. And the knowledge of this will yield, in the glorified sons of God, an unfeigned and eternal amen—“**Surely the wrath of man shall praise You**” (Psalm 76:10).

And there can be no doubt that the brightest shining ornament of God’s magnanimity (noble generosity) is the deliverance of His only begotten Son into the hands of sinful men (John 3:16). It is to the sacrificial Lamb of God that the heavenly host sings the new song:

**You are worthy to take the scroll,
And to open its seals;
For You were slain,
And have redeemed us to God by Your blood
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and
nation (Revelation 5:9).**

How does the *covenant of grace* (understood in the context of *covenant theology*) fit into this equation? It is between the two paradises that God presents man’s only hope. The foundation of this hope is God’s promise—His covenant—His contract with man.

Two Other Covenants

Parenthetically, I would like to briefly address the two other principle covenants we see in Scripture: Before history the Father

covenanted with the Son to give Him a people—a bride (John 17; Galatians 3:16). This is sometimes called the *covenant of redemption*.⁷⁸ At the beginning of history God made a covenant with Adam which was dependent upon his perfect and perpetual obedience. This is sometimes called a *covenant of works* (Genesis 2:17).

These two covenants relate to the *covenant of grace* in that the *covenant of redemption* (a bride for Christ) necessitated the deliverance of the bride by Christ. The *covenant of works* (since its foundation is God’s holiness and justice) was not swept away or ignored but fulfilled by the second Adam, who is Christ (1 Cor. 15:45). In short, the *covenant of redemption* and the *covenant of works* necessitated the *covenant of grace*.

Announcing the Covenant of Grace

The covenant of grace enters immediately after the loss of paradise. No sooner did the serpent exercise his crafty and successful deception, resulting in the fall of man, than God announces His plan to redeem what Adam lost. With open force God avows His intentions. How these words of God must have pounded in the ears of the serpent!

**“And I will put enmity
Between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her Seed;
He shall bruise your head,
And you shall bruise His heel” (Genesis 3:15).**

Little wonder that two of the four gospels begin by tracing that promised seed to Jesus (Matthew 1:1-18; Luke 3:23-38). So prominent was God’s covenant that Peter at the dawning of the New Covenant Church preaches God’s promise with little explanation, no doubt assuming a prior knowledge of this glorious message in the minds of his audience.

⁷⁸ This is called *redemption* because it was made with a full knowledge of the fall and need for the bride to be redeemed (or, bought back).

For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call (Acts 2:39).

God's administration of this covenant of grace begins immediately by His clothing of Adam and Eve with animal skins (which required the shed blood of animals—Genesis 3:21). This displaced their futile effort (fig leaves—Genesis 3:7) of covering their own shame. The administration of this covenant of grace is further seen when Cain and Abel offer sacrifices (Genesis 4:3-5), indicating some knowledge of the necessity of shed blood for the redemption of sin.⁷⁹ In Abel, these sacrifices were accompanied by a genuine faith in Christ (Hebrews 11:4).

The Abrahamic Covenant

God will restate His covenant of grace many times throughout Scripture. We see this with Noah (Genesis 6, 9), but then in a much more detailed manner with Abraham (Genesis 12-17). The root of God's covenant (a root which will eventually explode into a great tree covering all the earth in the New Covenant) is found in Genesis 12:1-3.

**Now the Lord had said to Abram:
“Get out of your country,
From your family
And from your father's house,
To a land that I will show you.
I will make you a great nation;
I will bless you
And make your name great;
And you shall be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
And I will curse him who curses you;**

⁷⁹ This is opposed to Dispensationalism which, though it asserts salvation by grace through faith for old covenant saints, does not recognize that the saints in that dispensation (of conscience) had any conscious notion of a suffering Christ—see *The New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Dr. Robert L. Reymond, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998, p. 508).

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).

The one promise (the seed crushing the head of the serpent—Genesis 3:15) now unfolds into three promises—1). The establishment of a great nation; 2). blessings for those who bless that nation and curses for those who curse that nation; and 3). a promise of universal blessings to Abraham’s seed. Now, how are Christians to understand these promises?

A Great Nation

What is this great nation which is such an integral aspect of God’s covenant of grace? Disclosure of this nation is found in one of our favorite Christmas passages.

**For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of *His* government and peace
There will be no end,
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
To order it and establish it with judgment and
justice
From that time forward, even forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this
(Isaiah 9:6, 7).**

So the nation is a nation firmly planted on the shoulders of Christ. In other words, its very existence is dependent upon the zeal of its King. And since its King is God Almighty, it is a nation that shall continually increase (more on this momentarily). *But who makes up this kingdom? Who are the covenant people—its citizens?*

The New Testament becomes our commentary to understand the Old Testament. Peter, writing to Christians (the churches), explains,

But you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a *holy nation*, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9, emphasis mine).

Epiphany number one in our understanding of the covenant of grace (as it was given to Abraham) is that the nation (which in seed form was the nation of Israel) is to be understood by Christians as the church. Peter's letter is to us—those who gather as a community to hear and acknowledge the word of God.

Bless and Curse

This second aspect of the covenant of grace (as it was given to Abraham) involves blessings and curses—**“I will bless those who bless you and I will curse him who curses you.”** Who, then, are the objects of this protection and what are the mechanisms by which they are protected?

If we follow the flow of the text we recognize that the object(s) of this protection is the aforementioned nation (the church). This is consistent with the passage in Isaiah which promises continual increase (Isaiah 9:7; 26:15); the interpretation of the image in Daniel where the stone crushes the image, becomes a mountain covering the earth (Daniel 2:35); the river flowing from the temple which starts shallow then becomes a impassable deluge (Ezekiel 47); and the kingdom parables teaching God's kingdom starting small and growing large like a mustard seed or leaven (Matthew 13).

Numerous are the passages which speak of the un-halting advancement of God's kingdom.

They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9).

None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them (Hebrews 8:11).

And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

There is little doubt that this aspect of God's covenant was behind the comforting words of John to the seven churches in Revelation who by short-sighted and temporal observations were dwarfed by the power of Rome. What glorious comfort for them (and for us) to realize that it is the church's King who is **"the ruler over the kings of the earth"** (Revelation 1:5).

The second aspect of this gracious Abrahamic Covenant is powerfully presented, once again, in Psalm 2 where we read of the consequences of falling into the derision (a position of scorn or contempt) of God:

**Now therefore, be wise, O kings;
Be instructed, you judges of the earth.
Serve the Lord with fear,
And rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest He be angry,
And you perish *in* the way,
When His wrath is kindled but a little.
Blessed *are* all those who put their trust in Him
(Psalm 2:10-12).**

In short, the second aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant is that the church, as a world sanctifying entity, will be overwhelmingly victorious over all assaults and ungodliness.

All the Families

Thus far we have learned that God has covenanted/promised that He would extend His grace to form a nation/church that has His promise of protection and victory. Finally He declares the final aspect of His promise to Abraham that **"in (him) you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"** (parenthesis mine).

This third facet of the covenant assures the recipients of God's grace that 1) His grace will be widespread—all the families (tribes, clans, ethnic groups, etc); and 2) they will be reached by His blessing.

We will finish this study by allowing the Apostle Paul to elucidate as to nature of this blessing.

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham (Galatians 3:8, 9).

This passage informs us that this protected nation/church is comprised of people whom God has justified. The means by which God has justified these people is by granting them faith (Philippians 1:29). So the true and protected citizens of this holy nation are those who, like Abraham, have faith in the seed who is Christ.

Justification (right standing and acquittal before God) by faith (trusting not in self but in Christ alone) is, no doubt, the richest aspect of the covenant. The genuine nature and viability of this protected nation/church is faith in Christ. The church lives or dies by virtue of the continuation of faith.

The nation of Israel (which was the old covenant church/nation) exhibited an ebb and flow of faithfulness. Eventually the nation (in terms of its role as Christ’s church) descended to such utter faithlessness that it was divorced by God (Jeremiah 3:8) and given to a “**nation bringing forth the fruits thereof**” (Matthew 21:43).

And though, as we have established, the church will be sure in her success, the warning for individual churches and individual Christians is to persevere in that faith lest Christ remove their lampstands from their place (Revelation 2:5).

Our next question, now that we see our citizenship in this greater light, is: *what is God’s provision for the maintenance, viability and flourishing of His nation?* What is the means by which that faith is fanned, kept alive and made airborne for the deliverance of the nations? This we shall pursue when next we gather.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How did history begin? How will it end?
2. How does God respond to man's quest for autonomy?
3. What is God's purpose in history?
4. What are things that work toward God's purpose in history?
5. What is the greatest contributor to God's purpose in history?
6. Name the three principle covenants in Scripture.
7. Where, or when, is the covenant of grace first announced?
8. What are the three aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant?
9. What is the nation of which God speaks in Genesis 12:2?
10. Discuss whom God will bless or curse in relation to His covenant.
11. What is the nature of all the families of the earth being blessed in Abraham?

Part XXII

Christ, the Mediator

October 5, 2003

Thus far in this series, we have established that:

- 1). History is designed for the glory of God.
- 2). The brightest shining ornament of that glory is the cross of Christ.
- 3). God has covenanted (promised) to extend His grace to humanity by establishing a church which would have his protection comprised of people throughout the entire earth who have been granted justifying (saving) faith in Christ (Genesis 12:1-3).

Here we have the Christian world view in its most fundamental sense—God glorifying Himself by redeeming the world by the cross of Christ. It is a simple, tightly weaved pattern which properly and cohesively explains all we know and see. Yet since it is the nature of man to do what he prefers rather than what he ought, it requires the overwhelming power of a God-given faith to bring man to his senses that he might embrace that which he has hitherto purposefully suppressed (Romans 1:18).

What's a Pastor to Say?

This morning we will further examine this glorious covenant of grace by endeavoring to better acquaint ourselves with the Mediator of it. But before we seek to enhance our perceptions of Christ the mediator, let us address those glittering deterrents and roadblocks in the church which tend to hinder this type of pursuit. In the same way a boyfriend can inflict guilt upon his girlfriend for her desire to remain chaste, pastors can feel guilty emphasizing such theological quests and ignoring, as it were, the felt needs of the congregation.

So what is a pastor to say or do in his forty-ish minutes per week of sermonizing? I find myself tempted at times to launch into

some Christian version of *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*. Or maybe I should speak of politics or parenting or ways to be successful or positive or have a proper attitude in business. Certainly these are all important issues in the lives of Christians.

Perhaps the pastor should preach on the disciplines—such as prayer, fasting, solitude or Bible reading. Are these not biblical mandates which bring forth fruit? Or evangelism—is not the reformed church plagued with an evangelistic paralysis? Have you gone weeks and months without inviting your neighbor to church?! Are you a good neighbor?

These, and other similar duties, are assuredly Christian and should be an integral part of a Christian's life. And if you are not, at some level, performing these duties, consider yourself duly chastised. Yet at the same time one is hard-pressed to find the aforementioned subjects appearing as accentuated features in any creed, confession or systematic theology. I would argue that there are two reasons for this.

First, *there is nothing difficult or controversial about these subjects*. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Jews and Protestants would find little disagreement regarding the outward practice of such things. Second, *we do not find the Scriptures, though they address these issues, placing heavy emphasis on them*. The Apostle Paul didn't write a book on disciplines or a book on marriage. The disciplines were often an assumed addendum to his books, and things like marriage were often brought up to illustrate a greater issue.

Producing Godliness

What should alarm us is that even though these subjects were not the featured articles of creeds and confessions, those who wrote creeds and confessions excelled as husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, business-men, politicians and so on. Their lives were also marked by great and prolonged ventures in prayer, good deeds, evangelism and often martyrdom.

So what produces genuine godliness in Christians? I will argue that the catalyst for the genuine production of godly attributes is a lifelong pursuit of meditation and apprehension of the deeper things of God. This is the Apostle Paul's repetitive theme.

...that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and *attaining* to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words (Colossians 2:2-4).

...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what *is* the width and length and depth and height— to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:17-19).

Books on being a godly wife are well and good, but they will never yield that depth of godly wife-ness bred in her by an accurate knowledge of the sacrificial and selfless nature of her true Husband (Christ). All the aforementioned duties and disciplines may be good and profitable. But efforts at duty and discipline become cold and laborious when extracted from the vitality of knowing and enjoying the rich grace of God. Wives, would you rather have a husband go to a seminar on being a loving spouse or a husband who has entered into the holy of holies and witnessed the shed blood of Christ poured upon the mercy seat of God?

There is, therefore, no greater subject for the pastor, if he truly desires to yield bona fide godliness in his church, than presenting the true and deep nature of God's sacrificial covenant of grace—a subject to which we will turn presently.

Relevant Religion

God made a covenant to redeem the world and rescue men from the consequences of their own behavior. This covenant, which is akin to a contract, required a mediator—that mediator (the promised seed—as we learned previously) was Jesus. One might be tempted to view the study of the covenant as religious mumbo jumbo. But what is more universal to the human race than the awareness of

our own sin followed by an awareness of our own mortality? Therefore, what could possibly be more relevant than addressing the means by which these foes are overcome?

For the remainder of our time we will seek to answer two questions: 1). What is a mediator? And 2). What kind of mediator does the covenant of grace and deliverance require in terms of His nature? In other words, could any prophet or holy man have done what Jesus did?

A Mediator

For *there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time, for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (1 Timothy 2:5-7).*

Here we read of Paul being directly commanded to preach on Christ the mediator. So, what is a mediator? This isn't too difficult a question. A mediator is a go-between; someone who intervenes between parties. Sometimes we call them arbiters, representatives, liaisons or negotiators. A mediator might merely be used for communication as when Moses spoke to the people on behalf of God (Deuteronomy 5:5).

Mediators are often used because they are a bit better at negotiating the deal. People use brokers and realtors to buy and sell houses, cars, loans, insurance, etc. trusting that their expertise will save them from spending too much or buying damaged or unnecessary goods.

Sometimes the mediators are given power of attorney so they can close deals based for the party they represent. Generally, before a mediator is given this type of authority they must be very proven and trusted.

In times of conflict mediators come together for the purpose of reconciliation. Nations will send these mediators to negotiate peace. But it is never a peace at all costs. The terms of the peace must be agreed upon by both sides—often with compromises of land or finance.

The Ultimate Conflict

Anyone who understands anything about the nature of God and the nature of man will perceive what appears to be an insurmountable conflict. God is good and holy (Matthew 19:17) and is the author and owner of all creation (Genesis 1; Psalm 50:10). Man is sinful, unholy and a usurper of those things, material and immaterial, which rightly belong to God (Romans 3:10-18).

The depth of man's violation is inestimable. The very lips and mind he uses to curse God belong to God Himself. It is as if an enemy had moved into your house and in the grossest act of arrogance claimed all of your possessions as his own. And when you send your prophets to reveal to him his trespass he questions your very existence and kills your prophets (Matthew 21:33-41). The squatter has given himself legal title to that which belongs to another.

Who could possibly mediate reconciliation between a party who is infinitely good, holy and just with a party who is wicked, vile and damnable? What could the mediator possibly have to offer the offending party save a death sentence?!

Christ the Mediator

Perhaps now we are skimming the surface of the mediatorial office of Christ. A. A. Hodge taught:

The Scriptures apply the term (mediator), in a higher sense than any of these (the aforementioned types of mediators), to Christ. They teach that he intervenes between God and man, not merely to sue for peace and to persuade to it, but, armed with plenipotentiary (full authority to act) power, efficiently to make peace and to do all that is necessary to that end.⁸⁰

In other words, when Christ as mediator enters into negotiations for peace it is not as if He will walk away from the

⁸⁰Hodge, A. 1996. *The confession of faith : With questions for theological students and Bible classes*. With an appendix on Presbyterianism by Charles Hodge. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed. based on the 1992 Banner of Truth reprint.). Christian Classics Foundation: Simpsonville SC. **Parentheses mine.**

negotiating table stifled. Both parties that He represents will be fully satisfied and reconciliation will be had. The apostle Paul explains,

For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous (Romans 5:19).

In other words, the curse that fell upon the human race by Adam's violation of the covenant of works will be remedied by the successful mediation of Christ. So what kind of person must this mediator be? In whom will you put your trust to negotiate peace between you and your Creator?

The Nature of Christ the Mediator

The Larger Westminster Catechism teaches,

The only Mediator of the covenant of grace is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, of one substance and equal with the Father, in the fullness of time became man, and so was and continues to be God and man, in two entire distinct natures, and one person, for ever.⁸¹

It is not my purpose here to launch into the numerous proof texts undeniably proclaiming both the deity (God-hood) and humanity of Christ. It is my purpose to show that both natures are required for true and successful mediation and reconciliation between man and God to take place.

The Humanity of Christ

You will generally find little dispute regarding the humanity of Christ. Almost all will agree that there was a man named Jesus. But why would the mediator of the covenant of grace have to be a human? Again, the catechism teaches,

⁸¹Smith, M. H. 1990; Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. *Larger catechism of the Westminster Confession Standards*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.). Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press: Greenville SC.

It was requisite that the Mediator should be man, that he might advance our nature, perform obedience to the law, suffer and make intercession for us in our nature, have a fellow feeling of our infirmities; that we might receive the adoption of sons, and have comfort and access with boldness unto the throne of grace.⁸² (Heb. 2:16. Gal. 4:4. Heb. 2:14; 7:24–25. Heb. 4:15. Gal. 4:5. Heb. 4:16)

In short, we (humanity) needed a human to represent us at the table of negotiations. We are the ones in trouble. We need representation. But unfortunately, as has been established earlier, we have nothing to offer but guilt. We need a champion. Like David slaying the Philistine, thus granting victory to the armies of Israel, we stand in need of a conqueror.

When Jesus intercedes or pleads the case on behalf of humanity, He doesn't argue our innocence or any mitigating circumstances of our guilt. His argument is His own obedience.

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself (Christ) likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham (Hebrews 2:14-16—parenthesis mine).

Jesus did not die for angels. The offending party was mankind and it would be a Man who would pay the price. Hence Paul's words to the churches at Galatia:

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under

⁸²Smith, M. H. 1990; Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. *Larger catechism of the Westminster Confession Standards*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.). Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press: Greenville SC.

**the law, to redeem those who were under the law,
that we might receive the adoption as sons
(Galatians 4:4, 5).**

The Deity of Christ

Again, it is not my purpose to bring in the tome of biblical passages which has produced the uniform testimony of the orthodox church throughout history that Jesus is God. I merely wish to demonstrate the necessity of the case. Again the catechism teaches,

It was requisite that the Mediator should be God, that he might sustain and keep the human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God, and the power of death; give worth and efficacy to his sufferings, obedience, and intercession; and to satisfy God's justice, procure his favor, purchase a peculiar people, give his Spirit to them, conquer all their enemies, and bring them to everlasting salvation.⁸³ (Acts 2:24–25; Rom. 1:4; 4:25; 9:14. Acts 20:28; Heb. 9:14; 7:25–28. Rom 3:24–26. Eph. 1:6; Matt. 3:17. Tit. 2:13–14. Gal. 4:6. Luke 1:68–69, 71, 74. Heb. 5:8–9; 9:11–15)

Who will sit at the negotiating table with God Almighty on your behalf and what will he plead? Will you take rank with the deplorably insane masses whose colossal egos have deluded them into thinking they can mount their own case? Will you trust in a guru or a prophet who himself will be consumed by the fire at the very doorstep of eternity? Or is your mediator one who as a man lived in perfect obedience always pleasing the Father (Matthew 3:17) yet as God would not sink under His infinite wrath. Peter preached of Him,

...whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it. For David says concerning Him: 'I foresaw the Lord always before my face, *For He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken,*

⁸³Ibid.

Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope (Acts 2:24-26).

As the human mediator of the covenant of grace, Jesus sympathizes with our weakness (Hebrews 4:15) and justly represents His brethren (Hebrews 2:11). As the divine mediator of the covenant of grace Jesus has the infinite power to bear what no man could bear—the infinite wrath of God—and grant what no man could grant—a sure victory and everlasting salvation.

The mediator of the covenant of grace has the power over death.

Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father (John 10:17, 18).

The mediator of the covenant of grace mediates by virtue of His own sacrifice.

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone (Hebrews 2:9, 10).

Notice in the passage below what Jesus brings into the perfect heavenly tabernacle as he mediates as our High Priest.

But Christ came *as* High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the

blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance (Hebrews 9:11-16).

It is this conscience-cleansing blood that Christ beckons us to remember in our regular participation at the Lord's Table. It is because of His mediation, by the merit of His own death, that we receive the promise of redemption first made in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:15), when was then elaborated upon to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), and then unfolded throughout all of Scripture—the promise of the eternal inheritance.

If I may expound upon this covenant by unpacking perhaps the most commonly quoted passage in the Bible:

For God so loved the world that He covenanted to save the world by sending His own Son to fulfill the righteous demands of His covenant.

In doing so God has maintained His own just character while extending His infinite mercy. We call this good news the gospel.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Explain the design of history and Christianity in its most fundamental sense.
2. What do you suppose a pastor should preach?
3. What produces true godliness?
4. Why is a discussion on God's covenant relevant?
5. What is a mediator?
6. What is the nature of the conflict between man and God?
7. What kind of mediator is necessary to resolve this conflict?
8. Why was it necessary that Christ be a man?
9. Why was it necessary that Christ be God?
10. How is it we can be confident of Christ's successful mediation?

Questions for the Kids

Why did God create everything?

God created all things, including people, so we could all see what a glorious God He is.

What is the most important thing we can know?

Nothing is better or more important than that—especially when we talk about Jesus and the cross.

What should pastors preach about?

There is nothing more important for pastors to talk about than Jesus and all He did for us.

What will happen when we learn about Jesus?

It is knowing and believing these things that saves us and helps us to be the kind of people God wants us to be.

Knowing all the things that God has promised helps us love Him and others the way they should be loved.

How do we know that we will go to heaven?

It is Jesus who makes sure we have a good and peaceful relationship with God, the Father.

He has to do this because God is good and men are sinful.

Is Jesus a man or God? Why is this important?

Did you know that Jesus was both man and God? This had to be because men needed someone to save them from their sins and it would take someone as powerful as God to do it.

What happens if we trust in Jesus?

Since this is true, we know that if we trust in Jesus we will go to heaven forever.

Part XXIII

Prophet, Priest and King

October 19, 2003

Christ the Mediator

We previously spoke of Christ the Mediator. Nothing could be more sensible in terms of a remedy for man's dilemma (inevitable death and darkness) than to have a man, with the power of God, reconcile man's relationship with God.

Human ingenuity and innovation have proven to be consistent failures in this endeavor (reconciliation with our Creator). In the Bible, six is the number of a man (Revelation 13:18), and no matter how many sixes you add it will never be seven (the number of completion or perfection).

Our Mediator, our Savior, though a man is also God and thus infinitely perfect (complete) in all His ways. His nature, as we learned last time, is both humanity and deity—man and God. He is therefore not only the appropriate representative of the human race; He is also an insurmountable force in His battle over the wickedness of iniquity. As the catechism puts it, He will not sink “under the infinite wrath of God.”

This God, who all men know exists, graciously sent His Son to negotiate peace. He is our only hope.

For *there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time (1 Timothy 2:5, 6).*

The Offices of Christ

Having spoken of the nature of our Mediator, we will now speak of what has come to be known as the offices of our Mediator—that Jesus is Prophet, Priest and King.

Perhaps some will resist these categories. Lists can often be contrived and there is no single verse in the Bible that explicitly

assigns these offices to Jesus. However, it has been the uniform testimony of orthodox Christianity (at least since the Reformation) that these are the offices of Christ and there is, as I hope to show, good reason for it.

Let us not ignore the nature of our Mediator as we discuss these offices. In the fulfilling of these offices Christ is endowed with the full sympathies of His humanity and the full force of His deity. That is to say that as a man there was never a more impassioned prophet, sympathetic priest or empathetic king. Yet as deity He is the quintessential mouthpiece of God (prophet), the immeasurably capable Priest and the overpowering potentate of a King.

Prophet

History has distilled the discipline of philosophy down to three categories—metaphysics (what is real), ethics (what is right) and epistemology (how do we know it?). In His prophetic office Christ brings to the human race something they could never acquire on their own—true knowledge. Jesus is the light of the world (John 1:4, 5). He is the great prophet spoken of by Moses.

I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him (Deuteronomy 18:18).

By the words of Peter we know this is a reference to Jesus:

For Moses truly said to the fathers, ‘*The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you. And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people*’ (Acts 3:22, 23).

Half-Hearted Interest in Truth

Though it may be accurate to say that men are interested in true things (for example, everyone wants to know who truly shot

Kennedy) in the final analysis men are not genuinely interested in truth (John 4:11). At least this was the opinion of Jesus.

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil (John 3:19).

Truth is attractive to people only to a point—usually until the microscope of truth is aimed in our direction. You see Jesus, as prophet, did not come to reveal who shot Kennedy or if there is life on Mars; it is much more personal than that. Speaking to us in His Son (Hebrews 1:2), God’s word is...

...living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things *are* naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give* account (Hebrews 4:12, 13).

Prophets tend to make things very uncomfortable. Elementary Christianity teaches us that when confronted with Truth in the person of Christ, men nailed Him to a cross. Man’s natural disdain for truth is a result of the fall. Even when the truth of Christ’s prophetic utterances revealed the hope of salvation, men scoffed.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Corinthians 1:18).

By His word and Spirit, Christ continues His office of prophet to this day. But today, as then, the cross is foolishness to those who trust in their own sophistry and a stumbling block to those who trust in the weak and shifting sands of their own righteous deeds (1 Corinthians 1:23). So we must conclude that even though the message of Christ—the gospel—is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16), the mere message, in a certain sense, is insufficient to save; hence the need for the second office—Priest.

Priest

One needn't look too far to find the office of priest in the Old Testament (2 Chronicles 31:4; Hebrews 7:5). Prophets came to the people on behalf of God; priests came to God on behalf of the people.

For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things *pertaining* to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins (Hebrews 5:1).

In the old covenant the priest would bring the blood of the sacrifice into the holy of holies and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat (the ark) to make atonement, or satisfaction for sin (Leviticus 16:13-16). Of course this was only valuable in that it pointed to the atoning work of Christ (Hebrews 11). The priesthood of Christ brings to a close any functional use of a priesthood among men. Christ is our High Priest (Hebrews 5:10). And His priesthood is a superior priesthood.

A Superior Priest

Human priests had to make sacrifice for their own sins (Hebrews 5:3). Human priests have great limitations in their own sympathies (Hebrews 4:15). Human priests are limited by their own mortality. Our High Priest knows not these limits.

Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:23-25).

But more than all of this, human priests are limited by the very nature of the sacrifices they offer. It was not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins (Hebrews 10:4).

Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: “Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, But a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come— In the volume of the book it is written of Me— To do Your will, O God’ (Hebrews 10:5-7).

A body was prepared for Christ that He might offer it up to God, thus fully satisfying His divine justice. This was not done in a man-made temple but in the true holy of holies, heaven itself (Hebrews 9:23-28). It is this great sacrifice that pacifies God toward us.

Intercession

And although Christ’s priestly sacrifice was once for all (Hebrews 10:10) His priestly intercession continues (John 17; Romans 8:34). In the same way Jesus prayed that Peter’s faith not fail (Luke 22:32), so He prays for us that our faith may not fail (John 17:20).

The Father receives as acceptable the sacrifice of the Son and the Father hears the prayers of the Son. He is the Priest in whom we must trust. Christ’s prophetic office assures the veracity of the true message and His priestly office assures the satisfaction of the Father’s divine justice, yet there is another office—that of conquering king.

King

The negotiations have been made and both parties are satisfied. God the Father has received the payment, and Christ...

...who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2, 3).

With an eye toward the joy, Christ endured the cross and is now seated at the right hand of the Father. But Christ does not sit in repose (merely resting). Due to the onslaught of dispensational error,⁸⁴ we often fail to appreciate the office of Christ the king. In Daniel we read of what occurs on the other side of Christ's ascension when He was received into a cloud (Acts 1:9).

I was watching in the night visions, and behold, *One* like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion *is* an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom *the one* which shall not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13, 14).

Dispensationalists often interpret this passage as being concurrent with the beginning of Christ's future millennial reign. They believe it "will be fulfilled at Christ's Second Advent."⁸⁵ But the Son of Man is not coming to earth in this passage. He is coming on the clouds to the ancient of days (God) and given a kingdom.

The Old Testament foreshadow of this kingdom was the kingdom under David. We read of this in Acts.

Men *and* brethren, let *me* speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ (Acts 2:29-31).

⁸⁴ Dispensationalism asserts that the kingdom will not begin until the Second Coming. Some modern forms of dispensationalism grant varying aspects of the present kingship of Christ but the full force of this office is never granted.

⁸⁵ Walvord and Zuck, (Bible Knowledge Commentary), p. 1351.

When would Christ assume this office of King? *At His resurrection!* Contrary to popular belief, even though Satan is in some sense the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:3—that is, many people are governed by him), *he is not God and he is not king*. Christ is the King of kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16). Christ is the ruler of the kings of the earth (Revelation 1:5). It cannot be more forcefully stated than in the first chapter of Ephesians:

He raised Him from the dead and seated *Him* at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:20-23).

Christ's Activities as King

Numerous are Christ's activities as King: As King, He makes and enforces laws (James 4:12); He ordains authority (Ephesians 4:11; Romans 13); He rewards (Revelation 2:10); He corrects (Revelation 3:19) and orders all things to His own glory (Romans 14:10, 11); and more.

But there are two things He does as King that I would like to emphasize as we finish our lesson:

First, He builds His kingdom by subduing the hearts of those whom He has ransomed.

After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up (Acts 15:16).

He created us, yet we were lost in rebellion. He then purchased us with His own blood. He is our Maker and Redeemer. He is the King of the hearts of men and by virtue of that authority exercises proper dominion.

The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will (Proverbs 21:1).

The means by which this grace comes to men is word and sacrament. One might argue that the sword of Christ's mouth (Revelation 19), in one sense, is the power of His word to draw the hearts of men unto Himself.

But there is another facet of Christ's kingship which must not be ignored. The catechism teaches that as King He takes "vengeance on the rest, who know not God, and obey not the gospel."⁸⁶ So in another (and probably more exegetically accurate) sense we are informed:

And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God (Revelation 19:15).

Christ is a loving and benevolent King. But one must understand that rebellion against Him is not like rebellion against any human potentate (king). Rebellion against the regal office of Christ is rebellion against the very essence of what is good, true and right. And goodness, truth and righteousness will have its way in quashing evil and infidelity—both in history and finally in eternity. Let us be reminded of the most quoted Old Testament text we find in the New Testament:

For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy *that* will be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:25).

Praise be to Christ who as Prophet brings God's word to men, as Priest satisfied the divine justice of the Father, and as King lovingly and irresistibly rescues us from our own rebellion.

⁸⁶Smith, M. H. 1996, c1990. *Larger catechism of the Westminster Confession Standards*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.) (Page 2). Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press: Greenville.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why does man need a mediator between himself and God?
2. Why is it necessary for that mediator to be both fully man and fully God?
3. What are the three offices of Christ?
4. As prophet, what does Christ bring to the human race?
5. Why do men reject the message of Christ?
6. What is the role of a priest versus the role of a prophet?
7. In what respects is Christ a superior priest?
8. Discuss the intercession of Christ.
9. When did Christ take His throne as King?
10. What does Christ do as King?

Part XXIV

The Humiliation of Christ

October 26, 2003

Review

We spoke of God's covenant with man—His promise of redemption where He would extend His grace to fallen humanity. We spoke of the Mediator of this covenant—that He (Christ) must be both man and God in order that He might properly represent men and at the same time (being God) not sink under the infinite wrath of God. We spoke of the offices of this Mediator—Prophet (the mouthpiece of God), Priest (the sacrifice and intercessor for men) and King (the potentate who would bring forth the victory of His kingdom over darkness). Now we will discuss the actual journey of the Mediator.

Humiliation

To humiliate means to “injure the dignity of.” Although we may view humility as a virtue, to humiliate someone would generally be considered inappropriate. This morning we will examine what has come to be known as the humiliation of Christ. What makes the humiliation of Christ appropriate is that it was something He inflicted upon Himself for the good of humanity and the glory of the Father.

Truly I embark upon a daunting task when I endeavor to unveil the nature and passions of Christ's humiliation. By His humiliation I mean His birth, His life and His death. The quick student might readily observe that the resurrection, no small subject for Christianity, is not included in His humiliation. His resurrection (along with His ascension, reign as King and return) belongs to the His exaltation—a subject we will pursue another time.

The quick student might also observe that birth, life and death are common to humanity. What's so humiliating about that? Let us recognize that the incarnation (God the Son becoming flesh—John 1:14) is often referred to as the magnificent condescension (to descend below your rank). For Christ merely to become man would be notably humiliating. But in His humanity Christ would not merely

descend to humanity...He would descend to the lowest level of humanity.

How does this fall under the category of Remedial Christianity? Every child knows of the birth, life and death of Jesus. So for some this may merely be elementary Christianity. But it has been my observation that the presentations of the birth, life and death of Jesus have been reduced to a sentimental nativity scene; the vapid recitations of a *What Would Jesus Do?* Christendom which has become a catalyst for pacifism, liberalism and anti-nomianism (anti-law); and numerous lengthy dramatizations of how much the nails in the cross must have hurt when all four gospels dedicate a solitary verse to event.

This is not to belittle the cross and its horror. But many were crucified on a cross. So to allow our understanding of the cross to be restricted to the nails, the thorny crown and the piercing of His side is to stop considerably short of the full humiliation of Christ's death.

Three Goals

My goal this morning is three-fold:

- 1). To scratch the surface of Christ's humiliation in His birth, life and death. There is no biography more worthy of our meditation.
- 2). To understand what lessons we are to learn from His humiliations.
- 3). To understand what assurance belongs to us as a result of His humiliations. How does His active obedience (His obedience to the law) and His passive obedience (His suffering) bring blessings to His bride.

Much of my material comes from Thomas Vincent's Family Instructional Guide which was first published in 1674 to help parents teach their children the Westminster Catechism.

In order to appreciate the humiliation of Christ, we must grasp His glory prior to becoming a man. In His High Priestly prayer Jesus reveals something.

And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was (John 17:5).

Many people would consider it devastating to be forced to move into certain neighborhoods. People generally desire upward mobility. Jesus, conversely, moved in the opposite direction.

Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of death*, even the death of the cross (Philippians 2:5-8).

Birth

In a Stable

Let us first speak of His birth. Christ's condescension was immeasurable. This self-inflicted humiliation began in what would be considered the lowest possible environment. He was born of humble woman whose very reputation, arguably, would be at stake. His mother Mary sang,

For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant (Luke 1:48).

You could argue that His discomfort began while still in the womb during the journey from Galilee to Nazareth. In the children's movie, the *Lion King*, we see the birth of the king accompanied by his being lifted up and honored by all creatures. The birth of Christ was quite the opposite. Even though He was heralded by angels (Luke 2:14), Jesus was born in a manger (basically, a type of food trough for animals).

As God's providence would have it, there was no room for Him to be born among even the most rustic setting of humans—no

room in the inn (Luke 2:7). Christ's humiliation would see Him born in obscurity and insignificance.

Life

Law

In His life Christ humbled Himself in many ways. First, he humbled Himself by subjecting Himself to His own law. Paul writes,

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law (Galatians 4:4).

At first glance this might not seem significant. After all God's law is an extension of His own character; why would it be humiliating for Christ to obey His own law? Because He is now obeying it from the perspective of a man! It would be impossible, for example, for God to steal because He owns everything. It would be impossible for God to murder because everyone deserves His wrath. But Jesus would relinquish these privileges.

And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air *have* nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay *His* head" (Matthew 8:20).

Parents have rules for their children. They disallow their going into the street. They must all enter the car from the sidewalk. The fact that the parent is a grown-up who can see cars coming and who can be seen by cars extinguishes this rule for them due to their nature as grown-ups. It is not necessary for the dad to impose his own rule upon himself and crawl over mom to get to the driver's seat. The humiliation of Christ involves Jesus entering into humanity and subjecting Himself to all of God's ordinances.

Miseries of Life

Christ's humiliation also involves His undergoing the miseries of this life. These miseries did not merely include things like hunger (Matthew 4:2) and fatigue (John 4:6). His anguish was much deeper.

For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls (Hebrews 12:3).

He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3).

It wasn't as if Jesus were born in Malibu in 2003 enjoying all the privileges and freedoms of America. He was born under the oppressive Empire of Rome at a time when God's own people were living in evil and bitter rebellion (Matthew 11:22-24). He only lovingly spoke the truth which found Him deserted by all and persecuted to the point of a torturous death.

It is one thing to condescend to humanity. It is quite another thing to be reproached and rejected by the very humanity you've come to redeem--**"He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11).**

We are all so guilty, so often of so much. Yet if we are once falsely accused we caterwaul for justice. We shriek, "How could you...?" Yet Jesus was silent before His accusers (Mark 14:61).

Death

His Arrest and Trial

Christ's humiliation extended to His very death. This involved His betrayal by a close friend (John 13:27) and His denial by perhaps His closest friend (Matthew 26:74). It involved His submission to those who arrested Him even though He could have brought twelve legions of angels upon their heads (Matthew 26:53). It involved people spitting on Him, buffeting Him, mocking Him, scourging and other painful humiliations (Matthew 27:27-31).

His Dying

In the very act of dying Christ was stripped of His dignity. It was the death of criminals. It was a lingering death. It was a public and naked death (Matthew 27:28, 35). And it was death designed for those deserving of death and accursed of God.

If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the Lord your God is giving you *as* an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God (Deuteronomy 21:22, 23).

Truly, His death was designed for those forsaken by God (Matthew 27:46).

His Death

Christ's humiliation extended past His dying to the surroundings of His death. He was laid in a borrowed tomb (Matthew 27:59, 60) and so He would continue under the power of death until the third day (Matthew 12:40). In His death He was forsaken by the Father and bore upon Himself the due penalty of sin—the wrath of God. Humiliation hardly seems a strong enough word to express this sacrifice.

Lessons and Assurance

Though I may not have accomplished my initial goal of scratching the surface of Christ's humiliation in His birth, life and death, hopefully we are all aware of the nature of His humiliation and can appreciate it in our own reading. Let us move on now to examine the significance of His humiliation in terms of our lessons found in them and our assurance as a result of them.

What Do We Learn?

So what are Christians to learn when they examine the humiliation of Christ? If I may, I will gently submit that the *What Would Jesus Do? What Would Jesus Eat? And What would Jesus Drive?* paradigms are lacking in terms of the usage depicted by New Testament writers regarding just what it is about Jesus we are to imitate. Being born under the law, there are certain things about Jesus we should not imitate (His diet, circumcision, adherence to the Mosaic ceremonial economy, etc.). As God, there are other things about Jesus we should not imitate (His call to be worshipped).

Our imitation of Jesus (the emphasized *What Would Jesus Do?*) generally revolves around His response to temptation and attack. Our lesson will run deep if, and only if, we begin to appreciate His humiliation.

We learn that we are to be humble like Christ. Remember the passage we read earlier where Jesus humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death (Philippians 2:5-8). The Apostle Paul begins that passage by stating, **“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5).**

There is a disposition within Christ’s law-keeping which should serve to transform us at a deeper level.

We read Hebrews 12 which informed us of Christ’s endurance against hostile sinners. The reason the author brings this to bear is clearly seen:

For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls (Hebrews 12:3).

In Romans 6:5-11 Christ’s death serves as an example of how we are to be dead to sin. Again this presents a disposition rather than a restatement of the law.

Peter uses the example of Christ to admonish us to avoid retaliation.

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: “Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth”; who, when He

was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed *Himself* to Him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:21-23).

Again this is an attitude or a mindset which Christians are to imitate in their efforts to obey the law. Christ has set a context for law-keeping which should both humble and encourage us. The context of a man unjustly persecuted, enormously tempted, yet righteous in all His ways.

Of What Does His Humiliation Assure Us?

Christ's suffering assures us of our redemption through the merit of His sufferings.

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:7).

That Christ became a curse means those who trust in Him will escape that curse. His passive obedience (dying on the cross), whereby the Father's wrath was poured out (1 Peter 2:24), assures us that His wrath will not be poured out on us. His active obedience (His lifelong obedience to the Father) is freely imputed (credited to us), thus assuring us of the Father's pleasure, inheritance and our righteous standing.

For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21).

What is more humiliating than to be identified as sin? The Truth, the Life and the Light of men is here, designated as being sin. And it is through this utter humiliation that men can ascend to the unfathomable designation of the righteousness God—to whom be the glory forever.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Give a quick review of God's covenant with man, the Mediator, His offices, etc.
2. What is and is not included in Christ's humiliation?
3. What was Christ's estate prior to becoming flesh?
4. In what way did Christ's birth contribute to His humiliation?
5. In what way did Christ's law-keeping contribute to His humiliation?
6. Discuss the miseries of Christ's life.
7. Discuss the different aspects of Christ's death and how they contribute to His humiliation.
8. What do you think was the greatest aspect of Christ's humiliation?
9. What are some things we learn from Christ's humiliation?
10. Of what are we assured as a result of Christ's humiliation?

Part XXV

The Exaltation of Christ: His Resurrection

November 2, 2003

Preface

I often reflect on all the funerals I have officiated. I think of all I will do in the future. I think of my own. In a certain sense I view the heart of my job, as a pastor, to be a lifelong preparation—for myself and others—for that day. The Reverend John Owen said that he preached as a dying man to dying men. Some might view this as a bit macabre or grim. It is anything but. How much more joyful the journey when the destination is glory rather than a cliff! There is nothing more germane to this preparation than this morning's topic—the resurrection of Christ.

Not only have I officiated many a memorial service—I have attended many as well. Seldom is a memorial service so atheistic that the grace of God is not evoked in some way. The grace of God always works its way into the program. *But what is it about God's grace that has kept the human race afloat for these many centuries? Is the grace of God just a meaningless platitude to help us through tough periods in our lives?* The grace of God often becomes Play-Doh in the hands of the speaker. He morphs it whithersoever he wills. I remember a memorial service of a former student where a teacher was seeking to calm down a teenage girl. The girl was wailing incessantly. The teacher said, "His soul will only be comforted when we stop crying." Then the teacher looked to me for affirmation. The sapless nature of the proposition left me stunned and paralyzed. It's no wonder that the intellectual community, who can so easily perceive this recklessness, has abandoned religion as puerile.

Is there substance and specificity to God's grace? Is there something we can actually hold onto when it comes to God's grace? When the wisest man who ever lived uttered the words which appear so contrary to our experience,

A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth (Ecclesiastes 7:1).

was he setting aside reason? Was he mad? Is there beef that we, as members of the human race, can sink our teeth into when it comes to the grace of God as it speaks to our deaths? Is there order to this grace? Is there any reason we should think grace even exists? And if so, is there any legitimate reason why we should think ourselves recipients of it?

Review—Promise

Last week we mentioned how Jesus resisted bringing twelve legions of angels upon the Roman soldiers (Matthew 27:53). Why wouldn't He do such a thing? How can we be confident that He wouldn't do such a thing? How can we be confident that He won't just send another flood and annihilate the entire human race? The substantial answer to all these questions can be summed up in one word, *promise*.

The grace of God is neither meaningless nor random. There is wonderful substance and specificity to His grace. And what we, as a race, have to hold onto regarding the grace of God is the promise of God. Jesus didn't bring the legions of angels because He, essentially, is God's promise—His promise to redeem humanity. Look at the force of God's promise in Hebrews. It comes in the form of an oath.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you." ... Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath (Hebrews 6:13, 14, 17).

God is the promise-maker and He is the promise-keeper. Let us briefly review the nature of this promise: we spoke of God's *covenant/promise* with man—it is a promise of redemption where He would extend His grace to fallen humanity. We spoke of the

sufficiency of the *Mediator*, the active agent, of this covenant—that He (Christ), being man, properly represents men while, at the same time, being God, did not sink under the infinite wrath of God. We spoke of the offices of this Mediator—*Prophet* (the mouthpiece of God), *Priest* (the sacrifice and intercessor for men), and *King* (the potentate who would bring forth the victory of His kingdom over darkness).

We then pondered the journey of the Mediator—His *humiliation* consisting of His birth, life and death. We will now speak of His *exaltation*. The exaltation (literally, *to lift up*) of Christ includes His resurrection, ascension, His sitting at the right hand of the Father and His coming again in judgment. This morning we will consider only the resurrection.

The Resurrection

I will seek to answer three questions regarding the resurrection: What fundamentally took place at the resurrection of Christ? How is it a blessing to us? And what should it evoke in us?

If ever there was a lynch-pin in the plan of redemption it is the resurrection! The Apostle Paul says of the resurrection:

And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty... And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17-19).

Clearly, if the resurrection of Christ is removed from the equation, there is no equation at all! If my trust in Christ is not eternally focused via the hope of the resurrection—if I merely trust Him for the here and now—“in this life” I am pitiful. This made make more sense in the Apostle’s context, where Christians were being persecuted for their faith. Certainly the wisdom of Christ is superior to the wisdom of the world in every respect. That is, it would be better for the unbeliever to trust the moral teachings of Christ than not. But Paul’s point should not be missed. *The resurrection is the heart of the redemptive matter.*

Aspects of the Resurrection

What happened at the resurrection of Christ? What fundamentally took place during this event called the resurrection?

The exaltation of Christ's resurrection, in a sense, began during the humiliation of His death in that His body did not undergo the corruption of death (Acts 2:27). Christ's victory was a complete victory. Although the marks/scars of death remained as a testimony to the reality of His suffering (Luke 24:39), the corruption of death would find no home in the body of Christ.

These scars also reveal that Christ's resurrected body was essentially the same body in which He suffered. It was not some vaporous or ethereal body. He doesn't merely live on in our memories or some such thing. He physically came back to life.

Jesus rose from the dead by His own power (John 10:18) for it was not possible that death could hold Him (Acts 2:24). Jesus truly accomplished that which no mere man could ever accomplish—the defeat of mankind's final enemy, death (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Arguably it is the resurrection of Christ that changed the world, and even His detractors knew this would be the case.

On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, "Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him *away*, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go your way, make *it* as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard (Matthew 27:62-66).

If the Romans or Jews could have produced the dead body of Christ, the Christian religion would have ended immediately. Such was not the case. *Jesus is risen, He is risen indeed!*

What Are the Blessings of the Resurrection?

So, what are the blessings of the resurrection for believers? What makes this event central to the Christian faith and, quite frankly, to the entire human race? First, it assures and secures our justification (acquittal) before God. The Apostle Paul writes of Jesus,

who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification (Romans 4:25).

The completeness of Christ's redemptive work becomes apparent at the resurrection. John Owen explains it this way:

...when the angel descended from heaven and rolled back the great stone from the door of the sepulcher, this speaks to us, that the justice of God is satisfied, the ransom of our iniquity has been paid, that Christ rendered a full discharge of all the debt for which He undertook as a great surety between God and the sinners who believe in Him.⁸⁷

If a community sends a man on a mission (say, to save that community from a predator), they look for some indication that their man has succeeded. If Christ had not risen He would merely be another martyr. There would have been no conquering of death and no warrant to trust that He could vanquish death for others. Had Christ secretly ascended with no public display of His resurrection, the assurance of His victory would not be known.

Secondly, the resurrection of Christ serves as a model of our resurrection.

⁸⁷ *Calvin's Commentary on Romans* (Baker Book House), p. 186.

[Editor's note: It is unclear to me if Pastor Paul meant to quote Calvin rather than Owen, or if he incorrectly cited the source.]

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself (Philippians 3:20, 21).

Since His resurrection prefigures our resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20) we have the comfort of knowing that our eternal state is not some non-corporeal (no physical body) netherworld where all identity is lost while we're swept into some pool of incomprehensible oneness.

So for Christians the resurrection of Christ becomes the source of great comfort. For as sure as Christ defeated death in His own resurrection, He has procured that same victory for His bride; and this to the point of mockery.

So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: *“Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?”* The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks *be* to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:54-57).

I occasionally enjoy watching old movies. Recently I was watching a movie made in the early thirties. Even a movie that old displayed the pomp and splendor of Hollywood. Everybody was rich with energy and alive with enthusiasm. I couldn't help reflecting, however, on the reality that virtually everybody in the movie was probably dead. The resurrection is life's only happy ending.

What We Learn

Surely the resurrection is the good news of the gospel! But it is not merely to produce idle comfort that the Bible speaks of the

resurrection; it also carries a call to action. The above passage (1 Corinthians 15:54-57) ends with a charge:

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58).

The knowledge of the blessings of the resurrection should excite Christians to their labors in the Lord.

In the sixth chapter of Romans Paul writes of the Christian being united in the likeness of Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:5). We are therefore freed from the curse of the law (Romans 8:2) and freed from the bondage of sin (Romans 6:7). These truths all properly belong to the above section—the blessings of the resurrection.

But Paul had a purpose in informing believers of these blessings. It was not to seduce us to slothfulness. The knowledge of this great blessing (the blessing of a freely-given holy standing before God) becomes the impetus for holy living. Observe how Paul tells believers how they are to think of themselves (reckon themselves) followed by the call action:

Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God (Romans 6:11-13).

In other words, know who you are and behave accordingly. Or, as the Apostle Paul states elsewhere,

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called (Ephesians 4:1).

Of all the lessons and responses we should have to this wonderful news, nothing takes precedence over the praise of God by the objects of His grace.

I will praise thee with my whole heart: before the gods will I sing praise unto thee. I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name (Psalm 138:1, 2).

There are numerous reasons for which we see the Lord of glory praised, and they are all ancillary to the resurrection of Christ of whom the heavenly host sings,

You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood (Revelation 5:9).

Conclusion

The resurrection was a genuine historical event not merely in God's plan of redemption—but it was the turning point in history. The blessings of this event are wide and deep enough to be the subject of every sermon ever given. And these blessings should stir the believer up to a life of service, praise and holiness unto the Lord.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why preach as a dying man to dying men?
2. How is there substance and specificity to God's grace?
3. Discuss the difference aspects of God's covenant promise.
4. What makes the resurrection the lynch-pin of the Christian faith?
5. Discuss the fundamental aspects of the resurrection.
6. How do these fundamental aspects relate to the blessings of the resurrection?
7. What are the blessings of the resurrection for believers?
8. What should the knowledge of the resurrection evoke in Christians?

Part XXVI

The Exaltation of Christ

The Second Coming, the Success of Christianity

November 9, 2003

Introduction

On November 1, 1999 the cover of *Newsweek* donned a copy of the painting 'The Vision of Ezekiel' by Raphael. It is a work of art which presents the ominous coming of angels in God's judgment. In letters bigger than the title of its own magazine was the word *PROPHECY* with the sub-heading, "What the Bible says about the end of the world."

There may not be a section in any Christian bookstore that attracts more browsers than the shelves dedicated to eschatology (the study or science of last things). The best-selling Christian book in the entire decade of the seventies was Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. This book, bought by Christians and non-Christians alike, popularized the study of last things.

Tim Lahaye's *Left Behind* series has picked up where Hal Lindsay left off. Lahaye transitioned Lindsay's theology into Christian fantasy, and bookstores couldn't keep the books on the shelves. People find the issue of judgment spectacular. Hollywood seized the opportunity to cash in on this sensationalism with movies like *The Omen*, *The Sixth Seal*, *End of Days* and many, many others.

I will not equivocate on the matter in an effort to be clever; I think these popular and very sensational views of the Last Days are in error. The brand of eschatology proposed in these books will not be found in any confession or creed (or anywhere else) prior to 1800. Yet the influence of these book, and others with the same theological flavor, has been unquestionably phenomenal. So much so, that the views espoused in them have become somewhat of an untested modern orthodoxy. To hold views inconsistent with the brand of eschatology found in *LGPE* will cause not a few eyebrows to be

raised. A former member of our church, when he found that I didn't hold Lindsay's view, sought to portray me as a cult leader.

I comforted myself against this siege with the notion that at arguably richer theological times none of the great masters of the faith held to the views that dominate today's airwaves and bookstores. This is not to suggest that there were no disagreements among early theologians. But it should get our attention that *in all the disagreements, no one held the view that is most popular today*. Add to the mixture that today's dominant view is prevailing during a period of apostasy in western evangelicalism. We, therefore, should not be sheepish about questioning what the majority of a lukewarm church believes about any aspect of the Christian faith, not only eschatology.

None of this makes any position right or wrong. But it should make us a little more comfortable when giving modern notions of Christian thinking a healthy critique—especially as we examine alternatives with a richer theological history.

The Popular View

So what is the popular view of last things? It is called *Dispensational Premillennialism* and in short it amounts to this:

1. The church age is a parenthesis between the cross and the Second Coming of Christ. Many of the blessings associated with the cross are not for the church.
2. The world is going to get worse and worse. This includes earthquakes, famines, immorality, wars, faithlessness, etc.
3. Some political figure, who the Bible calls the anti-Christ, will win the confidence of the populace and lure them into worshiping him. He will force people to don his mark in order to function in society. That mark will be some form of 666. Those who take the mark will forfeit their souls.
4. The church will wax cold with apostasy.
5. Before things get too bad true believers will be raptured (caught up in the air) to be with Christ and avoid the Great Tribulation.
6. The Rapture will be followed by a Great Tribulation that will last for seven years, the second three and a half being worse than the first. People can become Christians during this time but will most assuredly be martyred.

7. At the end of the Great Tribulation Jesus will return, begin His kingdom and reign for a thousand years. He will then keep the promises made to the ethnic nation of Israel in the Old Testament. During this time a glorified Christ will live on the earth with both glorified saints and regular people. People will continue to live and die—even in His presence. Jesus will operate out of a rebuilt temple where animals will be sacrificed to Him as a memorial.
8. At the end of the thousand years there will be a Great White throne judgment at which time the wicked will be judged.

Popular Fallout

I believe this view of eschatology is incorrect. Not only is it incorrect, I believe it is destructive for a number of reasons:

1. I believe it breeds a lack of respect for what was accomplished by the cross—Jesus needs to come back and finish that which was left undone.
2. It breeds a lack of appreciation for the wonderful accomplishments in history via the word of God, the Spirit of God and the men of God. Those who take this position seriously consign history to the devil. Don't be deceived; if the devil wins history, he will also win eternity, for it is in history that eternal decisions and battles are won or lost (Matthew 18:18)!
3. It breeds lethargy because it teaches the church that it is simply an exercise in frustration to try to change the world. As one dispensationalist put it, "Why polish the brass on a sinking ship?"
4. It breeds short-sightedness. People who take this position seriously are not planning for the distant future resulting in a vacuous legacy. Praise God, most people who espouse this position don't take it seriously!
5. It breeds defeatism. I have coached high school and college sports for many years. If my teams believed it was simply not possible for them to win, they lost before they entered the game. The irony is that this brand of theology has managed to convince the most blessed Christians in the history of the

world that the demise of all cultures is God's will for humanity.

6. Finally, it robs the church of the proclamation of untold blessings and warnings. The majority of the warnings and blessings in the Old Testament (in the Bible) are thought to apply merely to ethnic Israel. They ignore the Jew/gentile unity in all the covenants taught by the Apostle Paul (Ephesians 2:11-22).

The Success of Christianity

Briefly, here is what I believe the Bible teaches regarding the last days, a position that would have been quite common throughout church history:

In opposition to #1 of the popular view (the world getting worse and worse), I believe the Bible teaches that as a result of the gospel the world will become a better place in every respect. Remember the promise made to Abraham:

“And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

Keith Mathison states,

“Whatever else ‘all the families of the earth’ means, it does not mean a minuscule percentage of the families of the earth.”⁸⁸

The following is the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament.

“The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool’” (Psalm 110:1).

This seems to suggest that as a result of Christ's victory and authority (see Ephesians 1:20-23 and Matthew 28:18-20), all of

⁸⁸ Mathison, *Postmillennialism, An Eschatology of Hope* (P & R Publishing, 1999), p. 64.

Christ's enemies (things resulting from the fall) will be redeemed throughout history. I am not suggesting heaven on earth or the salvation of every last single person. Clearly, the last enemy (death) will continue until Christ comes again (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Perhaps this will be an easy way to explain it: When a person is saved by God he finds Himself being sanctified by God in every aspect of His life (thoughts, words, deeds, family, church, citizen, etc). Although he will never be perfect until glory, there aren't areas in his life with which God is unconcerned.

We should expect that same type of sanctification in a world that is being blessed by God and whose enemies are being made a footstool. When an enemy is made a footstool it has very limited power. The gospel will have its way and we should not limit the scope of its power. Psalm 22 begins with these words:

**My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me
(Psalm 22:1)?**

After this clear allusion to the cross (a great deal of the Psalm describes the passion of the cross) without an intervening dispensation⁸⁹ of apostasy we read of the results of the cross:

All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the Lord's, and He rules over the nations (Psalm 22:27, 28).

This appears to indicate a literal, physical, fulfillment in history. Isaiah also informs us as to the grand effects of the cross.

**For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given;
and the government will be upon His shoulder. And
His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of His government and peace *there*
*will be no end, upon the throne of David and over***

⁸⁹ I mention the intervening period since Dispensational Premillennialism believes there is a parenthesis between the cross and these blessings; the parenthesis is the church age in which we now live. In other words, these blessings are not for the church.

His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this (Isaiah 9:6, 7).

This very familiar passage moves from the birth of the child to the establishment of His kingdom with no mention of an intervening period. As you continue to read Isaiah there are other passages that give clear indication that the world will be positively affected by the cross of Christ.

“They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

The need to fight so hard to convince Christians that the cross of Christ will have a positive influence in the world in every arena of life almost seems odd. But Jesus was not shy regarding the accomplishments of the church by His cross and Spirit.

And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

Christians must ask themselves if they believe that the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20—make disciples of all nations) is going to be fulfilled. And if it is fulfilled, should we not expect that a world full of people who have been brought to faith in Christ will not have a positive influence in that world?!

Remember how Christ’s kingdom is described: A mustard seed starting small and getting big; leaven permeating the whole loaf; a stone that becomes a mountain and covers the whole earth; a river that flows out of the temple and becomes an impassible deluge. I must respectfully disagree with those who teach that things must get worse, not because I’m an optimist, but on biblical grounds.

I remember, years ago, wrestling with this concept. There was one verse in Isaiah I just couldn’t get past:

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11:6).

However one wants to interpret this, literally or metaphorically, I will leave alone for now. But I remember thinking of this in very literal terms. I remember thinking how feasible it would be for this to happen in some future millennium but how silly to think it could happen before Jesus came back.

It hit me like a brick. And I hope it hits you this way too. If I were to put it in the form of a Pentecostal narrative I would have to say that Jesus asked me, “Why don’t you think that what I did on the cross alone is sufficient to accomplish this?” It dawned on me that I was denying the power of the cross. Jesus must come and finish the job. To this very day people look at me with incredulity when I suggest that all these blessings will be fulfilled in history with no further sacrifice on the part of the Savior.

I can interpret this no other way than their having a truncated view of the cross of Christ. After all, the promise is: “**The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this**” (Isaiah 9:7).

Judgment

After God’s plan for the success of the gospel in history is complete, I believe Jesus will come again. Those who are dead will be raised first (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus, we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17). I believe that all men, during one great and terrible day, will stand before God in judgment (John 5:28, 29). And only those who are clothed in Christ will enter into their peace (Zechariah 3:1-5).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why do you suppose eschatology has become so popular today (page 2)?
2. Go over the main points of Dispensational Premillennialism. What are your initial thoughts (pages, 3, 4)?
3. What type of fallout might occur as a result of the Dispensational Premillennial view (pages 4, 5)?
4. Read and discuss the passages which speak of the manifold success of the Christianity (pages 5-7)?
5. Why do you suppose people have a hard time accepting such a positive outlook on the results of the cross (pages 7, 8)? What is at stake here?
6. What will happen on judgment day (page 8)?

Questions for the Kids

1. What is the resurrection?
2. Was Jesus' body a physical body?
3. Who raised Jesus from the dead?
4. What's so important about it?
5. What did the resurrection do for Christians?
6. What should we do now that we know Jesus did this for us?

