

Principles of Practice
In the
New Testament Church

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1) Introduction

The criteria serving to define a church are broadly classified under the terms “doctrine” and “practice.” Its doctrine is of course what it believes and advocates. Its practice is what it does, particularly with regard to its primary functions of worshipping God, teaching His word and administering His ordinances. Doctrine and practice are overlapping ideas. What a church does is a reflection of what it believes. One would also hope that what it does is under the guidance of prudent principles which collectively make up a doctrine in itself. So while we might speak of doctrine and practice as being two separate ideas, they are actually quite interdependent, and a church should not only have a doctrine *and* practice, but also have a doctrine *of* practice.

By “New Testament” church we mean the church defined in scripture and established by Christ and His Apostles. We do not necessarily mean the church attended by the reader, nor do we mean the church down the street, nor do we automatically assume the term would apply to our own church. In fact a very small percentage of churches today would qualify as New Testament churches, and even these will in some respects fall short. Many things have been done in the name of Christianity having no resemblance to the New Testament church. The atrocities of the Inquisition and Crusades were done in the name of the church even though there is nothing in the New Testament commanding or commending such things. These are extreme examples, but should be sufficient to warn any reasonable person that professed Christians are not only capable of egregious error but also of dressing it up and glorifying it as church. Every church should be in the continual process of examining itself to determine if it is in fact a New Testament church.

Given the interdependence between doctrine and practice, it should come as no surprise that as modern churches have moved away from doctrinal commitments, choosing rather to adapt to the ever-changing tastes and opinions of men, so also have they become unrestrained and undefined in their practice. Their actions suggest they have little concept of a definitive body of principles determining what they should do or how they should do it. Instead, they seem to consider almost any church practice admissible provided it has popular approval. As a consequence of this, churches of most denominations have seen radical changes in how they function and worship, generally moving away from the precedents set in the New Testament. These departures are now of such number and degree that most Christians of past ages would be shocked to see them.

Other Christians, in objection to these changes, have defected mainstream Christianity in mass numbers, oftentimes forming their own storefront churches or home churches. This movement has been so extensive that such groups probably exist in most towns of reasonable size. Their objections have been numerous, including: 1) the ineffectiveness of Sunday schools and youth programs, thus leading the dissenters to opt for what is commonly called “family-integrated” church; 2) the shallow and worldly nature of what is commonly called “contemporary” music with its ever-growing use of instruments; 3) the absence of scripture-based hymns designed to teach and admonish; 4) the practice of condescending to youth by accommodating them in their

immaturity rather than seeking to elevate them to greater maturity. Accordingly: 5) the excess of entertainment and amusement and the carnal environment it creates; 6) the absence of systematic Bible-based preaching, thus leading to a state of Bible ignorance never before seen in this country; 7) the lack of any fixed doctrinal or moral foundation, and the accommodative attitude toward the whims of the world, thus leading to a near total absence of any disciplinary standard; 8) the corrupting trends in many seminaries and their influence on the churches; 9) the unqualified and improperly-motivated leadership over churches and the unscriptural structure of that leadership. Finally, 10) in some cases the objections are also of a doctrinal nature, with large numbers of conservative Christians now trending toward the so-called “reformed” doctrine that was common to Christianity in bygone years, but has gradually been displaced by Arminian doctrine in recent centuries.

These Christians are to be commended for their convictions, and their efforts have generally led to net improvement over what they left. They will find much in this book agreeable to their sentiments. But a great number of them have not divested themselves of all errors, and some have left one set of errors to arrive at another. The reason for this is a lack of consideration to the general principles underlying New Testament church practice. Oftentimes their approach is more pragmatic than scriptural. They reject what their observation and experience have indicated to be bad, and accept what their observation and experience have suggested to be good. In this respect, the dissenters can be much like the churches they left, only differing in their priorities or in their opinions of how certain priorities are best achieved. All Christians should consider that God does not work by trial and error, and He would never leave something so crucial as His church without a well-calculated, definitive specification as to what it should do.

Nothing better illustrates the extent to which mainstream Christianity has changed in its view of church practice than its use of music. In recent decades, the musical instrument has become the darling of worship in nearly every denomination, but an examination of history will show that the founders and historic leaders of these same denominations passionately opposed them. Consider for example the following list of quotes from some of the most famous men in Christian history. These quotes will likely prove very surprising to some modern Christians:

Martin Luther (Lutheran): "The organ in the worship is the insignia of Baal. " – McClintock & Strong's Encyclopedia, Volume VI, page 762.

John Calvin (Presbyterian): "Musical instruments in celebrating the praise of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The Papists, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things, from the Jews." – John Calvin's Commentary on Ps. 33.

John Wesley (Methodist/Anglican): "I have no objection to instruments of music in our chapels, provided they are neither heard nor seen." – Clarke's Commentary, Vol. 4, page 684.

Adam Clarke (Methodist): "I am an old man, and an old minister; and I here declare that I never knew them (musical instruments) productive of any good in the worship of God; and have had reason to believe that they were productive of much evil. Music, as a science, I esteem and admire; but instruments of music in the house of God I abominate and abhor. This is the abuse of music; and here I register my protest against all such corruptions in the worship of the Author of Christianity." – Clarke's Commentary, Vol. 4, page 684.

Charles Spurgeon (Baptist): "David appears to have had a peculiarly tender remembrance of the singing of the pilgrims, and assuredly it is the most delightful part of worship and that which comes nearest to the adoration of heaven. What a degradation to supplant the intelligent song of the whole congregation by the theatrical prettiness of a quartet, bellows, and pipes. We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it." – Spurgeon's Commentary on Psalm 42.

Andrew Fuller (Baptists): "The history of the church during the first three centuries affords many instances of primitive Christians engaging in singing, but no mention, (that I recollect) is made of instruments. (If my memory does not deceive me) it originated in the dark ages of popery, when almost every other superstition was introduced. At present, it is most used where the least regard is paid to primitive simplicity." – Complete works of Andrew Fuller, Vol 3, page 520.

David Benedict (Baptist): "In my earliest intercourse among this people, congregational singing generally prevailed among them... This instrument (i.e. the organ), which from time immemorial has been associated with cathedral pomp and prelatical power, and has always been the peculiar favorite of great national churches, at length found its way into Baptist sanctuaries, and the first one ever employed by the denomination in this country, and probably in any other, might have been standing in the singing gallery of the Old Baptist meeting house in Pawtucket, about forty years ago, where I then officiated as pastor (1840)... Staunch old Baptists in former times would as soon tolerated the Pope of Rome in their pulpits as an organ in their galleries, and yet the instrument has gradually found its way among them... How far this modern organ fever will extend among our people, and whether it will on the whole work a RE-formation or DE-formation in their singing service, time will more fully develop." – Fifty Years Among the Baptists, pages 204-207.

Be sure that more quotes could be added to this list, including quotes from times very near the Apostles, but we have confined the list to men who are recognized by all as leading figures in

church history. Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with these men, the quotes clearly establish that a radical change has occurred in Christian thinking. The passion with which instruments were once opposed was no less than the affection with which they are now embraced. This change in thinking extends well beyond music to nearly all other areas of church practice as well. If modern churches do in fact follow *any* principles with respect to their practice, those principles are clearly at odds with principles that were followed in the past. Indeed, it would be fair to say that some things being done in churches today have never before been approved on any meaningful scale, and would be spontaneously rejected by nearly all Christians of the past.

Given the popularity of these modernizations, they are obviously well-suited to the personal preferences of many, but it is difficult to see how anyone could endorse them if the interests of Christianity were truly at heart. There is now a degree of Biblical illiteracy that would surpass anything seen since the Dark Ages. This has been accompanied by a steady and pervasive degradation in Christian morals. Christian influence upon society and government is as low as it has ever been in America. The current rate of defection from the church implies dismal times for Christianity in days ahead. Notwithstanding the obsession of modern churches with numbers, and the millions of Dollars they have spent trying to secure them, they are now almost surely destined for decline. This is because some estimates have them losing as much as 80% of their youth before finishing college. This is happening notwithstanding an unprecedented investment in youth programs and ministries calculated to do exactly the opposite.

Contrast this to the experiences of the ministers quoted above, who *all* participated in momentous, world-shaking, history-changing revivals, yet with little money, limited media, no church amenities, no youth programs, no electric guitars, no drums, no entertainment, and no revised versions of the Bible to simplify its study. Most remarkably, they preached in times of higher mortality, shorter life-spans and larger families, so that their congregations were *significantly younger* than what we have on average today. If anyone will dismiss all this by saying times have changed, and that present circumstances necessitate rock music, amusement and other such modernizations to draw youth, then let them explain why the ongoing decline in Christianity has been accompanied by a rapid rise in Islam and Mormonism, even though they are religions that are virtually void of such levities.

Modern Christians have concentrated themselves in large churches where they can behold huge congregations and delude themselves that all is well with Christianity, but the truth is that modern church practice is not working by any meaningful metric. Thousands of sincere Bible-honoring pastors in nearly all denominations will agree. Most importantly, the Lord Jesus Christ will agree. There is a strong and disturbing familiarity in the following words of the Savior:

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked. – Rev 3:15-17

Thankfully, the Savior also provided a solution to this problem:

I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. – Rev 3:18-20

The last sentence of this verse has been much abused by some modern Christians, to the extent that many readers will be surprised at the context in which the statement is found. When Jesus speaks of knocking at the door, the meaning is not an unregenerate sinner's heart but the door of the church itself. He should of course *already* be inside the church, but He is instead outside of it, doubtlessly because the church has opted for its own ways rather than His. The consequence is that the church has settled into a lukewarm state wherein it is very comfortable with itself, even proudly thinking it is rich, whereas in truth it is wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked. The good news is that the church is not hopelessly doomed to this deplorable state. Though He is on the outside, Christ is no further than the door, and stands ready to come in. This will happen when the church buys of Him the "gold tried in fire" – words that can only mean the inspired word of God. They surely cannot mean the untested, vagarious whims of the age, but the eternal wisdom that has withstood the oppositions of all ages. The word of God is a sure recipe for success. He has resolutely declared, "...it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it," (Isa 55:11).

The principles of practice in the New Testament church are far-reaching in their implications. They form a philosophy that embraces not only church but many other areas of life. In examining these principles, this book will do much to explain traditional Christian thought in even secular matters. The success of the Western World is largely owing to this philosophy, and failures of both past and present have their root in departures from it. While the New Testament church has at times been small in terms of true followers, never has it been small in terms of its impact upon the world. Whether as a living, functional entity, or even through partial influence as an ideology, nothing has had a greater positive impact on world history than the New Testament church.

2) In the Image of God

Though the Bible was written by many different authors over a span exceeding a thousand years, all sound Christians believe that it has but one Ultimate Author, the Holy Spirit, who worked within men and moved them in the things they wrote. An evidence of this fact is how the book is brilliantly unified about a central theme, and how the book is, from first to last, an unfolding drama whose stage was definitively set in its opening pages. Those pages divulge the most fortuitous fact in the history of mankind with the words:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. – Gen 1:26-27

Thus, man was distinguished from all other creatures in the most honorable conceivable way: He was created in the very image of God. Atheists sometimes scoff at this, claiming the opposite to be true, or that man created God in his own image and imagination. The irony is that these scoffers themselves prove the text to be true. The intellectual achievements of man clearly distinguish him from all other creatures. All living things apart from man are still climbing the same trees, eating the same grass and chasing the same bugs they were in the very beginning, but man has demonstrated immeasurable potential, building bridges, skyscrapers, automobiles and airplanes, discovering higher math, designing complex microscopes and telescopes, travelling space, exploring the Universe, unraveling atoms, designing computers, decoding genetics, etc., and indeed, the task of cataloguing all this knowledge now requires countless libraries scattered all over the world. As remarkable as these achievements are, they are small in comparison to what they would have been had it not been for things we will shortly discuss, but God has blessed man in sufficient achievements to confirm what He said from the outset, namely, that man is not like other creatures. He is very special.

The above verse also suggests a thing that the Bible will thereafter confirm, namely, that God endowed man with supremacy over all other living things, including a second class of intelligent life He created, which are known in the Bible as “angels” (Ps 91:11-12, 1Cor 6:3, Heb 1:13-14, Heb 2:5-18, 1Pet 1:12). This fact will likely prove a surprise to Bible novices, but it will make sense when one considers that man was made in the very image of God. Since this was not the case with angels, it would be a personal affront to God to rank the angels higher than man. The Bible gives limited information about angels, but reveals that they exist in vast numbers (Rev 5:11) and are extremely powerful. Upon one occasion, a single angel destroyed 185,000 men in the Assyrian army (Isa 37:36). This great power is no contradiction to the superior rank given to men. An infant is helpless before a savage dog, but has potential vastly exceeding all dogs put together. The Bible also reveals that a significant percentage of angels are fallen and degenerate,

and that the chief of these is Satan (Mt 25:41). The Bible then teaches that Satan set himself for the corruption and downfall of man, evidently for the purpose of displacing him in his supreme status among the creatures of God. Since the pride of Satan is such that he would rival even God (Isa 14:12-15 2Thes 2:3-4), there was no doubt injury to his ego to be ranked even less than man. He therefore seduced man to destroy himself by disobeying God, whereby man fell into corruption and death.

It was of course in the power of God to instantly destroy Satan for his rebellion; however, He instead declared to Satan, “*I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel,*” (Gen 3:15). This is to say that, whereas Satan would inflict a hobbling wound to the man, the man would inflict a mortal wound to Satan (Rom 16:20). Thus, the plan of God was to destroy Satan by the very means of man. This becomes sensible upon considering that if God were to destroy him directly, this would be a vindication of Satan and make him a martyr in his own cause, because if he had brought man down, and could himself be destroyed only by God, this would imply he was justified in objecting to the lower rank he had been given. So to enforce the order originally commanded, God instead purposed to raise up a Champion among men, distinguished here as the seed of the woman, by means of whom Satan would be destroyed. This declaration has long been understood by Christians as the first of countless Old Testament prophecies concerning Christ, and since He was unexpectedly called the seed of the woman, and not rather the seed of the man, this declaration also contains strong intimation of His virgin birth.

These facts set the stage for the lengthy saga that will become the Bible, and set forth the central plot of world history. Much religious and philosophical error entails, in some degree or another, a denial of these basic facts or their implications. For example, a formidable amount of error in professed-Christianity has derived from an essential denial of the extent of man’s fall, claiming, in effect, that he did not truly die in the fall, whereas God plainly said he did. Further, God said he died in the *very day* of his fall (Gn 2:17), which can only mean that he died in a spiritual sense, because his physical death did not occur until long after. His subsequent physical death was a mere symptom of the spiritual death he had suffered many years before. Now a dead man is not *hopeless* so long as a resurrecting God exists, but a dead man surely is *helpless*. He is helpless to recover himself from a state of death, either in the spiritual or physical sense. He can only be saved by an act of Divine grace. So any doctrine claiming that man somehow contributes to his own salvation by his own spiritual action is as senseless as a dead man somehow contributing to his own resurrection. Then we have error on the opposite side of the spectrum that essentially denies the high dignity of the original man or the higher dignity of the final man or the infinite dignity of the ultimate man, Jesus Christ. These errant doctrines include all non-Christian religions, not the least of which is modern Darwinism.

As these facts set the central theme of the Bible, they will serve to explain much else to be found in the book. In particular, they explain why God saw necessary to provide for the salvation of

men even though He evidently did not do it for any other creatures. It was done in the interest of His own glory, being in preservation of the nearest representation to Himself in all His creation. They also explain why so many of the great acts of God were in correction of diseased and deformed bodies of men, and more importantly, why God is ever-ready to advance their minds by hearing their requests for wisdom and knowledge (Jn 1:5). They explain the implacable hatred Satan has for man and his incessant effort to seduce man to abase himself. No doubt Satan finds much gratification in taking men who are the presumed intellectual lights of the race and duping them to believe they evolved from scum in a pond.

These facts also explain why God is infuriated when men bow and worship other creatures. Man simultaneously insults both himself and his Creator when worshipping anything other than God alone because God made man in greater honor than anything but Himself. Accordingly, these facts resolve God's otherwise enigmatic passion against idolatry in comparison to other sins. Not only do these idols fall infinitely short of the incomprehensible glory of God, they are also in blatant disregard to what He has revealed about His true image in the creation of man. An even greater enigma they resolve is the passionate denunciation the Bible makes of doctrines that deny the humanity of Christ. The Apostles considered these doctrines abominable heresy – the very doctrine of antichrist (1Jn 4:3). Now the biblically ignorant might well assume that it would be flattery to make Jesus out to be an angel, cherubim or other extraterrestrial, but the Bible considers it denigration and confusion. Jesus Christ is the prototype man, the ultimate man, the perfect man and the express image of the person of God. This explains why God loves Him, hears Him, blesses Him, anoints Him, destroys His enemies and exalts Him.

Most Christians are disposed to think the great feats of Jesus Christ were owing to His divinity rather than His perfect humanity. We readily confess that our mind is too feeble to discern such things, and acknowledge that even a perfect man could do nothing without the power of God, but this much we can confidently say: There has never been a religious teacher, whether in the Bible or elsewhere, who put more emphasis on the potential of God-honoring men than the Lord Jesus Christ. Verily, in man's struggle of faith, and in his longing to believe all God has promised, nowhere will the challenge rise to greater heights than in accepting Christ's words to this effect. Such words include: *"...verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you,"* (Mt 17:20). *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father,"* (Jn 14:12).

Paul affirmed all this in saying concerning man, *"Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing that is not put under him,"* (Heb 2:8). These words were spoken by one who elsewhere taught human depravity in the plainest possible terms, so he continues here and says, *"But now we see not yet all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of*

death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man,” (Heb 2:9). So it is difficult to see the honor God has conferred upon man in his present fallen condition, but because it can surely be seen in the resurrected Jesus Christ, it must also follow for all His redeemed people. The ultimate purpose of God is to restore fallen man to the image from which he fell: *“For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren,”* (Rom 8:29). *“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him...”* (1Jn 3:2-3).

The fact that man was created in God’s image also resolves what might otherwise be considered an enigma in the Bible. This is that the book holds the pride of man in abject contempt but expresses the potential of man in terms that not even a conceited mind can grasp. The Bible says of man’s present state that he is by nature totally depraved, and therefore incapable of saving himself by His own freewill and ability. Whenever a man assesses what he presently is, he must be careful to consider that pride is ranked first among the things God hates (Pr 6:16-19), and is also a root cause of all other sin. However, when contemplating what a saved man can be, and will be, through the power of Christ, no star is high enough to surpass what God will permit the mind to entertain. There is actually no enigma in these two things. The first step toward aspiring to be better at anything is in acknowledging that present deficiency leaves room for improvement. While all men struggle with pride, it can also be presented to them in such a way that their minds instinctively deplore it. The human mind has been designed by the Creator to know that pride is a toxin to the soul and a deterrent to progress. God hates pride even more than man because the progress of man is more important to Him than it is to men themselves. God created man in his own image. It is in His interest for man to succeed, though, of course, His metrics of success are not always the same as ours.

So God has Himself emphasized the potential of man more than anyone else, and He has also demanded that every man honor this potential. It is to be honored in both rich and poor. It has been the habit of God throughout history to take men under seemingly inescapable disadvantage and elevate them to the heights of success. This was surely done to teach men to honor those they would otherwise despise or dismiss. It is to be honored in youth. A parent that refuses to discipline his child has acquiesced to what it presently is and disregarded what it is capable of being. This is Christianity turned upside down. It is also to be honored in all races of men. God has blessed every race with distinguishing abilities so that all will learn to honor the potential God has placed in their fellow men. It is to be honored in the wayward and disobedient. This is why ministers are commanded to preach repentance. This potential is even to be honored when it is seated in a jail. Solomon said, *“Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished. For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also he that is born in his kingdom becometh poor,”* (Eccl 4:13-14). So a young man locked in prison under drug charges, but who is willing to receive admonition, and willing to learn the principles

God is ready to teach him, and willing to go where God is ready to take him, has more potential, and is deserving of more respect, than a recalcitrant President of the United States.

In the new world after the flood, man was once again warned to honor the fact he had been made in the image of God. This was in the earliest commandment of the Bible against murder:

And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man. – Gen 9:5-6

Surely, no commandment demanding civility among men could have been stated in more compelling terms than this. This verse also implies one of the strongest condemnations of abortion in the Bible. The debate over this issue has been shamelessly reduced to a question of human rights and thereby distracted from the sheer indignity and savagery of the act. The above commandment says nothing of anyone's rights apart from the right of God to demand that men conduct themselves with a degree of dignity commensurate to the high honor with which they have been freely endowed. In every city of America, there are laws against any man indecently exposing himself in public or defecating in the streets. These laws are almost universally approved among men. By such prohibitions against animal behavior, men clearly acknowledge that there is an obligation to civility that derives simply from the fact one is human. Yet the same people who support these laws are evidently so blinded by their unbridled lusts that they assert the right to commit savagery in abortion that even animal instinct would deplore.

These types of contradictions are nothing new to the devil-duped human race. In nearly all world societies, it would be considered utterly barbaric for rival kings, national leaders or high-ranking military officers to settle their differences in a knife fight. By this men again acknowledge an inherent obligation of their race to civility. Yet they have remarkably little hesitation in putting their youth on the battlefield to butcher each other. Time and again in human history have young men been called upon to die so that old rich men could be even richer, or that old powerful men could be even more powerful, or that some glorified pervert on a throne could receive even more unwarranted glory. While there is of course a place for war, most of them have been in disregard to the commandment: *"Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword,"* (Mt 26:52). War and abortion are alike in that both are satanic attempts to dupe mankind into destroying its own youth. Satan hates man because God has favored him, and the more a man is favored the more Satan will hate him. The Bible plainly shows throughout that God has special affinity for young people, and that He will shake the planet in their behalf if they will turn to Him. If Satan cannot destroy them in the womb, then he will destroy them on the battlefield, and if not there, then he will destroy them with drugs, alcohol or sex, and if not this, then he will destroy them with divorced parents and broken homes, and if all else fails, then he will destroy them by corrupt religion and philosophy.

The Bible always portrays God as masculine. This is something that only the most impudent would seek to change. Yet the distinguishing honor of being created in His image was applied to both men and women: *“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.”* The woman was also honored as being the first to witness the triumph of mankind in the resurrection of Christ. These honors place an obligation upon the woman that is no less, nor any less important, than it is for the man. Our present society should be acutely aware of this. Almost any person old enough to have witnessed the protracted decline in the morals of America will agree that nothing did more to accelerate the downward plunge in our society than the decline of feminine dignity. Much of this derived from the feminist movement, which, while having some worthy goals, was not anchored in the word of God, and therefore damned to degeneration.

Very commonly has an ill-behaved and biblically diffident man been dazzled by love for a beautiful woman, and then moved by this love to amend his ways, realizing he had no chance at her without adapting to the higher dignity of her gender. Given this, it is bewildering to see young women in our present society who, though possessing sufficient beauty to have their pick of men, are draped all over unkempt, uncouth, uneducated men having absolutely no sense of responsibility toward them or the children they might bear, and having no more regard for their integrity than one dog has for another.

Christian beliefs in depravity on one hand and sanctity of human life on the other may seem contradictory, but they are reconciled by considering the distinction between what men presently are and what they have potential to become through the power of God. But liberals who oppose Christianity have contradictions that defy all explanation. They typically subscribe in some degree or another to the humanist doctrine, which denies depravity and asserts the inherent goodness of man. Indeed, they say there is no better moral compass for the human than the human himself, and dismiss anything purporting to be divine revelation as being without absolute authority and a likely obstacle to social progress. Having little use for religion, many of them see no future for man beyond what is in this life only. Their position then implies that the practice of abortion they so adamantly support takes from inherently-good unborn infants the only future they could ever hope to have.

Further, they typically deny that man was created at all, much less in God’s image. Rather, they say he is merely a higher form of animal, being brought to his present state by an evolutionary process wherein millions of mutations were filtered through a survival-of-the-fittest or “dog-eat-dog” sieve, leaving only such as would minutely mold him to outcompete, exploit and devour everything weaker than he is. Curiously, this process so adept at producing monsters did somehow terminate upon their great moral compass. More curious yet is how anyone could logically claim that a survival-of-the-fittest process managed to produce monsters that destroy their own progeny. Not even evolution would do this. Since such ideas did not come from God, and are not supported by nature, nothing but Hell is left to account for their origin.

To continue with these thoughts, the same evolutionary process that presumably produced the human body must also have produced the human soul. The numerous parts of any animal body are remarkably coordinated with each other and are collectively adapted to the specific environment in which they supposedly evolved. When placed within that environment, the animal flourishes, but when removed from it the animal suffers and possibly dies. It would follow that if the soul of man were placed within an environment of evolutionary philosophy and so-called “science,” this being its native habitat, it should flourish there and find resolution and meaning. We will leave it to evolutionists to explain why their theory, almost wherever it is believed, leads instead to suffering souls as they behold about them declining civility, increasing ignorance, growing ghettos, rampant drug abuse, escalating divorce, slaughtered unborn infants, neglected and abused children, growing welfare rolls and bankrupted governments – all of which violate our supposedly evolved sense of dignity, commitment, compassion and responsibility. Evolutionists have forfeited all right to denounce degenerate religion because their own teachings have had exactly the same effect, and no surprise given that those teachings are themselves a degenerate, superstition-based religion, cleverly cloaked in a costume of science.

If an affluent business owner were to take a hungry bum off the street and give him a high-paying, opportune job in a managerial position, and also give him a respectable suit to wear, then the owner would rightfully consider himself reproached, and his kindness disdained, upon seeing the bum arrive at his first day of work in a filthy, drunken and foul-mouthed state. The bum could be fired simply because he had violated policies that the affluent man, as owner of the company, obviously had a right to make. But the offence of the bum goes well beyond this. He had been granted honor and opportunity he did nothing to deserve. His future had been changed from an ignominious death in the street to one of great potential. If the owner would bless him even though a bum, then he should have inferred that far greater blessings would have followed had he only acted responsibly. The bum may assert his right to live as he wants to live, dress as he wants to dress, and act as he wants to act, but in so doing, he makes himself an arrogant, impudent, unappreciative, irresponsible, self-centered fool. Only a fool asserts his own rights to his own destruction. The ironic thing is that after the bum is returned to grovel in the streets, his tendency will be to view himself as being humble and himself as being worthy of sympathy, whereas those contemptible characteristics that are truly his he will rather impute to the affluent man who was ready to help him. Matters will be made even worse when the bum lives in a society full of fools like himself who will be happy to reinforce him in his error.

This illustration at least partially conveys the point. Man was freely endowed with the highest conceivable honor in the creation when he was made in God’s image. God had every reason and right to expect man to carry this honor in appreciation and dignity. When man was duped by the Devil to forfeit his privileged status, the Son of God, in whose image man was made, did, in the interest of His own glory and in defiance of the Devil, set Himself to the salvation of His people, and by the power of His saving grace alone, His people will ultimately be carried to triumphant

supremacy second only to God Himself. This then brings us to our first principle of practice in the New Testament church: As surely as the heart of any man has been captured by these truths, so surely will he be inspired to wear his underserved honor in dignity by taking conscience in his appearance, picking up his trash, maintaining his property, paying his bills, repaying his debts, keeping his word, cleansing his mouth, treasuring and training his mind, putting parameters on his passions, striving to maintain his marriage, loving his children, diligently laboring to support himself and his family, honoring all men, giving as he has been given, showing the mercy he has been shown, putting His faith in God and joyously following the path of his Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that it surely and uniquely leads to triumph. This is the most important principle of church practice because no other principle is meaningful without it.

Once a man has set his heart on the duties stated above, his next obligation and privilege is to be baptized in the name of Christ and become a faithful member of His church. The importance of baptism by the New Testament mode of immersion, or of being lowered in the water and raised again, not only follows from scripture but also from conscience. Of the many things that inspire men, nothing ignites their souls like seeing one who is seemingly down and defeated rising and overcoming to achieve victory. This tendency is the fingerprint of the Creator on the soul of man pointing him to the primary plot of the Divine plan for world history and for the lives of all who seek Him. Baptism is a symbolic rite declaring that, though Satan brought men down, through the power of God they will rise again. Though life's disappointments will from time to time rudely knock them down, as surely as Christ lives, they will get up again. Though death destroy their bodies, surely they will live again. Though the word of God will sometimes *seem* to have been refuted by Satan and wicked men, it will surely ascend and prevail again. And all these things necessarily and sufficiently follow from the fact that the Jesus Christ died and rose again. Baptism is the consummate symbol of triumph. It is therefore fitting that all of the brilliantly-devised symbolism of the Bible did culminate into this joyous symbolic rite. New Testament Christianity will put a man's knees on the ground but put his hands in the air. Man was created in God's very image, and though he fell from this, "...if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new," (2 Cor 5:17), so we heartily say, "...thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ," (2 Cor 2:14). Therefore, "*Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure,*" (1Jn 3:3-4).

3) “Let No Man Despise Thy Youth”

In the prior chapter we showed that man should honor God because God has graciously honored man, and done it in ways and degrees that man’s appreciation will never be able to match. Of course, the obligation to honor God would sufficiently derive simply from the fact He is sovereign, but we have reasons beyond even this. In this chapter, we will continue to consider this principle, but as it pertains particularly to youth. The aged Paul told the younger Timothy, “*Let no man despise thy youth,*” (1Tim 4:12). Paul meant that Timothy should conduct himself in a way worthy of respect, and it would follow that if he were worthy of it, then others would be obligated to show it. Young people should never demand respect of the older, but they should live in such a way to deserve it, and whether they receive it or not, the Almighty God will baptize them in blessings for it.

Being one of history’s greatest Bible scholars, Paul knew that the book contains a definite pattern of Divine favor for youth, and that whenever God has been ready to shake the world, He has been very prone to use youth to do it. He exhorted Timothy on the basis of these facts. Our present world is in need of a great shaking, especially in its churches. Since many of the needful changes entail reversing what recent generations have done or neglected, and since those generations are least apt to be persuaded, our hope is best placed in the next, and the Bible gives sufficient basis to suppose that such a hope is reasonable. This chapter is therefore placed early in our book, though for some purposes it would have made a better fit later on.

People tend to think that those of us who are old and worn out have more in common with God than young people because God is Himself very old; however, while God is indeed ancient, He is far from being worn out, and in this respect has more in common with youth. The commonalities do not stop at this. Youth tend to be idealistic. God is also idealistic. Old people can become negative because they dwell too much on past failures. Youth have no such record of failure, or at least not a significant one, so they tend to be more optimistic. Now it happens that God has no experience with failure either, so there should be no surprise that scriptures commonly show His perspective aligning with the young better than with the old. Youth commonly want to take a new path and do things in a new way, but should consider that God’s way may be the only new way left to try. Winston Churchill once dryly said of Americans that they can always be counted on to do the right thing after they have exhausted all other possibilities! This statement truly applies to all men of all nations. In our modern society, it oftentimes seems that every conceivable way has been attempted except God’s way. Certainly, there is nothing new in Satan’s way. In case after case, and generation after generation, youth have tripped over the same old handful of worn-out vices, with drugs, alcohol and illicit sex being at the top of the list. If youth in every generation insist upon destroying themselves, they should at least find a creative way of doing it! But returning to the positives, youth also want to change the world for the better, and are of the opinion that it can in fact be changed. Be sure God Himself would be

pleased to see the world change for the better, and He knows very well that it can be changed. These facts will partly explain why one of the most important of all prophecies concerning the glorified Christ said of Him, “...*thou hast the dew of thy youth,*” (Ps 110:3).

The Divine affinity for youth can be seen at several points in the Bible. One of the most familiar cases occurred with the Israelites under Moses in the wilderness. God became weary of the older generation because of their slave mentality and their addiction to Egyptian superstition. He eventually swore they would not enter the Promised Land, but would die in the wilderness, and that He would instead take their children and conquer the land. It would be difficult to find a more honorable generation in the history of Israel than what those children became. Strangely, they were raised by a generation that the Bible repeatedly denounces as being one of the worst. There is something very inspiring in this. Good parenting is a tremendous advantage to a man, but it remains the case that “*the preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, is from the Lord,*” (Prov 16:1). Poor parenting is no excuse, nor is it reason for despair. This is good news for our world today, with its millions of children being born out of wedlock, deserted by fathers and sometimes by mothers, and in many cases being raised by grandparents. These are obviously unfavorable conditions, but they are not too much for God to overcome.

David said, “*Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger,*” (Ps 8:2). By the “avenger” he means Satan, who seeks vengeance against the human race for the inferior rank he has been given. When a society is seemingly hopeless, being thoroughly corrupted by Satan, even in respect to the influence it has upon its children, the Almighty God can preempt him by raising up a new generation of young people blessed with special strength to overcome this adversity. By means of such, God can turn the course of history. He has in fact done it many times. The world would have been altogether lost long ago had this not been the case.

God again sided with the young in the days in which the temple was rebuilt after the Babylonian captivity. Ezra described the completion of the foundation of the temple as a confused scene wherein some rejoiced but others grieved (Ez 3:10-13). The old grieved because they remembered the former temple, which had been much more glorious. But the younger people, having no memory of the “good old days,” were exuberant. God said the young people were right and the old were wrong (Hag 2:1-9, Zech 4:7-10). The new temple would have a far more meaningful glory: It would be visited by God Himself in the form of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The most notable of all cases where the young were honorably distinguished was when the Lord Jesus entered Jerusalem immediately before His crucifixion. The children were then ready to receive Him as Messiah, and exuberantly acclaimed Him as such in the temple, but some of the older people were simultaneously conspiring to murder Him (Mt 21:15-16). Clearly, the kids are not always wrong, and the adults are not always right.

The tendencies seen in the above cases can be found at numerous other points, to the extent that a definite pattern is formed: Consider the cases of Abel, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and David, where a younger brother was chosen over older brethren. Joseph was one of the greatest men in the Bible, and one of its strongest types of Christ, but was blessed of God to achieve greatness in his youth. The same was true with David. Add to this Josiah, who was distinguished by God as one of Judah's greatest kings, but put on the throne at only eight years of age. This is yet another case of a child who achieved honor though raised under the worst parentage. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were great in their youth; instrumental in some of the most remarkable miracles in the Old Testament, and distinguished witnesses of God when every nation in the world, including Israel, was in a state of darkness. These young men overcame the poor example of an older generation in Israel and then the brain-washing attempts of the Babylonians. Add to this the Apostles themselves, who are generally thought to have been young men. Finally, Christ Himself, who was only 30 years of age when beginning His ministry, and had distinguished Himself to the religious scholars of Israel long before.

These numerous cases are sufficient to warn churches not to underestimate their youth. Now most would feel safe under a charge of "despising" youth, but it must be considered that this word did not have the same meaning in the King James Bible that it has today. It presently means to hate or hold in contempt – things good Christians would never do to youth. But the meaning in old English was to simply disregard or take lightly. Paul's commandment was that youth are not to be taken lightly in the church of God. He knew that the facts of biblical history would not allow it. This will explain why there is not a word in the Bible to suggest that the New Testament church had youth worshipping any differently, learning any differently, singing any differently or praying any differently than adults. Contrast this to modern churches where families are partitioned along lines of age almost as soon as they enter the door, and oftentimes there are entirely different worship services for young and old. This is evidently done upon the theory that what the Holy Spirit prescribed in the Bible is not best suited for young people. This is to take youth lightly. The Bible will not support it.

Any conscientious Christian parent knows that the proper way to raise children is to treat them according to their conduct and not according to their age. If a fourteen-year-old behaves and respects as a forty-year-old, then he should be respected as a forty-year-old, and if he behaves as a four-year-old then he should be treated as the same. By such means a child learns that respect is the sure reward of proper conduct and very soon he is no longer a child. On the other hand, when he is brought up under a system that perpetually condescends to him and accommodates him in his immaturity, then none should be surprised that when at twenty-four his spiritual maturity is little better than it was at four. Sadly, modern Christianity is replete with such cases.

When Cornelius and his kinsmen and friends were assembled by the Holy Ghost into the first Gentile congregation to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, Cornelius then said to the Apostle Peter, "*Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee*

of God,” (Acts 10:33). This pattern was followed by the church until recent centuries, and there are very good reasons why it should be followed even today. Departures from it will account for many modern problems. The pattern serves to the benefit of both young and old. It serves to the benefit of the young because no other system will more quickly bring them to a state of spiritual maturity. In the initial phases, almost any child in church service will be anguishing for it to be done so they can go outside and play, flirt, etc. This changes when they see older people showing intent interest, giving vocal support and being emotionally moved. A child then begins to pay attention, wondering what it is that he or she is missing. This system benefits the old because they have no greater joy than the youth. When old people are left to themselves, they can sometimes be very negative about life and do too much complaining, but all this dramatically changes when youth are around. Nothing brightens their lives more than children. The irony is that both groups help each other to conduct themselves as Christians. The youth behave because of the older people, and the older people behave because of the youth. The church is truly a body, even as Paul said, with every part complementing the other (1Cor 12:4-31).

The idea that the preaching of a competent gospel minister is above the heads of youth does not show proper regard for their potential. One irony of our times is that as churches have become increasingly partitioned along lines of age, the preaching from the pulpit has become so shallow that it would be an insult to mankind to suppose that anyone would fail to understand it. Any experienced minister will know that Bible veterans in their congregation will be pleased with a sermon if they can gain but a single point they had not known or considered before. If they can gain two points, then they will go away ecstatic. This means that the balance of any sermon can be presented at a level that all can understand. This allows all to worship and rejoice together. Christ told Peter, “*Feed my sheep,*” and in the same context said “*Feed my lambs,*” (Jn 21:15-18). One of the strongest rebukes He ever made of his disciples was when they refused to admit youth into His presence (Mk 10:13-14). Any minister has an obligation to both young and old. While the modern church has invented a new class of minister called a “youth minister,” the fact is that if a man is not a youth minister then he is no minister at all.

While we have complained that modern churches tend to underestimate their youth, we happily acknowledge that nearly all Christians love youth. There is little that an older Christian loves more than a well-behaved, respectful young person, whose Christian principles have given it confidence to stand before its elder in conversation as though it were an adult. This love in the elder for the younger is usually very evident. It is the reward that the young person receives for the discipline of its parents. On the other hand, the courtesy shown to an ill-behaved and disrespectful child will only be obligatory, and palpably lacking in the warmth just described. This is the consequence such a child must endure for having parents that will not discipline it, or for failing to heed whatever discipline those parents offered. The love received in the first case reinforces the young person in their good principles, so that it becomes a case where success

breeds more success. The love denied in the latter case reinforces the young person in its bad principles, so that failure tends to yet more failure.

Young people who choose to faithfully follow Christian principles will almost invariably find themselves in a minority and be derided by some of their contemporaries. These oppositions are to be disregarded. There is a difference between being impacted by the world and making an impact on the world. Those who are impacted by the world will always be the majority. Those who positively impact the world are typically a small minority. Those of the first class will eventually be reduced to an engraving on a tombstone, which will itself erode away with time. Those of the second class will be remembered and honored by many generations, and indeed, if they are as *all* great people of the Bible, their effect on the world will be even greater after their death than it was in their life. No one ever became great by being average. No brilliant achievement was ever made by thinking the way other people think or doing what other people do. These truths follow from simple common sense, but are strengthened by the fact that the invisible hand of Divine providence will enforce them.

“And the remnant of Jacob shall be among the Gentiles in the midst of many people as a lion among the beasts of the forest, as a young lion among the flocks of sheep: who, if he go through, both treadeth down, and teareth in pieces, and none can deliver,” (Mic 5:8). This verse speaks of a mere remnant of people among many, but the hand of God will make this remnant as a lion in the forest. Now if a carefree group of men were in a forest, their perspective would be radically changed upon learning that a lion were somewhere roaming about. Though the lion be but one, and the forest large, and the trees multitudinous, and other creatures many, the presence of a single lion will capture the attention and concern of men, rabbits, raccoons, squirrels, deer, and anything else that lives in those woods. Such will a faithful servant of God be in this world. Christians should be a worry to the wicked world, and not be worrying *about* the wicked world.

If young people are to have any meaningful impact on the world, they must remember that any religion, church or movement of men that is not firmly anchored in biblical principles is damned to degeneration. Examples serving to demonstrate this are abundant. Many religions of the world began in promoting high principles under which men could make better of themselves, but the tendency of all religion is to morph into a vindication or glorification of what men already are. Such corruptions are rampant in churches today. The Dark Ages should be sufficient to warn Christians of how degenerate their own religion can become if not squarely based in the Bible. Also, many youth-driven movements have started with good intents, but not being anchored in biblical principle, they eventually took a decadent course. For example, the hippie movement of the last century was largely empowered by an opposition to war. Since the planet had recently passed through the two worst wars in history, leaving tens of millions dead, and since man had developed weapons of sufficient force to destroy the entire race, it was surely a good time to cry out against war. But that movement was not anchored in biblical principle, and was largely in defiance of such principle; consequently, it quite predictably degenerated. It

became what is perhaps the worst social disaster in American history. The same is true of the black liberation movement, which had many worthy aims, and actually started in the pulpit, but soon left the pulpit and moved to the hands of men, both black and white, having little regard for the Bible, and some having such unchristian principles that the ministers who initiated the movement would sooner be slaves than endorse them. That movement, while having favorable effects, also had disastrous ones on black society, and fell far short of what it could have been. The same can be said of the feminist movement.

“*Let no man despise thy youth.*” Young people are not to be underestimated, nor should they underestimate themselves. We will make no predictions as to whether the world *will* be changed, but be sure that it *can* be changed, and nowhere is it more apt to happen than when young people turn to the Lord and His word.

4) “Pressed Down, Shaken Together and Running Over”

No religion entertained by humans has ever placed more emphasis on the importance of giving than was done by the words and works of Jesus Christ. In this respect, He commends Himself to the consciences of all as one who is righteous and true. Giving is admired as a virtue in every culture of man. Though these cultures may differ radically in other respects, all will agree it is a good thing to be a giver, and will likely further agree that giving is in fact the crown of all that is virtuous. It is a moral force conveyed with such power to the conscience of man that even the most aggressive critics of Christianity will cower at the sight of it. On the other hand, a self-serving Christianity will surely be viewed with justifiable skepticism by many if not most. A giving man cannot be far from the Kingdom of God. A selfish man cannot be near it regardless of what he is in all other respects.

Giving is essential to the New Testament church because its doctrine teaches that the ultimate effect of Christ's salvation is to restore fallen man to the image of God. Since God is the consummate giver, it becomes both the duty and privilege of all Christians to give. God is distinguished above all other beings in the Universe in that He is the only true and absolute giver among them. All others give in hope of receiving something in return. Though they may have no expectation of repayment from the person actually receiving the gift, still they hope that God will see their kindness and bless them for it. But when God Himself gives, there is no higher power to bless Him, and the recipients of His gifts are incapable of reciprocating by adding to His already immeasurable riches, power and glory. The only thing they can give is appreciation, and even this would be impossible without God first giving them the sensibility and heart to do it. Every gift, and whatever appreciation it receives, must ultimately trace to some gift of God, and there will be nothing to account for His gift apart from His inherent altruistic nature.

Atheists commonly adduce the so-called “problem of evil” against belief in God, but seldom consider that if the existence of evil poses a problem for Theism, then the existence of good must pose a problem for them. Indeed, giving hearts among humans leave Atheists with far more than their theories can explain. They of course must attribute human origins to evolution, but how could their Darwinian, survival-of-the fittest model ever account for the existence of givers? They might reply that empathy of mother toward child will contribute toward survivability, and would therefore be a likely product of evolution. They might also contend that a giver contributes toward its own survivability by gaining the favor of its cohorts. But these explanations could never account for the empathy of a seeing man toward one who is blind, or of an agile man toward one who is lame, or of an intelligent man toward the mentally impaired. Such things should not exist in world where humans were brought into existence by a multitude of mutations whose effects were to advance the strong and eliminate the weak. Also, if giving originated from a quest to promote survivability by gaining the favor of cohorts, then why is it that men have an instinctive disdain for those who give with ulterior motives, and what is there

to account for the case where the gift is life itself, or where the stronger places himself at peril for the sake of the weaker? Such behavior is Darwinism turned upside-down.

There is really but one viable explanation for the existence of this type of good: It is that there is an inherently but inexplicably benevolent God in Heaven who has replicated this characteristic of Himself in the hearts of men, or at least in many of them. This will also explain why giving speaks with such power to the heart and conscience. The human mind knows, whether subliminally or consciously, that there is no plausible explanation for it apart from one that confirms our highest hopes and dreams, namely, that there is a giving God in Heaven; that He in some significant sense conforms men to Himself in this respect, and that if He does it in this most noble regard, then we are justified in believing He will eventually do it in other regards. This is why it is truly *“more blessed to give than receive”* (Acts 20:35). The benefits of the recipient are miniscule in comparison to the implications produced by the giver. Only a single man may benefit by receiving the gift, but the giver inspires hope for us all. These conclusions follow from both reason and the inspired text. James said, *“Do not err, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning,”* (Js 1:16-17). This is to say that when any good gift is examined, and the links in its chain of causality completely traced, one will invariably find himself at the throne of God. No other theory is plausible.

Men of course are also capable of atrocities. In no other creature can one observe such a contradictory mix of cruelty and kindness. But this fact only serves to further advance the case for Christianity against Atheism. Atheists are no less obligated to reconcile this contradiction than anyone else, but they are far more challenged to do so. Naturalism can well explain competition, exploitation and cruelty. It cannot explain self-denial and self-sacrifice. These things must therefore originate from something that is above nature, or what is properly called “supernatural.” Christianity acknowledges that man is a natural being and is therefore disposed to the cruelties that would follow from such, but Christianity also contends for a God who is above nature, possessed of benevolence, and who moves and transforms the hearts of men in ways that nature would not predict.

We are confident that every believer will affirm that whenever they have received a needful but unexpected act of kindness from another, there was of course a feeling of appreciation to the giver, but there was also an instinctive impulse of thanks to God. This impulse is testimony from the conscience serving to corroborate the scriptural claim that all gifts do in fact trace to God. This then gives us yet another motivation to be givers: Giving serves toward the praise of God by means of the thankful hearts it produces. Hence, Paul praised the Corinthians for their generosity saying:

For the administration of this service not only supplieth the want of the saints, but is abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God; Whiles by the experiment of this

ministration they glorify God for your professed subjection unto the gospel of Christ, and for your liberal distribution unto them, and unto all men... – 2Cor 9:12-13

The scriptures promising blessings to those who give are absolute and resolute. Famous verses to this effect include:

But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. – 2Cor 9:6

Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. – Gal 6:7-9

Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. – Eccl 11:1-2

There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty. The liberal soul shall be made fat: and he that watereth shall be watered also himself. – Prov 11:24-25

Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again. – Luke 6:38

These scriptures promise a sure blessing to the giver though it may not be an immediate one. “*For in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.*” “*For thou shalt find it after many days.*” In God's good time the blessings invariably come and in “*good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over.*” Younger Christians will believe this because it is their duty, but their conviction will strengthen after experience and observation have given repeated corroboration to what the scriptures have said, both positively and negatively. Givers will be openly blessed (Mt 6:4). Non-givers are apt to fare little better in the future than now.

There is no coincidence in the fact that one of the strongest advocates of giving in the Bible was also the richest man in the Bible. This was Solomon. Some will dismiss his generosity by saying he had much to give, but the better theory would be that he had much to give because of his generosity. Any Bible reader knows that Solomon's most famous books, Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, were not primarily addressed to older people whose fortunes were already made, but to younger people whose success he desired to see. Solomon contended that a great key to their future would be their generosity. Some of his most famous verses to this effect are:

Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth. If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the

south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be. He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good. – Eccl 11:1-6

By “*casting bread on the waters*” he refers to the act of broadcasting seed on irrigated ground. This is in effect what a giver is doing. Though the seed could be converted to bread and eaten for immediate benefit, the far greater reward is in forfeiting the seed for future gain. Giving “*a portion to seven*” means to give to completion or perfection. Giving “*to eight*” means going beyond. The giver should not walk away wondering if he gave enough. It would be far better to give more than enough. The reason is “*thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.*” The carnal mind would here draw the opposite conclusion, or that giving should be restrained and the money kept in reserve against future uncertainty, but the Bible asserts it is better to give so as to acquire heavenly insurance.

The clouds are also designed to teach the principle of giving. When they are full, they release their rain to the benefit of the earth. The falling tree represents the case of the non-giver. If he does not give when there is opportunity, then he will find himself in a fallen situation where there is no opportunity. Trees tend to fall under heavy rain when their shallow roots are levered through the mud by the weight of the branches and leaves – then made heavier by the water upon them. The condemnation of the selfish is exacerbated by the example of the generous.

“*He that observeth the wind*” refers to one who always finds an excuse for withholding. The same will never reap. An excuse can always be fabricated at any level of prosperity. Nor is it right to give only when a compensating blessing can be clearly seen and understood. Young couples are not deterred from having children even though the outcome is uncertain and the path to the outcome is neither observable nor fully known. To withhold from giving on such account is to implement an argument which, if consistently applied, would eliminate us all from existence. The manner in which God will bless for giving is seldom known. He may bless in this, or bless in that, or bless in both, but the possibility He will bless in neither is not even acknowledged by the inspired text. The blessing will surely come.

If one cannot give of their money, then they should give of their time. Time is more precious than money. Those who possess billions of dollars do not have a minute more than the poorest man on the earth. Time is so precious that the Bible exhorts to redeem it: “*See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.*” – Eph 5:15-16. Time must be “redeemed” because in absence of a committed effort it will surely be

lost. All Christians should make an unwavering commitment of a reasonable portion of their time to church, to other worthy causes, to those they love and to the aid of those in need.

While we feel confident on the basis of scripture and experience that givers will be blessed in a material way, we are absolutely sure they will be blessed in a way that is far more meaningful. This is expressed by Solomon in:

Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God. For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth him in the joy of his heart. – Eccl 5:19-20

This text states that if a man finds joy in his possessions, then he has actually received two blessings from God, not merely one. His first blessing is his possessions. His second blessing is the joy he has in them. These things do not automatically accompany each other, as can be seen in the abject misery of many rich and famous people (whose case Solomon also considers in the opening verses of the next chapter). God has answered the happier man – or answered his prayers, obedience and generosity – by giving him a joyous heart. The effect is that “*he shall not much remember the days of his life*” – referring to the inevitable days of sorrow and loss. These do not oppress his mind because God has upheld his heart and his hope. Now if a man does not have this, what does all else matter, and if he has it, then how can his case be improved?

5) Sufficiency of Scriptures

It is a remarkable thing that large numbers of people in the modern world claim to be Christians yet do not truly submit to the accuracy and authority of the scriptures. It is impossible to reconcile these two positions. A true “Christian” is necessarily a follower of Jesus Christ as this is what the name implies. However, there can be no doubt that Jesus Christ Himself esteemed scripture to the highest possible level, always treating it as absolutely inerrant and authoritative. In particular, He said scripture cannot be broken (Jn 10:35); that it was inspired by the Spirit (Mt 22:43), and that not so much as a jot or tittle of it could fail (Mt 5:18), but that it must be completely fulfilled (Mk 14:49). Both He and His apostles habitually spoke of scripture being fulfilled, always stating or implying that no other outcome could have been the case. Indeed, immediately before His abduction, He claimed to have power to call upon legions of angels for His deliverance, but rejected this alternative because it would contradict what scripture had foretold (Mt 26:53-54). It follows then that the Son of God takes personal responsibility to ensure that scripture will be fulfilled, and He would sooner die than suffer His word to fail. He Himself expressly stated that one could more easily destroy the Universe than obstruct the word of God: “*Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away,*” (Mt 24:35).

In nearly all disputes with His adversaries, Jesus replied with scripture, and both He and His adversaries understood that a scriptural answer was a final answer to all matters. Even when challenged by Satan, three times did Christ answer him by quoting from the Bible (Lk 4:1-13). Now if Jesus Christ is what all true Christians claim, He needed not appeal to any authority to establish His point. He is the only man ever that could act and speak entirely upon his own authority. Notwithstanding, Jesus repeatedly referred to scripture in His defense, which plainly shows He considered scripture to be nothing short of the very word of God, and it is a vain and culpable claim to be His follower without taking exactly the same resolute position.

Belief in the Bible is therefore not a choice that professing Christians are truly free to make. It is a choice only for non-Christians to make. The choice to be a Christian is simultaneously a choice to believe the Bible, and the choice to believe the Bible is simultaneously a choice to be a Christian. All claiming to be Christians but denying the reliability or authority of the Bible are in fact pseudo-Christians because their claim of being followers of Jesus Christ cannot possibly be true. Further, when Jesus gave His repeated and emphatic commandments to have faith in God, He did not mean faith in humanly-fabricated notions of what God is, or what God should do, or what God will do, but He meant faith in God *as He is revealed in the Bible*. Jesus *never* recognized any book or any man as being absolutely reliable and authoritative apart from the Bible and its inspired authors. Faith in the Bible implies faith in God and Jesus Christ, and faith in God and Jesus Christ imply faith in the Bible.

Further, since all true Christians recognize Jesus as being the ultimate author of the Bible, it follows that Jesus is the final authority on what is Bible and what is not. Unlearned and unstable

men oftentimes promote other Jewish writings that were omitted from the Bible, suggesting that the decision to omit these books was made by prejudicial men seeking to promote their own agendas. The truth is that the books we have in the Bible were put there because the evidence says that Christ and His apostles honored those books as being the inspired word of God, and other writings were omitted because we have no evidence that Jesus Christ approved them.

Now for purposes of determining what the Lord would have our church practice to be, there can be no doubt that scripture is intended as our sole rule and guide. This can be seen in Paul's important statement to Timothy:

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. – 2Tim 3:16-17

Excepting the Lord Jesus only, no man has ever had a greater impact on civilization than the author of this text. Few would have predicted this of Paul. He was of a conquered and oppressed nation, rejected by his own people, initially doubted even by Christians, of meager stature and unimpressive voice (2Cor 10:10). But he was an absolute master of the word of God, as demonstrated by all he wrote, and he acquired the traits that always accompany assimilation of the word, namely, confidence, boldness, resilience and resolve – things desired by all men, and which they soon learn to feign, but do not so easily make real. This proficiency in the word was the key to his power and to the Gentile revolution energized by the Lord through him.

This crucial verse claims that all scripture is by Divine inspiration. This implies it is the product of an infinite mind, thus having no errors or oversights, being of the soundest conceivable judgment, and therefore optimal in all its prescriptions, whether of doctrine, philosophy, personal walk or church practice. Any departures from its judgments must therefore entail some loss of effectiveness. It may be with the best of intents that a man pursues a different course, and his strategy may have been carefully planned using the best reasoning his human mind can muster, but it cannot be better than the one prescribed by God. To affirm otherwise either denies that He is God or denies that the scriptures are in fact His word. So if we pursue any course other than what is prescribed by the Bible, at some point or another, we are going to encounter unforeseen and unintended consequences, defects or deficiencies that would have been avoided had the scriptures been followed.

Many Christians will concur with what we have said in the previous paragraph, but the verse makes another claim that is not so readily accepted: Not only is the Bible an inerrant and optimal guide, it is also a *complete* one. It addresses every question that need be addressed for the man who sincerely wishes to serve God. The scriptures were formulated in the infinite mind of God such “*that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*” Since all Christians acknowledge that formal worship is one of the most important aspects of our

service to God, then it is unthinkable that a book covering all needful things would have omitted any important aspect of this particular thing. The claim that the Bible is a thorough furnisher simply could not be true if it failed to give us definitive guidance on any important aspect of the undeniably important business of worship. The same may be said of other primary church functions. They are too important to have been omitted in a thorough furnisher.

The Bible of course is not a complete guide in secular matters, nor does it claim to be. It does not tell us how to overhaul an engine, program a computer or fly an airplane. When it claims to be a complete guide, it means with respect to the *spiritual* needs and obligations of man. Since all of these needs and obligations are met in God, and since God has not changed, the Bible remains a complete guide today. Since the church has first priority in the spiritual life of man, it follows that the Bible provides all we need to know about it.

Since modern Christianity worships God in a multitude of different ways across its multiplicity of denominations, and since it does this notwithstanding the undeniable reasoning of the prior paragraphs, one would anticipate that all this diversity has its root in disagreement about what is important. If the Bible is a thorough furnisher in all that is important, and if we are true to our claim to be obeying it, then it should follow that our differences are only in things that are unimportant, or else they derive from disagreement over what is important and what is not. However, when we do a survey of Christians, we come to a surprising discovery: It is that, notwithstanding all their differences in church practice, nearly all Christians are at agreement on what is important. They nearly all agree that baptism is important, that communion is important, that church music is important, that education of youth is important, that training of ministers is important, that evangelism is important, etc. Now if we agree these things are important, but have differing opinions concerning them, then it must be true that at least some of us are either ignoring or denying that the Bible is a sufficient furnisher, or else there are differences in our rules of interpretation that are leading us to differing conclusions.

Those who choose to ignore or deny the Bible are not apt to be influenced by what we have to say. Unfortunately, many so-called Christians today fall within this class. These have a problem much more fundamental than what this book addresses. But to those who properly consider the Bible to be the ultimate authority, we hope to show there are objective rules that must be applied when interpreting it, and upon so doing, the Bible will be found as a complete and definitive guide in all matters of church practice.

6) The Law Not a Rule of Practice

While scriptures are a sufficient rule of practice, it is of course necessary that scriptures be properly interpreted. Paul told Timothy, “*Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth,*” (2Tim 2:15). Paul’s selection of the word “divide” to describe proper interpretation was no doubt partly motivated by the need to distinguish between Old Testament and New Testament, or between law and grace.

Where Christians are found worshipping with practices having no basis in the New Testament, they will oftentimes retreat to Old Testament Law in search of support. This will commonly be the case when defending several things, including the use of musical instruments in worship, the observance of Saturday Sabbaths, the observance of Jewish Holidays, and even in defense of infant baptism or sprinkling, the argument is apt to be significantly based in the Law. Indeed, most Christians do in some degree or another stumble at this point, including Christians who are otherwise well-reasoned. It evidently does not occur to them that the very argument they offer in support of their practice could actually serve to discredit it. The fact that a thing was done under the Law does not imply it should be done in the church, and likely implies the very opposite.

What bearing then does the Law have on New Testament Christianity? All Christians acknowledge that at least part of the Law has been done away, yet they agree that things such as murder, theft, adultery, etc. are as wrong now as they ever were. In light of all Christ has done for us, these things are even worse than before. So does this mean the Ten Commandments are still of force, whereas other provisions of the Law are to be considered obsolete? Many Christians have in fact drawn this conclusion, and have conveniently divided the Law into two parts – one called “ceremonial” and the other “moral,” then they claim the former has been done away while the latter remains of force. This reasoning is approximately correct and tends to carry toward proper conclusions on many points, including especially the idea that the Law is no basis for New Testament worship. But when a more precise understanding is sought, the case against using the Law as a rule for the church is even stronger than this reasoning suggests.

For logical purposes it is necessary that a distinction be made between moral and ceremonial law because of the different ways the Law applied to Jews and Gentiles. Both were under the moral law but only the Jews were under the ceremonial. A Gentile could convert to the Jewish religion and become a proselyte, in which event he too would come under the ceremonial law, but in absence of this, the Bible did not obligate him to keep it. When considered as a composite unit, the Law was only to the Jews, whether naturally born or converted. Though the moral law was never a means unto eternal life in a practical sense, in a hypothetical sense it was, albeit by nothing short of perfect compliance. This of course was something no man ever achieved, and this fact was the primary point intended by the Law. Its success was in the realization of its failure, and its failure was in the illusion of its success. The intent of the Law was to

demonstrate its own inadequacy and the absolute necessity of another way. *“Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith,”* (Gal 3:24-25).

This objective of pointing to Christ was common to both aspects of the Law. The moral law demonstrated the necessity of Christ. The ceremonial actually promised Him and His sufficiency through its various types and shadows. This will explain why the Bible curiously never makes any explicit distinction between a moral and ceremonial law. These two implicit parts of the Law are unified under a common objective, and are done away as one when that objective is served. So Paul continues and says, *“But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster,”* (Gal 3:25). An engine and a transmission are two separate parts of an automobile, but serve toward a common objective, and become equally needless when that objective ceases to be or is better served by another means.

However, theologians have long struggled with the fact that the Bible does not supply them with a distinction that is absolutely necessary to support their reasoning. They insist that the moral law is still of force whereas the ceremonial has been done away. If their view were accurate, and the distinction as important as they claim, then surely the Bible would have somewhere acknowledged it. Since the Holy Spirit has never faltered through oversight, the problem is not with the Bible; rather, it is that something is amiss in the reasoning of the theologians. While there is indeed a logical distinction between moral and ceremonial law, the distinction is no less hypothetical to Christians than the salvation the Law purported to offer. When properly viewed, the Law is not two separate covenants or contracts, but is a single contract made only with the nation Israel for the purpose of demonstrating to it and all other nations the necessity and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Now as a single covenant, it is both ratified and rescinded in whole.

This will explain why the Apostles consistently described the Law as a composite unit that cannot be accepted or rejected in parts. The Law is not two contracts. It is one contract. Consequently, violation of any part of it constitutes violation of the whole. One must either take all of it or none of it. Hence, Paul told the Galatians, *“For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law,”* (Gal 5:3). James said, *“For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all,”* (Js 2:10). Again, Paul said, *“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them,”* (Gal 3:10). Add to this: *“And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work,”* (Rom 11:6). So Christ and the Law are alike in that neither can be taken in part. They both must be taken in whole, which means they cannot be taken together. Hence, Paul said, *“Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace,”* (Gal 5:4), and earlier he said, *“I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain,”* (Gal 2:21). Thus, to compromise the grace of Jesus Christ in any degree by a mixture of the Law is equal to a rejection of Christ altogether.

Jesus Himself handled the Law exactly the same in His teaching on fasting (Mt 9:14-17). When challenged by the Jews as to why His disciples did not fast, the Lord began by explaining that one does not fast in the presence of the Bridegroom. It would be inappropriate for men to fast while joyously in the visible presence of their Lord. But Jesus then added:

No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse. Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved. – Mt 9:16-17.

By these remarks the Lord showed it was not His intent to merely patch the Law by adding amendments or rescinding selected parts. Jesus was a revolutionary, not a mere reformer. He came to replace the entire system. He gave an entirely new garment, not a patched up old one. Similarly, He gave both new wine and a new bottle in which to put it. As He said elsewhere, “*The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached...*” (Lk 16:16). Hence, His own system replaced the former.

Add to this the numerous declarations in the New Testament that Christians are not under the Law. None of these state or even suggest that only a ceremonial law is meant:

For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace. What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid. – Rom 6:14-15

Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God. – Rom 7:4

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth. – Rom 10:4

For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. – Gal 2:19

Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator. – Gal 3:19

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. – Gal 3:24-25

For purposes of exactly understanding the present role of the Law, no scripture is more important than Paul’s statement to Timothy:

Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: From which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling; Desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm. But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine; According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust. – 1Tim 1:5-11

This declaration that the Law was not made for a righteous man does much to explain its present role. Since any blood-washed follower of Jesus Christ has been rendered righteous before God, he is no longer under the Law. Yet the Law remains relevant for the unrighteous. The amount of Law that has been done away for any man is exactly equal to the amount of Law that Christ has fulfilled in his behalf (Mt 5:17-20). For the unsaved man, this means none of it, but for the saved man, it means all of it. As Paul elsewhere said, *“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death,”* (Rom 8:2). Hence, the Law has not been repealed, and still bears upon some, but the people of Christ have been freed from it.

The fact that Christians are not under the Law can readily be seen in the deliberations of the apostolic conference wherein they directly dealt with this very issue (Acts 15). In concluding that they needed not burden themselves or other saved people with the Law, the Apostles stated, *“For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day,”* (Acts 15:21). Hence, they considered the teaching of the Law to be of such low priority in the church that they were willing to commit this business to the unbelieving Jews. This will come as a real surprise to anyone failing to understand the meaning of Paul’s earlier statement. The Apostles surely did not forfeit jurisdiction of the entire Old Testament to the synagogue, but insofar as the Old Testament was a rule of conduct and worship, this they were willing to leave to the Jews. This shows they did not consider that part of the Old Testament to be relevant to them as Christians, though they did consider it relevant for others.

We therefore have no evidence that Christ or His Apostles viewed the Law as being divided between a moral part and a ceremonial part, nor that they saw part of it as being current and part of it as being obsolete. When they spoke of the Law being done away for Christians, their meaning was that it was entirely done away, and not to be followed by them in any respect. Rather, Christians are to aspire to the *higher* standard of Jesus Christ. It is important to understand that it is in fact a higher standard. While Christianity does not *follow* the Law in any respect, it *fulfills* the Law in every respect on this account.

Christ said all the Law and Prophets hang on two simple principles, namely, that a man love the Lord with all his heart, soul and mind, and that he love His neighbor as himself (Mt 22:37-40). This statement is commonly construed as conveying the essence of the Law, but it would be more accurately viewed as being a higher law of which the Mosaic Law was a mere corollary. If a man has his heart set on these things, the commandments not to kill, steal, etc. will indeed be fulfilled by his life, but they are inapplicable to him in the sense that they do nothing to govern or bind his behavior. This is because he aims for an even greater goal. Paul said of himself prior to his conversion that he was blameless as touching the righteousness of the Law (Phil 3:6). This he meant in a comparative sense, not in an absolute one. Yet he elsewhere described his unconverted state as disobedient, deceived, malicious and hateful (Tit 3:3). These two statements are reconciled by understanding that he spoke relative to two different standards – the lower standard of the Law versus the higher standard of the gospel.

In His famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “*Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment...*” (Mt 5:21-22). Again, He said, “*Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart,*” (Mt 5:27-28). The authorities here quoted of “old time” were Moses and other Old Testament writers, but in this sermon, Jesus repeatedly followed them with the words “*but I say unto you.*” This shows that He was replacing the old standard with a new one. The Jews were therefore astonished with His doctrine (Mt 7:28) because He assumed authority even over Moses. He was not merely giving a pure interpretation of Moses. There would be no occasion for astonishment at this. Nor were the Jews impressed merely with the power and confidence with which Christ taught. Their astonishment was not merely in *how* He taught, but also in *what* He taught. They were astonished with His *doctrine* because it replaced what Moses taught and assumed an authority that God alone could have.

In every case, His new standard had demands at least as great as the old, to the extent that it is the most daunting system of morality ever taught. It might therefore seem very strange that He elsewhere claimed that His yoke is easy and His burden light (Mt 11:30). But the burden of it is suddenly removed upon realization that His new standard is actually a *heavenly* standard, being given to a blood-bought, heaven-bound people who are to be conformed to the very image of the Son of God. For this reason, it is a standard defined in God Himself: “*Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,*” (Mt 5:48). All this shows the gross error of those who believe salvation is by human obedience, but think the New Testament has lowered the terms to within human reach. The greater rigor is actually with the New Testament, but it is pursued in joyous hope rather than in fear.

The higher moral standard of the gospel can also be seen in: *“For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world,”* (Tit 2:11-12). Now one could argue that the Law taught exactly the same things, but the grace of God teaches them in a much more powerful way. When a man is told he must save himself by his own works, the carnal side of his mind will then ask exactly how much he must do, not wanting to expend any more effort than is necessary. But when a man is told that he has been outright forgiven and graciously saved from eternal hell notwithstanding all his sins and errors, then his obligation to repent and live in an appreciative way is without bound. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father could have reasonably imposed rigorous terms on his son for being received back into his home, but then the effect of the parable would have been destroyed. Nothing could more obligate the son toward repentance than for the father to do exactly as he did in graciously forgiving him.

In further proof of these claims concerning the present role of the Law, consider Paul’s statement to the Corinthians:

For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you. – 1Cor 9:19-23

Observe his claim to be under the “law to Christ,” which shows that there is indeed such a law and that it is distinguishable from the law of the Old Testament. This law of Christ was the ever-abiding law over the life of the Apostle, whether in the company of Jew or Gentile. It is a dishonor to Jesus Christ to suppose that His law is inferior to the other, or that His law is insufficient without being propped up by the other. The law of Christ is actually the ultimate standard, and does in fact prop up the Old Testament Law by elucidating its intended purpose and meaning. This is conveyed in the following crucial text:

Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech: And not as Moses, which put a vail over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. – 2Cor 3:12-15

Unfortunately, to hear the complex and confused arguments of some Christians today, whereby they cleverly use the Law to dismiss the simple and plain speech of the New Testament, one would think the exact opposite of this text to be true, or that there is a veil over the face of New Testament Christians that is done away in Moses. The truth is that the Law of Moses is subordinate to the law of Christ, and is to be interpreted in the light of it. In the prior text, Paul claimed that, insofar as the law of Christ would allow, he adapted to the Mosaic Law when in the presence of Jews to avoid offending them. This was in keeping with the law of Christ, who had commanded his Apostles saying, “*And into whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you, eat such things as are set before you,*” (Lk 10:8). By this He meant that evangelists are to adapt to the cultures of those they visit and not to demand the reverse. This would include the culture of the Jews. But when in Gentile culture, Paul said he lived *as without law*, thus showing he did not consider it the final rule of conduct, much less would he consider it a rule of worship.

No doubt much of the confusion on this issue has been caused by the overlap and similarity of the two laws. When a nation rescinds an out-dated constitution and replaces it with another, the two documents are apt to contain similarities, but in a court of law they are as distinguishable as night and day. The new document is the absolute law of the land. The old document may be of historical interest, and serve as an effective tool to an educator, but legally it is no longer of force. Accordingly, Christians are in every sense under the new law of Christ. In no sense are they under the Law of Moses. Confusion is also caused by a failure to distinguish the case of those who are in Christ and those who are not. The Law is done away only *in Christ*. This is true either of the moral or of the ceremonial. One should not be distracted by the fact that the Jews have themselves done away with much of the ceremonial. There is no basis in scripture or reason for their action. If they insist upon denying Christ, then there is no basis for supposing that *any* of their obligations the Mosaic Law have ceased to be. The same is true with respect to unbelieving Gentiles and their obligation to the moral law. When Christ is denied, everything reverts back to the old, burdensome, fearful and hopeless state of affairs. This is why the Apostles repeatedly and emphatically warned Christians that they wanted no part of it.

So the fact that a worship practice was used in the Old Testament does nothing to validate its use under the New. While we have gone to some length here to demonstrate this, the error of such thinking should be apparent from the inconsistency of those who advance it. Their habit is to take from the Law what they want while leaving the rest. For example, they will eagerly justify musical instruments from the Law, but be loath to take on its sacrifices. This reasoning will not stand under biblical scrutiny. Paul warned the Galatians that in taking on part of the Law, they were obligating themselves to the whole.

This inconsistent use of the Law by Christians has also played into the hands of those who are critical of both Christianity and the Bible. Such infidels will commonly attempt to discredit the whole book by pointing to aspects of the Law that are contrary to the norms of our society. Its accommodations to slavery and its hard position against the Canaanite nations are common

points of criticism. Now the norms these infidels take to be inviolable are in fact Christian norms, and they have Christianity to thank for living in a society where such norms are observed. New Testament Christianity had declared the Law obsolete long before these infidels were ever born, and the New Testament had carefully explained that the Law was a deliberately hard system under which all men were truly condemned slaves. Further, it had been the Divine plan all along to replace it, as confirmed by the Old Testament scriptures themselves (Ps 89:20-37, Isa 54, Jer 3:16, Jer 31:31-34, Dn 9:27)

Further, the New Testament had explained that the purpose of the Law was to teach man the futility of all ways apart from Jesus Christ. In this respect, God has carried religion along the same path we travel personally. Practically all men having a hope in the Savior will concede there was a point in their lives when they expected to attain Heaven by means of their own obedience. Jesus Christ became meaningful to them only after they met with defeat in pursuing this futile course. Accordingly, it is a plainly observable fact of reality that God will carry men through hardship, suffering and defeat for the purpose of advancing them. He does this both to individuals and societies. Infidels will object that these hardships are actually proof there is no God, but their argument is ridiculous, and only proves there is no God that these infidels would approve. We have no interest in imagined deities who comport with preconceived ideologies of what a deity ought to be; rather, our interest is in the *real* God over the *real* world, which happens to remain a place with many *real* hardships. The Law was a hardship imposed by God for the purpose of advancing men, but it is done away in Christ.

Still, some Christians will argue that if a thing be under the Law, then we can at least be confident in its decency, and therefore admit it to the church on that account. This argument will be advanced with hypocrisy, because there are some things under the Law these same Christians definitely would not admit. But the greater problem with their conclusion is that the Bible records multiple attempts by uninspired persons to do these very things under much the same reasoning, but in no case were their actions approved. Misguided Christians in the New Testament attempted to add circumcision, Sabbath days, holy days, etc. on the basis that they were done under the Law, but these efforts were rejected as inadmissible by the Apostles. We have not a single instance where a modification was approved on the basis of it being part of the Law. This truly speaks volumes about church practice in general. If the Apostles were unwilling that the original form of the church be altered even by things approved under the Law, then how much less for human contrivances having no authorization in either Old Testament or New? The New Testament church is the very culmination and perfection of the plan of God for worship on this earth. Any modification of it, whether from the Law or elsewhere, can only serve to degrade it. *“For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God,”* (Heb 7:19).

In recent years, some have attempted to justify homosexuality and other vices on the basis of the fact that the Law has been done away. These arguments are invalid because, when the Bible is

properly interpreted, the New Testament will be found condemning the same behavior. But the argument also errs in that it fails to consider that the Law has only been done away *in Christ*. Unsaved people are as much under the Law as they ever were, and it is upon this account they will be condemned and punished. Further, it is a dubious argument that says God has saved anyone for the purpose of licensing them to a lower standard of morals. The opposite is true: God has mercifully saved people for the purpose of His own glory, which is served when they show their appreciation by living in an obedient, God-honoring manner. Those who teach otherwise are described by the Bible as “*turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ,*” (Jude 4). The same false teachers are said to be “*raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever,*” (Jude 13). They are aptly described as “wandering stars” because they truly have no fixed moral standard or doctrine, but are ever-ready to adapt to the ongoing social current. Jude is very clear that such people are eternally condemned.

Their error of perverting God’s word to justify their behavior does far more to condemn them than their behavior itself. The homosexual who concedes his error, though struggling to repent of it, can still look to Heaven in hope, but a self-justifying corrupter of God’s word has no basis whatsoever for claiming he is saved. This claim is reserved for those who look to God in faith. “Faith” surely does not mean to earnestly believe whatever one wants to believe. The wickedest man in the world is both willing and able to do this. Faith means to believe and accept what God has said, especially and necessarily as revealed in His inspired word, so that those who reject and pervert the word can make no claim to faith and no claim to salvation.

The fact that the Law has been done away only in Christ creates an interesting predicament for anyone who would presume to break the Law on that account. Lawless behavior is a mark of one who is not in Christ, and therefore of one to whom the Law still pertains. James used this very line of reasoning when warning Christians against despising the poor and those of lower social class. Such behavior, being in violation of the Law, is a mark of one who is unsaved and yet under the Law, in which event, the full burden of the Law falls upon them (Js 2:1-13). On the other hand, loving and merciful behavior is a mark of one who is in Christ, and therefore of one who is freed from the Law, and to whom love and mercy will be shown.

When a man is saved in Christ, His offences against the Law are forgiven, and the Law is displaced with an even higher moral standard, which he is to pursue, not as a formula for salvation, but, in appreciation and self-assurance of a salvation that can only be freely given. Where displaced with the higher standard, the Law is no longer the *rule* of conduct, but it does remain a *test* of it. It is in this sense that scriptures do in fact make an implicit distinction between moral law and ceremonial law for the case of Christians. Both have been done away, but the moral law remains as a test. A man who lives in violation of the moral law, and therefore in violation of the lower standard, cannot possibly be in compliance with the higher standard, and is therefore deficient in his appreciation for the salvation he presumes to possess.

But the most important point for purposes of this section is that the Law, being a lower standard, is degrading to Christianity when adapted by it either as a rule of conduct or rule of worship. The quotes in the introductory section demonstrate how Christian thinking has degenerated in this respect. Calvin condemned musical instruments in worship as having been borrowed from Jewish religion. This was also a complaint of other reformers. Even early Christians claimed to have omitted instruments because they considered them to be judaizing. All these Christians understood that the Law, being a deliberately inferior and now-obsolete form of worship, is not a rule of practice for the church. But modern Christians are apt to run straight to the Law to defend their ways on this and other points. What was formerly considered as proof against a thing has now been perverted into an argument favoring it.

7) Tradition Not a Rule of Practice

If Christians are sufficiently supplied in scripture, then it would of course follow they need no other rule, but when the whole of professed Christianity is examined, one will find a rule of tradition to be much more prevalent than a rule of scripture. What is worse, a majority of professed Christians will justify themselves in this, resolutely affirming that tradition is actually authoritative. Few things could be further from the truth.

This spirit of traditionalism is a problem with both conservatives and liberals. When it blinds conservatives, they will impulsively object to anything departing from their narrow sphere of familiarity. Very little thought is truly given to how scriptures bear upon the issue. The automatic assumption is that things have always been done in a scriptural way, so that any change from tradition must be unscriptural. This approach invests too much confidence in the past, and can also err in assuming there is only one right way in which a thing can be done. When traditionalism blinds liberals, they invest too much confidence in the present, being disposed to approve anything for no other reason than that other people are doing it. In either case, the actions of man have been made the guide, and the word of God has been laid aside.

Primary reasons for this tendency to supplant scripture with tradition are: Tradition is easy to follow. It requires no knowledge of the Bible. Indeed, it requires little knowledge of anything because it defends its practices with the most convenient of arguments, claiming those practices should exist simply because they do exist or have existed. Accordingly, it automatically vindicates those who seek to hand it to the next generation. And, because it originates with man and not God, it is apt to be more accommodative to human preference.

The ironic thing is that there is no better way to destroy tradition than by following it. The practice of following tradition is like a man attempting to walk a straight line by putting one foot directly in front of the other. After making many steps, if he will look back on the path he has taken, he will invariably find it is crooked. The same outcome will result for a man attempting to plow a straight furrow by watching the furrow as it develops behind him. As Jesus said, "*No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God,*" (Lk 9:62). Such a man will never plough in a straight line. To do this, or to walk in a straight path, a man must set his eye upon a distant object and maintain a course directly to it. Even so, a church or denomination following tradition will likely be left with no real tradition of any length, but will meander between various doctrines and practices from one generation to the next. While it may boast of walking in the "old paths," the fact is that one may not have to be very old to remember when things were different. Indeed, it seems to be a common habit of traditionalists to pretend an orthodoxy that never actually existed. But if a church will faithfully follow the word of God, it will walk in a straight and consistent path, leaving a trail of real and honorable tradition behind it. A tradition can be a good thing to create, but not a good thing to follow.

It is strange that anyone would boast of following tradition given the sharp denunciations that Jesus made of this very thing:

Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. – Mark 7:6-9

So the Pharisees were sharply rebuked for making tradition an authority. They even gave it priority over the word of God. Jesus said they had reduced their worship to *vanity* by doing this. Now if we take the word “vanity” for its literal meaning, this would imply that the Pharisees were accomplishing nothing by their worship, and would have been no worse off had they not worshipped at all. This is a sobering thought, and should be sufficient to warn anyone that God is not pleased with those who make tradition their rule.

Upon two occasions, Paul commanded the Thessalonians to follow tradition (2Thes 3:6 and 2:15), but context will plainly show he did not mean the uninspired tradition of many generations; rather, he meant the inspired tradition of the Apostle’s generation only. So these commandments represent no contradiction to what Jesus said, and do nothing to authorize the practice of following tradition in the usual sense. Instead, they are unequivocal proof that we should follow the scriptural precedent set by Christ and His Apostles.

Another irony of traditionalism is that those who are least guilty of it are oftentimes the most accused, whereas those who are most guilty are never accused. Worshippers who closely adhere to scripture will be accused of traditionalism because of their constancy and their resistance to change. On the other hand, those who are more disposed to modernize will not be considered traditionalists at all. The problem here is that nothing in the formal definition or common use of the word “tradition” actually specifies the length of time or repetition that is necessary for a tradition to be established. In fact some traditions are of very recent origin while others date to the distant past. Consequently, a “tradition” is best defined as a thing that is done simply because other people have done it, whether many times or few. Now a person who is truly a follower of the Bible has no concern whatsoever about what others have done, so such a person is not properly a traditionalist. On the other hand, while all modernizations do of course begin with an innovator, they are thereafter imitated by others, oftentimes on revolutionary scale, in what is primarily motivated by herd instinct or an accommodation to such. Such practices are justified and adopted on the basis that other people are doing them, which truly make them the products of traditionalism. Be sure it was exactly this form of traditionalism that Jesus meant when He scathed the Jews, saying, “*Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition,*” (Mk 7:9).

Traditionalism, as we have defined it, is also potentially dangerous, and this likely helps to explain the passion of the Lord against it. When a society is not anchored in the solid, unchangeable word of God, but chooses rather to follow the particular human opinion presently favored by the most crafty debaters, then the outcome will be unstable, unpredictable and perilous. There are no bounds on where a society can go when its people justify their behavior simply on the basis that it comports with the opinions of others. Witness Nazi Germany of the last century. Modern attempts to discredit, dismiss and pervert the Bible will eventually lead to the ruin even of those who oppose and corrupt the book. Peter said the unlearned and unstable wrest (i.e. “twist”) the scriptures *unto their own destruction* (2Pet 3:16). A potential example of this can presently be seen in the pro-gay movement, where many have invented ingenious interpretations of the Bible in an attempt to coerce the book into supporting their view. They do not consider that a substantial percentage of their present supporters have been swung to their view on little more than herd instinct, and could as easily be swung by the same to a dangerous, opposing extreme. True New Testament Christianity is an annoyance to homosexuals because it calls on them to repent, but true New Testament Christianity also condemns religious coercion and persecution. Anyone anchored in it will still be annoying gays 10 years from now, but his opposition will still be held in check by the word of God. Those who dismiss or pervert New Testament Christianity are therefore sawing on the very limb that upholds them.

But before leaving this chapter, it is important to note that while tradition should not be considered a *rule* of practice, it is nonetheless an important *guide* that all Christians would be prudent to consult. This is because tradition is handed down from those who have fully lived out their lives, made their mistakes and implemented their corrections from the word of God. This cannot be said of the ongoing whims of the present generation. Also, present opinion is based on the untested wisdom of only one generation whereas tradition is the cumulative wisdom of many. So tradition is a thing that should always be consulted, even if not blindly followed, and there should always be a healthy degree of hesitation before abandoning it.

Respect for tradition is also necessitated by the scriptural doctrine of the preservation and perpetuity of the church. Paul called the church “*the pillar and ground of the truth,*” (1Tim 3:15). It could hardly be this if it had generally resided in error over the whole of its duration. While even a Spirit-blessed church is capable of error, one should not expect it to persist in such. So the things generally believed and practiced by the historical church must be considered in all decisions we make, and to do otherwise is to take a path that will almost surely lead to regret.

8) Christian Liberty

Errors in church practice can occur either by disregarding scriptural rules or by enforcing rules that are not scriptural. Sometimes Christians can be very guarded against the first type of error but have very little conscience about committing the second. The effect of these unauthorized rules is to deprive of rightful liberties. The last two chapters can be unified as one subject in this regard. Either to enforce the Law or uninspired tradition in the church is to infringe upon Christian liberties by imposing rules having no New Testament authority. These types of errors cannot be lightly dismissed because Jesus and His Apostles vigorously opposed them. Jesus scathed the Jewish lawyers saying, “*Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne...*” (Lk 11:46). By this He was referring to the multitudinous rules of the Jewish religion that were void of scriptural basis. In contrast to this, when the Apostles made their important decree to the Gentiles, they prefaced it with the words, “*For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things,*” (Acts 15:28). This shows a sharp distinction between the liberty of the New Testament and the burdensome Jewish religion it displaced. Paul strongly warned the Galatians against reverting to it: “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage,*” (Gal 5:1). These statements reflect the high value placed by the New Testament on freedom and its resolve that it not be lost.

The freedom given to Christians is so extensive that there are several places where scriptures warn them to use it prudently (1Cor 8:9, 1Cor 10:29, Gal 5:13, 1Pet 2:16). The fact that a man has a right to do a thing does not imply that it is the right thing to do. It is therefore of great significance that the New Testament opted to handle many such cases by teaching the prudent exercise of rights rather than by denying them. This again shows the importance put on freedom. Such being the case, it is a serious breach of the New Testament to deny rights that God has given. It is also important to understand that rights are in fact given only by God. Modern Americans have become careless in this respect to their own peril. It is not uncommon for them to speak of government *giving* them the rights to free speech, religion, etc. When properly viewed, governments do not give *any* rights. God gives rights, and governments either recognize those rights or rebel against them. This important principle is stated in the opening words of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...” A primary reason Atheists are averse to God is that they do not savor the idea of submitting to Him, but they evidently do not consider that He is also the foundation of their freedom. If rights come from man and not God, then which man do they come from: Me, you or who? These considerations explain why Paul did not simply say to the Galatians to stand fast in liberty; rather, he said to stand fast in the liberty *wherewith Christ hath made us free*.

There are of course limitations on rights. Many of these are not only taught by scriptures but are acknowledged by all honest men in all societies of the world. For example, all acknowledge that one man does not have a right to deceive another, nor does he have a right to advance his own cause at the expense of another without consent. Accordingly, he does not have a right to seize control or take possession of what rightfully belongs to another. As basic as these principles are, faithful observance of them is sufficient to guarantee absolute soundness in any Christ-loving church. The church is the sole property of the Lord Jesus Christ, having been bought with His own blood. He only has the right to define it. Any man seeking to redefine it is exercising rights he does not have and is infringing upon the rights of another in the worst imaginable way. No violation of rights could be more severe than that which treads upon the rights of Jesus Christ. He alone has authority to determine what His church is to believe and advocate, what it is to do, what it is to prohibit and what it is to allow.

Many Christians are too disposed to view a church as being their own property or as being the property of a congregation. They errantly assume that a majority vote would legitimize almost anything in their church. The congregation may in a sense own land, building, etc., and have a right before both God and civil law to use their property as a pasture, department store, baseball field, etc. But once they pin the name of Jesus Christ on it and represent it as a church, they have taken on a franchise that carries obligations to Him whose name cannot be taken in vain. Men should surely understand God's demands in this since they reserve to themselves the same rights. To properly be a church, it must teach what Christ taught, worship as He said to worship and be under His law. Moses was one of the greatest men ever, yet not even he had the right to dictate the laws of the church. When Christians impose the Mosaic Law, particularly for the purpose of dismissing the plain precepts and precedents of Christ, they have effectively built one tabernacle unto Moses and another to Christ. When Peter proposed the same error, his admonition from Heaven was, "*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him,*" (Mt 17:5). Accordingly, while parents, grand-parents, etc. may be worthy of veneration, they have been made objects of worship when traditions acquired from them are made the law of the church.

It would of course follow that neither is the present generation authorized to dictate the laws of the church. Nonetheless, it is not uncommon for Christians to do this. Examples are numerous: Some have imposed racial requirements for membership. The Bible gives no authority for this whatsoever. Others have taken extreme measures to ensure a qualified membership, including even minimum age requirements. While this rule may have been implemented with good intents, it was in overreaction to churches that will admit almost any practice to gain a nickel or a nose. The corrective measure is as void of scriptural authority as the practices being opposed. One set of errors has been exchanged for another. There will be negative consequences for these unauthorized amendments to the wisdom of God. As another example, consider churches who, in justifiable suspicion of modern revised versions of the Bible, have done well to endorse the King James Version, but have gone so far as to elevate this position to creedal status. The

problem here is that neither the King James nor any other version contains a scripture that would authorize any group of translators with monopoly rights. Such extreme and implausible measures generally serve to weaken the very positions they purport to defend. The first step in successfully defending any position is in choosing a position that is defensible. We believe the King James Version can be defended as the superior translation, but a position denying any possibility of a better translation cannot be defended by scripture.

Oftentimes an unscriptural rule takes the form of a bogus principle or argument that is enforced by well-meaning Christians against things that are themselves unscriptural. So the unscriptural practice is opposed by a line of reasoning that scriptures will not support. This then leads to a predicament. While there might be good reasons for the objections these Christians make, those reasons are not to be found in the weak and dubious arguments they offer. Invalid arguments tend to eventually stumble over contradictions, and once these are found, all credibility will be lost in defense of what might have been a defensible position. But the problem can become especially severe if the invalid line of reasoning is legislated and enforced as a general rule, because it then affects not only what was originally considered, but reaches out to produce error in other things as well. The final effect will be bondage to a rule the Lord never required.

When unscriptural practices are opposed by unscriptural arguments, then both sides will of course be in error. The outcome of this is not apt to be good. There are no worse disputes than those which leave people without any proper side to choose. The choice between right and wrong is clear. The choice between wrong and wrong usually is not. When the choice becomes a matter of what error should be tolerated versus what error should not, people who are guilty of neither error are apt to disagree and part ways. It is an unfortunate fact that many religious disputes involve good and reasonable people being at odds with each other over others who are not so good and not so reasonable.

So on one hand we have an unscriptural practice, but on the other we have an unscriptural principle being presented in opposition to that practice. Which is worse? This is not an easy question to answer, but be sure that both errors are formidable. Some might reason that even a bad rule is better than no rule at all. This could be correct. Any kind of order is generally better than anarchy. But a true follower of Christ must aspire to better than this. Never will one find Jesus Christ being any more passionate than when denouncing the man-made, legalistic rules of the Jews. His anger will be understood by anyone who has witnessed the strangling effects of such rules on the spirituality of churches they infect. What is a legalistic church today will likely be a dead church tomorrow. Also, because its man-made rules are usually unconvincing, such churches will have limited effect toward stopping the unscriptural practices they oppose, and because its man-made rules are unscriptural, those rules are very apt to be cast against other practices that are in fact compliant with scriptures. All of this shows the importance of doing the right things for reasons that are right, and reasons that are clearly understood and stated.

A prime example of an improper principle is one that adamantly asserts that anything without scriptural precedent is wrong. Such a claim may be right in its intents but is lacking in needful precision. It is similar to the claim of opposing anything “not in the Bible.” Again, the intents of this statement may be good, but the statement can be construed in so many ways that almost any Christian could feel comfortable in making it, while at the same time, any Christian would be a hypocrite for doing so if the statement were taken in its absolute sense. Suppose a penitent man in church were to wipe the tears from his face with a cotton cloth. Now since there is no precedent in the Bible for cotton, shall we condemn the man on this account? Only the most contemptible legalist would do such a thing. Any spiritual conscience will surely know that such unreasonable criticism is not in the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Even the most unyielding advocates of this rule will themselves be found doing things that are nowhere in the Bible, including things that cannot be dismissed as mere trivialities. For example, the Bible says nothing of religious periodicals, radio broadcasts, web sites, email discussion groups, religious libraries, associations, baptisteries, musical notes in song books, hand-shaking sessions, etc. Yet these are among things commonly admitted in the very churches where scriptural adherence is emphasized the most. There may be no complaint against the actual practices of these churches, either in respect to what they allow or what they disallow, but it is a futile argument that claims all their decisions were based strictly on a rule of scriptural precedent. Scriptural precedent is indeed of supreme importance in determining what church practice should be, but prior action sets a precedent only when done with intent of establishing a *specification*. One can be confident that the Bible never intended any specification as to the type of cloth that a penitent man should use to wipe his face. The fact there is no precedent in the Bible for cotton is therefore of no consequence.

A common error in respect to precedent is failure to distinguish a case *without* precedent from a case that *contradicts* precedent. If a judge has a case without precedent, then he is freed or forced, as the circumstance may be, to use his own discretion, but if he has precedent, then he is expected to comply with it. Errors in church practice are commonly characterized as being without precedent when it would be more accurate to say they contradict it. For example, musical instruments are commonly said to be without precedent whereas they actually contradict precedent. We know for a fact that music in the New Testament church was vocal. Most other errors in church practice also are contradictions of precedent. If something is truly without precedent, then this could convey liberty rather than prohibition. For example, there is no precedent whatsoever for a church house in the Bible. This does not mean that church houses are wrong. Rather, it means we are not held to any particular specification when building one.

A second errant rule is one that says it is wrong to teach the Bible in any organized context other than church. This is a complaint that rigid conservatives can make against Sunday schools and seminaries. Such a rule is very amiss because the Bible clearly gives the gospel minister broad latitude in teaching the word of God. This may be seen in the fact that men in the Bible are

found teaching in the streets, in homes, in places of public lecture, in schools, in jails, in Jewish synagogues, in the temple, etc. The word of God is not bound (2Tim 2:9), and any means that effectively teaches it is good. The problem with Sunday schools and seminaries is not that they teach the word of God, but that they substitute the inferior methods of man for the superior methods of God. There is little consistency in claiming that organized teaching of the Bible can only be done in church while also complaining of it being barred from public schools. If this bogus principle were true, then all Christians should rejoice that our degenerate government has censured the Bible almost everywhere but church. This rule is also inconsistently enforced in that its advocates typically have no complaint against the Bible being taught in periodicals, web sites, email discussion groups, radio broadcasts, etc. – none of which are in church; none of which have scriptural precedent; all of which are organized, and all of which are potentially done with regularity. The idea that the Bible can only be taught in church is not scriptural, and is no less objectionable, nor any less dangerous, than the things whereof it complains.

Nor is there merit in the objection that targets a thing on account of its organization. Organization and order are the principal means by which the hand of God is known in both nature and the Bible. We surely learn from both that “disorganization” is a word that can never apply to God. Nor will one find Christ or His Apostles objecting to anything on account of it being organized. The opposite will be the case. Paul complained of the disorganization at Corinth, and corrected them saying, “*Let all things be done decently and in order,*” (1Cor 14:40). If a thing is wrong in an organized form, then disorganizing it will only make it worse. The objection that complains of organization is also generally guilty of inconsistency. The objectors will themselves establish organizations for which there is no scriptural precedent. Associations, religious libraries and publishing firms are prime examples of this. An organized thing may be in error, but organization will not be its fault.

Some have carried the organization argument so far as to object even to pastor-led Bible studies and organized preacher meetings. Of course, everyone knows that study of the Bible is itself commendable and commanded, but in the search for fault, the organization of a Bible study is seized upon as the distinguishing feature serving to condemn it. This argument is oftentimes accompanied with the claim that the Bible can only be taught in church – an argument we have already shown to be seriously amiss. But the error here is compounded by the fact that Bible studies are a scripturally-authorized form of church. The essential difference between them and the more familiar form of service is that they have dialogue as opposed to monologue. Now the Bible expressly authorizes the teaching of scripture in church by means of dialogue, provided of course it is done in an orderly and considerate manner. This may be seen in 1Cor 14. Also in Acts 20:7, which relates how Eutychus fell from a window after Paul preached till midnight, the Greek word for “preached” is the very word from which our English word “dialogue” is derived. Hence the church was there having a dialogue session in which Paul was being presented with questions by the congregation.

“Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty,” (2Cor 3:17). The rules and principles inspired by the Spirit will tend to liberty. The uninspired rules of man can quickly lead to bondage. Churches must of course establish rules for the purpose of maintaining order. There must be rules as to when the church meets, how automobiles are to be parked, how its service is to be ordered, how contributions are to be taken, how items of business are to be handled in conference, etc. Such things are necessary for obedience to the scriptural commandment to *“Let all things be done decently and in order,”* (1Cor 14:40). Where the scriptures have not specified how a necessary matter is to be handled, its silence can be construed as authorizing the church to act as it sees fit, and all members should be subordinate to such church authority. But before enforcing any rule or principle, the questions should be asked: Does this rule or principle supplant or contradict any rule or principle already provided by the Bible? Does it allow what the Bible prohibits, or prohibit what the Bible allows? Is the rule actually commanded by the Bible, and therefore to be demanded of others, or is it simply a rule we have chosen for ourselves? The church is the property of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must be careful to submit to His authority wherever He has asserted it, respect all freedoms He died to secure, and make a sharp distinction between what are His rules and what are ours.

9) Precedent and Precept

Most problems of biblical interpretation on issues of church practice derive from ignorance or rejection of the fact that the Bible commands us both by way of precept and precedent. All true Christians acknowledge that we are obligated to the explicit commandments, or precepts, of the Bible, but the vast majority of Christians consider its precedents as being little more than historical information. In this important chapter, we hope to prove that the Bible is deliberately a “show and tell” book. It not only tells us what to do, but also shows us, and we are obligated to carefully heed both.

Our obligation to scriptural precedent is actually explicitly stated in the Bible. Important verses in this respect include:

Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you. – 1Cor 11:1-2

In this scripture, Paul states exactly how the ordinances are to be kept. They are to be done “*as I delivered them unto you.*” Hence, if Paul baptized by immersion, then this is exactly how we are supposed to baptize today. If he baptized only professing believers, then it is incumbent upon us to do the same. If he communed with real wine and unleavened bread, then the church should be following him in this also. The commandment is so simple that it is impossible to misunderstand. Even infants can learn by imitation, and this is in fact the first means by which they do learn. Now the word “ordinances” actually means “traditions,” and refers to more than what we typically call “ordinances” today (i.e. communion and baptism). The full extent of the word can actually be inferred from the text itself: “*Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in **all** things...*” So the commandment to imitate him is comprehensive, having only one qualification, namely, that he is to be followed in whatever respects he himself was a follower of Christ. This at least means we are to be his followers in all things that are important, so that if we consider baptism, communion, church music, etc. to be important, then we are either following him or else we are disobeying the commandment. Logic allows nothing else.

This verse is immediately followed by instructions about length of hair, both in men and women. He says that men are to have short hair and women are to have long. Since Paul was very accepting of cultural diversity and was a great defender of Christian liberty, his commandments concerning length of hair were given with unquestionable conviction. Further, there can be no doubt that when he commanded to follow him, length of hair was one of the respects he had in mind. Most Christians today would consider this issue to be of far less importance than questions of how we baptize, commune, evangelize, etc., so nothing could be more unreasonable than to suppose that his commandment to follow him did not include these things also.

Consider also:

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you. – 2Thess 3:6-7

This text not only tells us to follow Paul, but also says we are to withdraw from anyone who refuses to do so. In following him, we are to consider how he “behaved;” hence, we are obligated to both his words and actions. That is, we are to follow both precept and precedent. In the prior chapter he said:

Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle. – 2Thess 2:15

This verse has special significance because it is in a context that treats end-time apostasy. It says that before Christ comes there will be a great “falling away.” Now one cannot fall from the truth unless they were first in it, so the text is prophesying the widespread corruption of Christianity in the last days. Many will either depart Christianity altogether, or pervert it into a corrupt form that is suitable to their worldly tastes and ideologies. The world has always been a cruel and evil place, and has in many respects been worse in the past than it is today, so there must be something particularly odious about end-time evil to provoke God to destroy the world after He had long-suffered it before. A careful examination of scriptural descriptions of this evil will show a definite pattern serving to explain this: End-time evil will have moved into the church, or into what calls itself the “church,” and will so thoroughly pervade it that only a few true Christians will be left in the world. Since the church is the salt of the earth, or the means by which it is preserved, its corruption spells doom for the planet.

The above verse tells us exactly what we are to do when the so-called Christian world is caught up in its corrupted trend to the end. We are to “*stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught.*” So one should not think that because we live in a modern world these scriptural commandments regarding precedent no longer pertain. They are as important now as they ever were, if not more so, and they are the key to averting the end-time deception and corruption that will so thoroughly consume the planet.

Even without these direct commandments, one should know that the Bible is a “show and tell” book on the basis of its length and the general nature of its content. It could have been a book that merely commanded us what to do, in which event it would have been much shorter, but it actually went far beyond this in giving detailed accounts of the lives of a multitude of people, who serve for us as examples, either positively or negatively. “*Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come,*” (1Cor 10:11). “*For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for*

our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.” (Rom 15:4). *“Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience,”* (James 5:10-11).

But the supreme proof speaks with such force and clarity that we would be content to rest our entire case upon it: This is that the Bible is a book whose central and pervading theme is that God Himself would come, or did come, to this planet as a man, and that He lived as all men should live, thereby fulfilling the Law in their behalf, and then He died for them to answer the demands of the Law against their crimes, and by these things He secured for them a home in Heaven. The Almighty God could have merely commanded us what to do, but this was not satisfactory to Him. He also felt it necessary to live among us and *show* us what to do. This was so important to Him that He did what would otherwise seem unthinkable: He condescended to men, laying His glory aside. Verily, He did it while knowing that the vast majority of men would reject Him, making Him the object of their ridicule and persecution.

All Christians should rejoice to have a caring, compassionate God who can say more than, “Obey me.” He rises in dignity and honor above the imaginary gods of this world in that He can say, “Follow me.” These were in fact some of the most frequently used words of our Lord, as can be seen in: Mt 4:19, Mt 8:22, Mt 9:9, Mt 16:24, Mt 19:21, Mk 2:14, Mk 8:34, Mk 10:21, Lk 5:27, Lk 9:23, Lk 9:59, Lk 18:22, Jn 1:43, Jn 10:27, Jn 12:26, Jn 13:36, Jn 21:19. This lengthy list of scriptures ought to forever settle the question. The Bible is a “show and tell” book – a book that gives us not only precept but also precedent, and is honorably distinguished above all other religions of the world in this very respect. Consequently, few things could be more unbecoming of the Christian religion than for its proponents to say, “This is what seems best to me” or “This is what I like” or “I will do it my way.”

We should treasure every fragment of information that we can find about how the Savior lived, preached, prayed, sang, taught children, etc., and we should do the same for what He also communicated to us through the lives of the Apostles He taught and inspired. All understand that if He expressly commanded a thing then we ought to do it, but we need to understand that His instruction to us is not limited to what He expressly commanded. It is conveyed to us in both words and actions. We can be sure that to whatever extent we depart from following either, our effectiveness will be diminished. No thought could be more perilous than to suppose that our ways are better than His and that we are wiser than Him. If this were the case, then we are hopelessly lost, and our religion a vain exercise altogether.

We will finish this section with what may be its most important point. It is a general principle we commonly, naturally and intuitively apply in all areas of life. It is that: Precedent is the final authority by which precept is interpreted. If we are confused about the meaning of a precept because there are multiple ways to construe it, then of the various rules of interpretation whereby we might resolve the confusion, all are superseded by any existing precedent.

We will demonstrate this with a simple example: Suppose your employer were to give you a commandment to build a fence in a particular place, but he then abruptly departed, leaving you with a head full of questions as to the particulars of his meaning. You would be in a great state of perplexity at the sight of his departure. Did he mean a wood fence, picket fence, rock fence, brick fence, barbed-wire fence, or what? Then you are further perplexed by the fact that there are various ways in which each of these particular kinds of fences could be built. You are therefore overcome with a sense of uncertainty as to what you should do. However, as you approach the place where you were commanded to build, you are overcome with great relief upon seeing that the boss has already started the fence. You see where steel posts have been driven into the ground at exactly 15-foot intervals; where exactly five strands of barbed wire have been attached to each post, with the wires being spaced exactly ten inches apart. You now know that a barbed wire fence was intended, and also know all the needful detail.

You should readily understand at this point that the pattern set before you supersedes any other rule of interpretation you might apply to your employer's commandment. This would be true regardless of how reasonable that rule might seem to you. For example, you might reason to yourself that a rock fence would be more durable, or that a wood fence would be in greater conformity with the neighborhood and therefore more appealing to the neighbors. But it would be presumptuous for you to undertake either given that a contrary precedent has been set.

Now suppose you are overcome with a deluded sense of confidence that your idea about the wood fence is the better way to go, and you then proceed to build it, committing many resources and many days of labor in the endeavor, and being so consumed with your work that you give no further thought to the potential consequences of the decision you have made. Then one day upon seeing the approach of the employer's vehicle, your mind has an abrupt encounter with a few realities it had not seriously considered before: The departure you have chosen from the precedent he set will surely require an explanation, and the very nature of the case is that it will require an explanation that he himself has never offered. Further, any acceptable explanation must have its basis in the premise that you know more about how to build this fence than he does. You nervously realize that the challenge before you is formidable, because the boss happens to be a master fence builder who has never built anything but a flawless fence that was perfectly adapted to the ends it was intended to serve.

In your rendezvous with reality, you further consider that even were the boss to find a wood fence admissible, you have no idea he will be pleased with the particular wood fence you have built, because he gave you neither precept nor precedent regarding a wood fence. You reasonably conclude that your job might very well be at risk. The worst part for you will be the realization that all this apprehension and fear could have been replaced with confidence and good conscience had you simply built the fence according to the precedent that was set. Indeed, no other methodology could have assured the commendation rather than the condemnation of your

employer. The hard lesson you have learned is that precedent is the final authority by which precept is to be interpreted.

Various Christian denominations have developed some ingenious schemes to justify their departures from the precedents set in the New Testament. This is particularly true with respect to baptism, but also applies to other points. Regardless of how clever or complex these schemes may be, they mostly serve to fill the mind with fog. They obscure the otherwise simple and undeniable principle here given – a principle none would dispute were it not for prior theories they were bent upon supporting. While their complex arguments can be refuted, to even address them would only serve as a distraction from this single, crucial point, and give opportunity for obfuscation. Precedent is the final authority by which precept is to be interpreted, and any contrary claim has been corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ (2Cor 11:3).

In completing this section, allow us to build yet further upon this example to convey another important point: Suppose there were numerous other employees responsible for this fence. If these were left to their own reasoning and preference, some would choose a rock fence; others a wood fence, and yet others a chain-link fence. To this diversity we could add their varied opinions as to the particulars of how each of these different types of fences should be built. Clearly, the situation is a near-perfect scenario for disagreement and strife, and one would be naïve to expect anything else. There is in fact only one kind of fence that can be built under a reasonable expectation of harmony among the laborers. It is a barbed-wire fence with steel posts situated exactly 15 feet apart, having five wires, being spaced at ten inch intervals. Surely, this is no trivial consideration, particularly if the boss left the employees with a strict commandment to be at peace and agreement.

10) The Regulative Principle

Much of the debate over how to apply the Bible to church practice has centered upon two competing principles. One of these is called the “regulative principle” of worship, which says that unless a worship practice is expressly authorized in Scripture it is implicitly prohibited. Others have advocated the “normative principle,” which says that any worship practice is admissible so long as scriptures do not explicitly prohibit it. The greater part of Christianity has obviously tended toward the normative principle, though significant numbers of these have lately found even this rule to be overly restrictive. These readily accept into their churches things which are unequivocally prohibited by scripture, such as homosexuality, women preachers, etc.

The regulative principle is technically correct, and this should be obvious to anyone who has read the Bible with an impartial mind. Everyone knows the Bible has no condemnation for any man who thinks he has an improved way of saddling a horse, growing rice, baking bread or building a fence. There is no sin in entertaining such thoughts or in pursuing them. Mankind has obviously benefitted greatly from such innovations. But if a man thinks he can improve upon the divinely-given specification for worship, he will find himself under the sharp censure of scripture. This is true in either the Old Testament or the New. There were numerous instances in both where uninspired men attempted to improve upon the plan of worship given by God. Most of these presumed improvements were in the form of additions to what God had said. In no case was their modification approved. Indeed, it was typically rejected outright. The Bible is clearly absolute and literal in its claim to be a thorough furnisher in spiritual matters.

In the New Testament, uninspired attempts to modify church practice included: circumcision, dietary rules, celibacy rules, other Jewish traditions, women preachers, long hair in men, common meals with communion, unknown tongues, holidays, new moons, Sabbath days, angel worship, teaching by means of fables and classification of church members by genealogy. All of these were attempted additions to the pattern of worship given by Christ and the Apostles. All of them were unequivocally rejected. This shows the foolishness of the normative principle. If an uninspired man is free to add anything to worship provided it is not expressly prohibited, then why is it that *every* attempt to do so in the New Testament was rejected? Verily, if only *one* such attempt had been rejected, it would be sufficient to show the unreliability of the normative principle. On the other hand, when we see *all* of them being rejected, any reasonable man should conclude that the regulative principle was being enforced.

Indeed, it was a rare thing even for inspired men to modify worship from its original form. Only two men in the Bible were ever authorized to do it on any meaningful scale. One was the Old Testament David. The other was the New Testament David, or the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. David of the Old Testament added musical instruments. He also obtained permission to have his son build a temple in substitution for the tabernacle. Hence, only one mortal was ever authorized

to significantly change worship from its original form. Other authorizations were only under special or exigent circumstances, and were never intended to be permanent changes of policy.

Those who seek to modify church practice today commonly point to David in defense of their actions. They seem undeterred by the facts that he was the only mortal who ever received such authority; that he was an inspired man, and that he was a man after God's own heart. Most importantly, he was one of the strongest types of Christ in the Bible, thereby representing the only man who has ever had an unquestioned authority to define or redefine worship. A man has attained the very apex of arrogance if he presumes to construe David as authorizing him to modify worship from the form originally given by Christ and the Apostles.

But it would not matter if we had found several men in the Old Testament making modifications to the form of worship originally prescribed through Moses. The Old Testament specified a deliberately inferior system of worship under a plan of obsolescence. It was given with the ultimate intent of showing its own futility as a means of salvation. On the other hand, the New Testament presents what is to be the final phase of religion on this planet. It is the very culmination of the plan of God concerning worship. As Paul said, New Testament Christians are those "*upon whom the ends of the world are come,*" (1Cor 10:11). No valid religion will ever replace the Christian religion. Its rite of baptism will be blessed of God until the end of the world (Mt 28:19-20), and its communion service will continue to show forth Christ's death until the day He comes (1Cor 11:26). This will explain why the numerous uninspired attempts to modify the church were *all* rejected by the Apostles, and why any such attempts made since those times should be rejected by all sincere Christians today.

The necessity of the regulative principle also clearly follows from observation and experience. When men are left to hatch up their own form of worship, the outcomes will be as varied and unpredictable as the imagination itself. Totem poles, voodoo dolls, shrunken heads, human sacrifices, illicit sex, snake-handling, poison-drinking and only God knows what else has been offered by fools thinking they were worshipping Him. These examples are sufficient to show that man is very capable of deceiving himself into thinking that he is worshipping when truly he is committing abomination. Accordingly, it is utterly naïve to suppose that everything done by professed Christianity in the name of worship is truly what they claim. It is for God to decide what is worship and what is not, and surely none can fault Him for reserving this right.

11) The Optimality Principle

Though the regulative principle of worship is technically correct, it is not the principle that Christians should consciously pursue. It is deficient in that it pertains only to worship, thus offering no guidance on other areas of church responsibility. But the greater problem is that both it and the normative principle seek to determine where the lines of prohibition are drawn. A spirit-filled, Christ-loving Christian should not think in such terms. Rather, he should be in pursuit of such high objectives that the lines of prohibition, while perhaps being of theoretical interest, are of no practical effect to him.

Consider a man who begins a day with a sincere and resolute commitment to live that day putting the interests of others above his own. No practical purpose would be served by lecturing this man about the prohibitions against murder, theft and adultery. His heart is set on such a noble principle that there is absolutely no danger of him trespassing any of these prohibitions. This is why Paul condemned teachers of the Law as having deficient understanding. The Law, he said, was not made for a righteous man. Any man who is washed in the blood of Christ, and who attempts to return gratitude by imitating his Savior, will so far exceed the demands of the Law that none of its prohibitions will be binding restraints to him. The Law is on a lower plane of principle than the one to which he aspires, and the Law could therefore become degrading to his religion if not handled properly. This is why Paul said the Law is good *“if a man use it lawfully,”* though he complained that some seeking to teach it understood *“neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm,”* (1Tim 1:7-8).

A similar principle holds with respect to church practice. If a man sincerely aspires to proper Christian objectives, he need not be concerned with what is prohibited. Such a man aspires for what is best, and what is best is logically situated at the greatest conceivable distance from what an all-wise God has prohibited. Our purpose should be to render service to God that best suits Him, and best serves to accomplish the objectives He would have us achieve.

Once this is understood, the normative principle is readily seen as being fundamentally defective. Even could it be shown that the innovations defended by this principle are admissible, this would fall far short of implying we should want them. The normative principle therefore seeks to prove too little. Paul acknowledged the liberties of the Corinthians, yet he warned them: *“But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak,”* (1Cor 8:9). A similar warning was made to the Galatians: *“For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another,”* (Gal 5:13). So the fact that a man has a right to do a thing does not imply it is the right thing to do. It is therefore a misguided line of reasoning that attempts to discover the limits of prohibition with the ultimate intent of indulging in every afforded liberty. The question is not whether it is admissible but whether it best serves the objectives of God. A fig tree is surely permissible, but God says if it does not bear fruit then cut it down:

He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down. – Luke 13:6-9

Christianity has been digging and dunging most of its uninspired innovations in an experiment that is now several centuries old. It would not matter if these innovations were in fact permissible. The question is: Where is the fruit?

On the other hand, the regulative principle seeks to prove more than is needful to establish its intended point. While many of the practices this principle opposes should indeed be done away, it is not necessary to show they are prohibited or sinful in order to establish this. We are confident that many modern innovations have been introduced and supported by those who had good intents. We would rather be doing the wrong thing with good intents than to be doing the right thing with bad intents, or to be doing nothing at all. Some who practice the regulative principle do so as a cold, legalistic formality. Who can confidently say that God would rather have this than the practices these legalists oppose? We will also happily concede that some degree of good may be accomplished by these practices. But the issue is not whether these things are good, bad or indifferent – questions which can be left for God to judge. The question all sincere Christians should be asking is whether these things are *best*.

The issue as to what is best does not suffer from nearly the same degree of ambiguity, uncertainty and debate that oftentimes accompanies the question of what is admissible. A man climbing a mountain may not certainly know the point at which he is half-way up, three-fourths of the way up, etc., but there is no ambiguity whatsoever about where is the top. The best way to do anything is the way in which God has told us or shown us to do it. If any man disputes this point, one could justifiably question whether he is a true believer, much less would he be qualified to render judgment about church practice. It is also clear that such a person is at least partially driven by improper motivations. Who would deliberately choose anything for his church that he knew to be inferior? The answer could only be someone with a perverted sense of priority, and most likely someone who has put his personal judgment and preferences above those of the Lord. Any sincere Christian should want what is best. Those who are not sincere should be of no concern. Churches would be better off without them.

This then leads to what we think to be the proper general principle for governing church practice. We will call it the “optimality principle.” It is a principle that applies not only worship, but also all roles of the church. The principle is reasoned as follows:

- 1) God has not changed

- 2) Hence, the best ways of serving Him have not changed, and since the spiritual needs of man are completely met in God, then neither have these changed.
- 3) The scriptures, being inspired by God, are an infallible and comprehensive rule in all spiritual needs and obligations of man.
- 4) The scriptures teach both by precept and precedent, with precedent being the final authority by which its precepts are to be interpreted.
- 5) Therefore, in respect to the spiritual needs or obligations of man, where the scriptures have given either precept or precedent, regardless of the times in which we live, these scriptural prescriptions are the optimal means of fulfilling such ends.

Observe that the principle addresses only spiritual matters. The fact that Paul travelled by foot or boat does not imply we should travel by foot or boat. The fact that New Testament churches were illuminated with oil lamps does not imply we should use oil lamps. These are things concerned with the physical needs of man, and are merely aids to what God has commanded. Technological advance may enable us to better serve the physical needs of man today than in biblical times. Those physical needs may also be subject to change. For example, the world today does not accommodate travel by foot as it did in former times. There is a real need to travel by automobile, plane, etc. But the spiritual needs of man are the same, and the God being served is the same.

Next, the principle does not address matters wherein scriptures are silent. If the scriptures do not address an issue, we can be sure its silence is not owing to any omission or oversight by the Holy Spirit. Rather, the silence is deliberate, with the intent being to afford liberty to handle the issue as circumstances require. This point is very important because it is commonly misunderstood, even by those whose thinking on church practice is otherwise sound. These are apt to claim that scriptural silence actually implies prohibition – the very opposite of what we have said. When this rule is applied strictly to worship, it becomes the regulative principle we have already discussed and endorsed. When it is applied even to activities apart from worship, the rule becomes so stringent that very few could honestly claim to live by it. For example, the Bible says nothing of religious periodicals, radio broadcasts, web sites, email discussion groups, religious libraries, associations, conference meetings, singing schools, etc., yet these are all functions and activities that are admitted even by those following the strictest rules of practice. When the same people object to musical instruments, Sunday schools, mission societies, etc. on the basis they are not in the Bible, obviously they do not offer a very credible argument seeing they are themselves condemned by it. Their conclusions are generally correct, but something is clearly amiss in the reasoning they offer to defend those conclusions.

The proper reason for objecting to musical instruments, Sunday schools, mission societies, etc. is based as much in what the scriptures have said as in what the scriptures have not said. It is not simply a matter of silence. The Bible is not silent about the issue of church music, nor is it silent

about training children, nor is it silent about the issue of evangelism. In its precedents and precepts, it has given a specification in all these activities – all of which are important parts of Christian service, and must therefore be addressed by any book claiming to be a thorough furnisher. The problem is that this specification does not include musical instruments or Sunday schools. So the proper reason for objecting to these things has its basis in two criteria: First, the Bible has provided a specification that surely would have included them had they been intended. Second, that specification does in fact omit them.

If the Bible is truly silent about an issue, this fact actually conveys liberty, not prohibition. For example, the Bible has said nothing of how a church house should be built. It is therefore of no consequence whether the church has carpet, wood floor or tile. The Bible has said very little about how a church is to handle its business meeting; therefore, the church is at liberty to create officers and procedures to handle such meetings as it sees fit. Accordingly, the Bible has said nothing of how to teach children musical notes. This fact conveys liberty to have a singing school. The general principle is this: If the scriptures have provided a specification, then any departure from it will be errant in the worst case or inferior in the best. However, if the scriptures have not provided a specification, then we are at liberty, provided we remain within the domain of general scriptural law.

Those who are bent upon practices that the optimality principle will not support must admit that their methods are either unimportant or inferior. If they are important, then a thorough furnisher would not have left them without a specification. On the other hand, if a specification has been given by scripture but is not being used, then the chosen methodology must be inferior. Christians cannot deny that the things at issue are important because they have divided into countless denominations on account of them. Nor do they deny it. Though Christians are at disagreement on many aspects of church practice, they are at almost complete agreement on what is important. This being the case, they cannot consistently claim that the Bible is a Divinely inspired and thorough book while also claiming that what it contains on these admittedly important issues is merely incidental. It must rather be a specification of the optimal means by which those things are to be done.

12) Supplemental Substitution

Our expression “supplemental substitution” is inherently contradictory but deliberately chosen. One thing surely does not supplement another when it is in fact substituted for it. But this contradiction is so commonly observed in Christianity that one could consider it a near-law of human behavior. The principle is that what humans introduce as being supplemental to the commandment of God will almost invariably be substituted for it in the end. All Christians should be wary of supplemental substitution because there has never been a more subtle way of laying the commandment of God aside.

Easter and Christmas are prime examples of this. These holidays are nowhere commanded in the word of God. Whoever introduced them was likely aware of this and therefore proposed them as being mere additions to what God commanded. However, there are now millions of professed Christians who evidently think their duty of church attendance has been reasonably met by observing these two holidays. It is especially troubling what has been made of Easter. Setting aside a day to observe the resurrection of Christ makes little more sense than setting aside a day to breath air or drink water. These are all things that should be done on every day we live. To substitute attendance on Easter for regular support of the church is to make the word of God of none effect by displacing it with human tradition. We happily concede that Christian liberty can admit holidays, but they surely cannot serve as alternatives to what God commanded.

The same can be said of baptism by sprinkling. Nearly all historians acknowledge that baptism was done by immersion in the early church. Early Christian literature sufficiently documents this fact. Sprinkling was thereafter added as an accommodation to exigent circumstances only. But in progress of time, sprinkling almost altogether displaced the original mode, and there are now Christians who will defend it even to the point of saying that immersion is in error.

A third example can be seen in Sunday schools. Its advocates would say it is not the intent of the Sunday school to negate anything the Bible has commanded concerning the instruction of children, but that it is merely intended to supplement those commands. As reasonable as this may sound, such arguments are generally precarious, being adverse to the optimality principle. The uninspired person advancing this argument has presumed to arrive at a good idea the Holy Spirit never had. This is of course impossible, and once the uninspired plan is implemented, one will invariably encounter unforeseen and unintended consequences that will explain why the Holy Spirit never commanded it. The most probable consequence will be that what was intended to supplement the Bible will ultimately prove to supplant it. It is an undeniable fact that where Sunday schools and other such youth programs have proliferated, Bible teaching in the home has tended toward neglect, and teaching from the pulpit has become less adapted to the needs of youth. Biblical ignorance has reached disturbing levels in our modern times notwithstanding unprecedented expenditures on youth programs and ministries. This is because these supposedly supplemental activities have served to supplant the God-ordained methods of teaching youth.

It is far more common to hear an older person relate of being profoundly affected by a pastor, mother or father than by a youth minister or Sunday school teacher. Be sure the Holy Spirit was aware of these facts when He inspired His book, and this is why He put nothing in it that could be misconstrued as a substitute for these essential ways of teaching youth. The Holy Spirit was also aware that the typical church would be sufficiently challenged to put a qualified Bible teacher even in its pulpit, much less in its numerous Sunday school rooms. The fact is that most of these teachers are unqualified, having read no more than parts of the Bible, and were sometimes put in teaching positions only months after joining the church. Parents would be outraged upon discovering that their children were under public school teachers having no more qualification than this, but a standard that would never be accepted in secular education is deemed adequate for the very word of God. If there is in fact a qualified pastor in the house, the time would be better spent under his instruction, though modern churches have done exactly the opposite, diminishing the time committed to him to allow more space for supplemental activities.

Musical instruments are an even worse case where the Bible has been supplanted by what purports to be supplemental. When instruments were introduced to churches, there was a vigorous and protracted debate as to whether they were permissible additions to New Testament precedent. Now many pastors could only wish they were mere *additions* as it would be laughable to call them such. They have arguably become the primary attraction of modern so-called worship. Indeed, thousands of churches have cut back on time committed to preaching so as to leave more space for musical performances. Church budgets have been reallocated to finance these costly productions, leaving less money for evangelization and support of the poor. Congregations have been partitioned in unscriptural manner along lines of musical preference. Church music has also been reduced to a spectator sport where a large percentage of the congregation only watches as professionals and semi-professionals vicariously fulfill the scriptural duty of all to sing (Col 3:16, Eph 5:19). Finally, add to this the degradation that has occurred in the music itself, with Bible-based hymns, well-designed to teach and admonish, being replaced with shallow-minded compositions that are better adapted to entertain, and better adapted to accentuate the skills of the performer than to teach the word of Christ.

One can scarcely think of any such human contrivance that has not had this effect to some degree or another. This will explain why the Apostles repeatedly rejected them. Paul referred to all such things as “will-worship” (Col 2:23), meaning that they have their origin in the will of man rather than the will of God. They are things God never commanded, but are offered as being supplemental to His commands. Paul said of such things that they have a “*shew of wisdom,*” and on this account men tend to approve them, and even consider them to be commendable. But the Apostle added that they in fact are not to any true honor, and upon closer inspection, they will be found to be motivated, in whole or in part, by the flesh. This can be seen in the fact that nearly all such innovations put someone in a position of recognition or authority that the Bible does not expressly give, while relieving someone else of a responsibility that the Bible clearly commands.

The same errors were observed under the Law. Jesus said the Jews had set the word of God aside to keep their uninspired traditions (Mk 7:6-13). Those traditions no doubt originated with men who only intended to supplement what God had said, but they were in the end substituted for it. Jesus said the consequence of this was that their religion was reduced to vanity, which literally means it was of no positive effect in the best case, and of negative effect in the worst.

In the times of Zechariah, the Jews undertook to add special days to their religious service to commemorate their sufferings at the hands of foreign powers (Zech 7). When the Lord was consulted about this, He answered exactly as should be expected of a wise and omniscient God: Those humanly-contrived holidays were not commanded by Him and did little to please Him. Further, He pointed the Jews to the crucial but overlooked fact that had they obeyed what He had actually commanded, foreign powers would have never prevailed against them, and there would have never been any occasion to remember their sufferings from such. The Lord therefore did not put His stamp of approval on their proposed activities, and said the Jews should be focused on doing what He had actually commanded rather than trying to invent new ways of serving Him. Even so, most innovations today, while pretending to be done in duty, are in fact a patch or band-aide to cover some dereliction in duty.

Immediately after giving the Ten Commandments, the Lord gave one of the earliest of all commandments concerning worship. There is a basic principle in this commandment that would characterize all that the Bible would thereafter teach concerning true worship. The commandment was:

An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee. And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it. Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon. – Ex 20:24-26

Hence, an altar was to be simple, small and unadorned. Such a commandment is positively contrary to human nature. The tendency of humans would be to make an altar as high, adorned and impressive as they possibly could. The problem with this is that people will then become distracted by the impressive structure they have built, and turn their attention to the altar rather than the sacrifice that is upon the altar. Now the sacrifice, being a type of Jesus Christ, is no doubt the most important aspect of the service, but when humans are left to their own designs, be sure they will divert attention from this to mere superficialities. The emphasis properly belonging to the sacrifice will instead be displaced by a highly supplemented altar.

It is our opinion that the spirit of this commandment was contradicted by the highly-adorned Jewish temple. When David first proposed the construction of a temple, the Lord quickly

reminded him that He had never commanded any such thing (2Sam 7:1-7). Nevertheless, the Lord conceded to David, saying He would allow a temple to be built in the days of David's son. This does not mean that God changed His mind or repented of any error. There were certain things God permitted under the Old Testament to serve as counter-examples to His church. As Paul said, "*Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come,*" (1Cor 10:11).

The fact is that the temple, though only intended as a supplement to what God commanded, was eventually substituted for it. The Jews gloried in the majestic stones of it, but they soon forgot the two old "rocks in the box" – the two plates stored in the Ark of the Covenant upon which the Ten Commandments were recorded. The "rocks in the box" had made them one of the greatest nations in the world, and had potential to make them even greater, but the glorious stones of the temple proved to be stumbling-blocks to them. The impressive hewn stones, otherwise prohibited in the construction of an altar, were effectively substituted for the "rocks in the box" in that focus was diverted from one to the other. Years later when a second temple had been built, the Disciples of Christ beheld it in similar adoration and spoke of the greatness of its stones, but Christ disdainfully replied that the whole structure would soon be torn down (Mk 13:1-2). No serious student of the Son of God would find any surprise in this reaction.

In light of this near-universal human tendency, any church-related activity should be carefully scrutinized under the question: Does this activity tend to facilitate or encourage what God commanded, or does it tend to be presented or construed as an *alternative* to what God commanded? If the former, then it would be wise to support it, but if the latter, then its corrupting tendencies will almost surely become realities if it is not avoided or strictly limited.

13) Derelict Delegation

If churches are to truly follow the Bible, it is important that they place authority and responsibility where scriptures have put it. One will find that in both Old Testament and New, the Lord generally gave definitive commandments concerning these things, and insubordination to any authority God had so ordained was considered a severe offence. Of course, authority and responsibility are two things that always go together. God does not grant the first without also requiring the second. Now as one considers the entire array of modernistic churches practices that are lacking in scriptural support, a common thread to nearly all of them is that they put someone in a position of authority or responsibility that the Bible does not give, while generally relieving someone else of responsibility the Bible clearly commands. Hence, the authority or responsibility that the Bible has put in one place is improperly delegated to another. Obviously, this error is very similar to the supplemental substitution problem considered in the previous section. Both errors would be avoided if churches would simply follow the optimality principle. The idea that authority and responsibility should be put where the Bible puts it is a mere corollary to that principle, but the commonness of this specific error is such that we think it needful to dedicate this entire section to it.

We acknowledge that it can be a commendable thing for a person or institution to take on responsibilities that have been shirked by others. We also acknowledge that it is better that a neglected responsibility be assumed by another than to be left undone. So as we complain of derelict delegation in what follows, the complaint is not against those persons or institutions that diligently and honorably endeavored to fulfill duties neglected by others; rather, the complaint is against those who should have done them, and against a system we think to have unwittingly abetted them in their negligence.

In our consideration of numerous examples of derelict delegation, few are any more to the point than mission boards. These were actually very controversial when first introduced to Christianity, and while some opponents to them were improperly motivated to relieve themselves of the peril, trouble and expense of foreign evangelism, other opponents definitely had a legitimate complaint. They objected that Jesus Christ had already set up an institution for evangelizing the world, namely His church, and that it was wrong for the church to transfer this responsibility to a humanly-contrived entity. Hence, the complaint was that the mission board was being conferred with authority and responsibility the Bible did not give, while the church was being relieved of responsibility the Bible clearly commanded. It was a classic case of derelict delegation. The facts of experience since those times have proven the wisdom of the Bible. Churches that directly manage their own foreign evangelism have generally been more efficient and productive than mission boards, and for this reason, large numbers of modern churches have in fact reverted to a policy of greater direct involvement in missionary work.

Another example of derelict delegation occurs with seminaries. Improper delegation is in fact the principal complaint against these institutions. No wrong is done in teaching the Bible in a school or any other honorable setting. The scriptures give the gospel minister broad latitude in teaching the word of God, even in a school (Acts 19:9). The error begins when churches commit to these institutions the responsibility and authority of interpreting the word, and then defer to the dubious authority they have created. The case is analogous to a man who creates an idol of wood and then bows to it. All Christians will agree that God gave wood for the purpose of serving man. He did not give man for the purpose of serving wood. Accordingly, seminaries should defer to churches and not churches to seminaries. God has set up the church to be the pillar and ground of the truth (1Tim 3:15). He gave no such authority to seminaries. Again, the facts of experience prove the wisdom of the Bible. Christians of nearly all denominations complain of the corrupting influence seminaries have had on their churches. Indeed, some of the most corrupt colleges in America began as religious schools, and religious schools continue to exhibit a strong tendency to defect toward liberalism and infidelity.

The error made of seminaries is compounded when churches make them a prime criterion by which a man is judged as qualified to preach. Some churches have gone so far as to make a seminary degree a prerequisite for the ministry. This is definitely a case of misplaced authority. Neither Christ nor His Apostles had such degrees, nor did many of the ablest ministers in the history of the church have them. Further, the facts of experience would be hard-pressed to show that seminaries can be credited with a more effective ministry or to a state of revival in the churches. In the Biblical system of training ministers, men were largely self-educated under the guidance of established, qualified elders. This is as it should be. Since ministers will expect their own congregations to learn the Bible in this manner, it is reasonable that the ministers themselves demonstrate sufficient discipline to be educated this way.

This system also serves to the benefit of both student and teacher. The student has the benefit of being taught by an in-the-field practitioner. The teacher has the benefit of being stirred up in the word of God by the needs and questions of the younger student. This stimulation will advance his ministry and serve to the benefit of his congregation. The Apostles said, "*It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables,*" (Acts 6:2). When ministers have their time being consumed by mindless activities that are nowhere recommended by the word of God, it should be no wonder that their Sunday morning congregations must endure mindless sermons.

The error of seminaries is therefore not in what they are of themselves, but in what churches have made of them. There is nothing wrong in principle with the Bible being taught in a school, and though we are frankly skeptical, we allow that a school could persevere in soundness. But churches should never defer to schools as authorities of biblical interpretation, nor should a seminary education have any bearing on the assessment of a man's qualification to preach.

A third example of derelict delegation is in super-church governing entities. These are given no authority whatsoever in the Bible. Rather, churches there were self-governed, being answerable directly to Christ and His word. It is improper delegation of the worst kind for a church to relinquish its God-given authority to a humanly-contrived institution. It also makes churches the easy object of satanic attack. When churches are centralized under any authority other than the Bible, corruption can be spread through all of them merely by corrupting the central entity.

A fourth example is all too often found in Sunday schools. In recent years, there has been a significant movement in Christianity away from these toward family-integrated churches. This movement has been prompted by a growing perception that, notwithstanding the formidable effort and money that has been poured into modern Sunday schools, youth programs, youth ministries, youth-adapted worship, etc., the effectiveness of the church at producing dedicated youth is a far cry from any reasonable standard, and likely worse than at any time in American history. This will come as no surprise to anyone whose confidence is placed in the Bible, seeing that it gave no precedent for any of these things. The biblical system has youth being taught in the church alongside adults and in the home under the instruction of their parents. Sunday schools may in many respects produce good results, but they will never be more effective than the God-ordained plan.

A fifth case can be seen in what many churches have made of deacons. They have set them up as governing boards over churches, whereas the Bible says absolutely nothing to authorize this as a governing office. It is rather an office of servitude designed to execute the wishes of the church, especially in respect to the care of needy people (Acts 6:1-7). We have no complaint against any church that respectfully follows the lead of a wise and godly deacon, but his leadership derives from the fact that he is wise and godly, not from the fact he is a deacon. Any other wise and godly man in the congregation should be heard with equal deference. Since we should choose men who are full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom to be deacons (Acts 6:3), and since the same sort of men should be our leaders, it would follow that leaders in the church could also be deacons, but this does not mean that leadership follows from deaconship.

Misunderstanding on this point has been a formidable cause of strife in many a church, where deacons have taken it upon themselves to enforce action that was contrary to the wishes of the congregation, or where deacons and pastors have engaged in power struggles against each other.

Some churches have foolishly struggled with the question of whether they should be pastor-led or deacon-led. Of course, the first step toward getting right answers on any subject is to ask right questions. This is not the right question to ask. Churches are to be *Christ-led*, which is all the same as saying they are to be *Bible-led*, and both preachers and deacons are supposed to be in agreement as to what this means. If they are at disagreement, then it is incumbent upon both to prove their case by the word of God. If the Bible cannot serve to resolve the matter, then the struggle will invariably be over things in the church that should not be there in the first place. Unfortunately, this is very commonly the case in practice.

Our last example will prove very controversial in these present times, but the word of God is absolutely resolute on the point: To sanction the use of women preachers is a blatant case of putting responsibility and authority where the Bible does not put it. Indeed, it puts it where the Bible prohibits it. Any church that approves a woman in the pulpit has declared in irrefutable terms that the Bible is not its supreme authority. If that church claims otherwise, or claims the Bible actually supports its policy, then its error is only compounded. There would be much less culpability in honestly confessing the obvious truth of the matter, namely that the Bible is not considered by that church as an absolute authority.

As for those who have found ingenious ways to construe the Bible as actually supporting women preachers, let it be observed that one cannot find any more clarity in what the Bible says about salvation than in what it says about preachers being male. If the Bible cannot be taken for its simple, intuitive meaning on one point, then why should we feel safety in assuming it for the other? Accordingly, if God has changed His mind with respect to the qualifications of the ministry, then how could we know He remains of the same mind to resurrect us and save us? It is a clear case of wishful thinking, and of seeing only what we want to see, and of hearing only what we want to hear, when the Bible is taken literally and absolutely when making points that suit us, but its intuitive meaning is cleverly dismissed when making points that do not.

The following scriptures speak with unmistakable clarity on this subject:

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? – 1Cor 14:34-36

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. – 1Tim 2:11-12

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife... – 1Tim 3:2

Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear. Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. – 1Peter 3:1-4

Some obstinate critics, realizing there is no plausible way to extract a preferred meaning from these texts, have gone so far as to deny the apostleship and authority of Paul, the man who wrote the majority of them. But observe that the last text was written by Peter, a man whose authority

cannot be successfully denied by any. Further, Peter gave a blanket endorsement to all the epistles of Paul in 2Pet 3:15-16 where he honored those writings as “scriptures.” Now it happens that the strongest language in the New Testament commanding that women be loved, honored and cherished were written by exactly the same two men (Eph 5:25-33, 1Cor 7:3, 1Tim 5:1-3, 1Pet 3:7). If we are not to accept their simple meaning on one point, then upon what basis do we accept it on the other? Though, curiously, the authority of Paul and Peter in commanding that women be honored will never be challenged by any.

Many women have assumed ministerial roles in a sincere desire to make a positive contribution to Cause of Christ. This is a commendable aspiration, and the imagination cannot be stretched far enough to span what women are capable of accomplishing with the help of God. Women can change the world. But this will only be done through compliance with the word of God.

Errors on this and similar points have doubtlessly contributed to the declining credibility and influence of nominal Christianity in American society. When Christians denounce gay marriage, abortion, etc. on the basis that they are unbiblical, any infidel can readily see the hypocrisy of the argument. Those making such claims do themselves dismiss even the plainest language of the Bible when it fails to suit their purposes. Verily, their worship itself is filled with alterations from biblical pattern, and they see no necessity in adhering to the Bible even in respect to the most sacred rituals recorded in that book (i.e. baptism and communion).

Some will criticize what we have here written concerning improper delegation as being too idealistic. They will claim that irresponsibility is an unavoidable fact of human behavior, so that provision must be made to fill the void that is left by it. This argument might be persuasive in certain contexts, but never for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Surely, if there is any institution that is to remain faithfully committed to the highest ideals, then the church must be it. Further, it should be taken into account that any provision that shifts the weight of responsibility from its proper place is very apt to abet the very irresponsibility it purports to remedy, leading to yet more accommodation, etc., with the result being a self-perpetuating spiral toward ever greater degrees of misplaced authority, misplaced responsibility, and the inevitable ineffectiveness that will be the consequence of such. As already noted, it is a near-universal law of human behavior that what man introduces as being merely supplemental to the commandment of God will eventually supplant it, and the facts of experience with all of the practices considered in this section aptly serve to illustrate the point.

14) “Maximin” Versus “Maximax”

In the science of optimization, when dealing with conditions of uncertainty, the analyst is oftentimes confronted with the choice of either implementing a plan that will produce the best results in the worst chance scenario, or a plan producing the best results in the best chance scenario. Under the first approach, he chooses a plan that will maximize his outcome in the worst case, but under the second, he plans so as to maximize his outcome in the best case. Mathematicians sometimes call the first strategy “maximin.” They refer to the other as “maximax.” It happens that in many issues of life, one is confronted with similar alternatives and the challenge of determining which to choose, or of choosing some balance between the two.

Now our contention is that the ways of God set forth in the Bible, if faithfully executed, will lead to the best possible results. A humanly-contrived system may in some respects produce good results, but always falling short of the excellence of the Divine plan. Most Christians will likely agree to this, having no recourse but to submit to the claim or else deny the omniscience of God. However, many will complain that the Divine plan, when under inferior effort, can also be productive of the worst possible results, whereas an alternate plan of human design may be more practical in that produces a better worst-case scenario. So, for example, a system wherein children are taught the Bible alongside adults in church, and faithfully taught it at home by their parents, will indeed be productive of the best results if diligently executed, but will yield the worst results if parents and preachers do not commit to the high responsibilities that such a system demands. On the other hand, a Sunday school, while being inferior to faithful execution of the Divine plan, will be superior to an unfaithful execution of it, and might on this account be preferred by some as the more practical alternative.

This argument carries toward a philosophical issue that affects many areas of life. It is a near-universal principal that a system capable of producing the best outcome in the best case can also produce the worst outcome in the worst case. The same principle generally dictates that a system producing the best outcome in the worst case will tend to be least productive in the best case. Potential for best gain usually comes at the expense of vulnerability to worst loss, and what does most toward avoiding loss nearly always does least toward securing gain. This relationship obviously presents a predicament, and one which not all men will handle the same.

In the world of business, this relationship is commonly described as a “risk/reward tradeoff.” An investment having no risk of loss is apt to have little possibility of significant gain, whereas an investment having high risk of loss can be productive of quick and sizeable gain. The principle applies not only to investments but to economic systems as a whole. This can be seen in the contrast between free-market capitalism and communism. Communism seeks to elevate those at the lowest level of society by means of wealth redistribution and extensive government intervention, but in seeking to improve its worst-case scenario, the system forfeits in respect to its best case scenario. Because it diminishes incentive to excellence and imposes heavy

regulatory burden, mediocrity is the best outcome that the system can typically hope to achieve. On the other hand, free-market capitalism affords the greatest degree of opportunity, but can, at least in theory, lead to the worst degrees of loss and deprivation.

The same principle can be seen in almost all other areas of life: A batter who swings hard at the baseball has best chances of hitting a home run, but also maximizes risk of striking out. The all-out blitz in football can drive an opponent backward, force mistakes and turnovers, by which the momentum of a game can be quickly turned, but if the blitz is beaten, it can be equally devastating to the other team. A fisherman that baits and rigs for the biggest possible fish also runs greatest risk of catching nothing. An army that splits its forces can quickly surround and subdue the enemy, but also makes itself vulnerable to annihilation. The more creative an inventor attempts to be, the greater will be the possibility of momentous achievement, but also the possibility of abysmal failure. These numerous examples should suffice. The tradeoff between risk and reward is so ubiquitous to the real world that it is a near-absolute law of nature.

The principle also applies in spiritual matters. Jesus said, *“For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it,”* (Mt 16:25). A man will not find fullest spiritual joy in Christ until he is ready to put himself at risk of natural loss. This principle can also be seen in the fact that many oppressed people, fearing loss of life, have been condemned to perpetual bondage under their oppressors, while others, in brave willingness to forfeit their lives, have secured to themselves joyous freedom. It is a general principle that the things of life, including life itself, cannot be fully enjoyed unless we are willing to lose them. One cannot find a more joyous book in the Bible than Philippians. It was there that Paul said, *“I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content,”* (Phil 4:11) and it was also there that he said, *“Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ,”* (Phil 3:8).

Given the universality of the principle, there should be no surprise that it applies to church practice also. A system that teaches children in the sanctuary along with adults, and which encourages Bible teaching by the parents at home, can produce the best possible results. It can also produce the worst. The same may be said of homeschooling. Experience plainly shows that home-schooling can surpass public schooling by almost every meaningful metric, but it can obviously have a disastrous outcome if parents are not disciplined and diligent. The biblical apprenticeship system for training ministers has produced the ablest preachers in history. It has also produced the worst. Vocal music can be unsurpassed in quality and beauty, but can also be a chaotic mess. Church-based evangelism can have vibrancy and vitality beyond even the best of mission societies, but it can also be a corpse. Independently-governed churches will achieve the highest levels of happiness, efficiency and harmony if all will follow the Bible, or degenerate into anarchy and strife if they do not.

So which course do we pursue? Will it be one which averts the worst, and settles for the safer middle ground, or one which aspires to the best, though subject to greater loss? In many circumstances it will be prudent to seek a balance on the spectrum of this trade-off, but the definite tendency of Bible-based Christians is to favor the pursuit of excellence notwithstanding the risk that such a pursuit almost surely entails. There is a reason for this tendency in Christians: It is what they have been consistently taught by the word of God to do.

The faithless Israelites under Moses repeatedly expressed preference for the security of Egyptian bondage over the perils of purchasing freedom. Their freedom would have never been realized had it not been for God pressing them to do what by nature entailed enormous risks. The Bible repeatedly expresses disapproval of that faithless generation, and exhorts Christians to learn from their error. Again, when directing Gideon against the Midianites, God gave a plan of battle that was bold, daring and fraught with peril, yet possessing potential for total victory. David gained legendary fame by putting his life on the line against Goliath, whereas his fellow soldiers were content to maintain a safe distance. Solomon stated the principle in, “*There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty,*” (Prov 11:24). This is another way of saying that what averts risk also averts reward. Again, in a famous verse he said, “*Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days,*” (Eccl 11:1). Here, precious seed that could have been eaten is cast upon irrigated ground where it could possibly be lost, yet without this, starvation is an eventual certainty.

Moving to the New Testament, the slothful servant who buried his talent defended himself as avoiding risk, and perhaps expected commendation on that account, but this is not the way of God (Mt 25:14-30). The servant was reprimanded and punished instead. Again, Jesus said, “*For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it,*” (Mt 16:25). This is the consummate expression of the principle that Christians should assume risk if this is what it takes to achieve excellence. This will explain why Bible-based Christianity has always been accompanied by energetic pursuit of technology and progress, whereas most other religions, including degenerate Christianity, have been mired in ignorance and poverty.

Maximin seems a prudent philosophy to many, especially liberals who are disposed to socialism. It has gained an increased foothold in America, whereas former communist countries, now enlightened from the hard lessons of experience, have been trending in the opposite direction. After its long experiment with communism, Russia was left with such an anemic economy that its output was surpassed by many individual states in America. Such dismal outcomes can be expected of maximin almost wherever that philosophy is excessively applied. The problem is that it fails to account for the fact that man is a spiritual being, and as such, inspiration is far more important to his happiness and progress than this doctrine allows. A cow can be completely content with a green pasture and a pond, but a man will languish with no better than this. He must have inspiration, and this requires that he have a standard of excellence, a reward

for excellence and an opportunity for excellence. Maximin forfeits the best to avert the worst, and being deficient in excellence, it comes to a dismal end, even for those it purports to help.

Inspired man is an immeasurably powerful force. Repeatedly in the history of man, achievements that were once considered impossible became commonplace once done by a groundbreaker who then inspired others. But uninspired man can be as remarkably weak as inspired man is strong. Witness countries in the world that are hopelessly mired in ignorance, poverty, starvation and disease, yet other countries that could be bombed into oblivion only to quickly rebuild. The difference is not in superiority of mind or body. Rather, it is a difference of soul. The soul of a society can be robbed by corrupt religion, corrupt philosophy, corrupt government, etc., leaving it in a near-hopeless state of bondage to its own mind. Any system that does not take into account its effects on the soul of man has foolishly disregarded what will likely be the most important factor in its failure or success. Such is the case with socialism. It purports to help the poor man, but fills his stomach while emptying his soul. It destroys his incentive to achieve, and leaves him without examples of excellence to inspire him to achieve.

These considerations have even greater relevance in spiritual matters. No method of training ministers, training children, evangelizing the world, aiding the poor, etc. will be more effective than where one man, one woman, one child or one family moves with extraordinary zeal, commitment and sacrifice to rise above others, resetting the mark of excellence, thereby inspiring others to follow. This is why God has little use for maximin. His ways are almost always found to be bold, daring and ambitious, and never do they put a lid on excellence. The Divine philosophy is clearly maximax. It is therefore a vain expectation that God will be pleased when any humanly-devised plan is substituted for His own system on the argument that it will function better in an environment of inferior effort and give better results in a worst-case scenario. When in a state of inadequacy, the proper correction is to pursue the Divine course with greater energy, not to form a new path requiring less energy.

Since the views advanced in this chapter will be accused by some of insensitivity toward the disadvantaged and poor, we will finish with comments addressing these claims. The idea that socialism favors the poor is rooted in imagination rather than fact. If this system does what it claims, then either God must not care for the poor or else He is incompetent to alleviate their plight. Free-market capitalism is almost everywhere observed in the Bible (2Ki 6:25 + 7:1&18, IChr 21:-24, Mt 13:44-46, Mt 25:15-17, 16:27, etc.), but nowhere did God propose alterations to this system as a solution to poverty. The facts of experience corroborate the Divine wisdom in this because socialism has almost invariably tended toward even greater poverty. The general experience with capitalism has been that the rich get richer and the poor get richer, though not necessarily at the same pace, whereas the effect of socialism is that all sink in poverty together. Socialism may therefore serve as a solution to human envy, but at a price that only a fool would be willing to pay. Most Americans would be very surprised to know how little of the public coffer would be necessary to support those in this country who are truly poor. Experience shows

that the wealth generated by free market capitalism under prudent governance is so copious and dispersed that care for the remaining poor becomes a minor burden. Poor governance has done vastly more to elevate the deficits and debts of this country than poor people.

The Bible is the best of friends to a truly disadvantaged man, but it is the worst of enemies to a man than is lazy and irresponsible. Care for the poor was so important in the New Testament that when Paul began to preach, though the established Apostles instructed him in nothing else, they reaffirmed to him his responsibility in this (Gal 2:10). Multiple places will show him to have been faithful to this calling. Yet he also said, *“For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat,”* (2Thess 3:10). *“But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel,”* (1Tim 5:8). The Old Testament expressed exactly the same contempt: *“Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit. The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh,”* (Eccl 4:4-5). This text speaks of one who envies his neighbor for having been rightfully rewarded for his labor, yet he envies in such foolish laziness that he would sooner eat his own flesh than work for a meal.

If a man is down then the Bible commands to help him get on his feet, but never will the Bible walk for him. A society that helps such a man get on his feet will be rewarded for its generosity. For example, consider the effects of public aid to those seeking education for the purpose of responsibly supporting themselves. The better jobs and higher incomes resulting from this will quickly generate tax revenues more than sufficient to cover the cost of the aid. The common laborer whose circumstances will not allow an education will also be better off because he then has fewer people competing for the types of jobs he is capable of doing. He too will have better wages, higher income and pay more taxes. But when the public coffer is used to atone for the consequences of laziness, irresponsibility and immorality, then *“withal they learn to be idle,”* (1Tim 5:13) upon which that society has no other direction to go but down.

15) “In Spirit and in Truth”

Christians of nearly all denominations agree that, for purposes of determining what true worship should be, no part of the Bible is of greater importance than the instruction given by Jesus to the Samaritan woman. She had inquired about the proper location of worship, having been errantly taught that a mountain in her own country was the proper place, but the Lord replied:

Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. – John 4:21-24

The words “*the hour cometh*” convey the idea that the mode of worship was soon to change. This supports our earlier claim that the Old Testament Law is no longer a rule of worship. Also, it is clear that true worship is not dictated by location. The important factors of worship are in *how* it is done, not in *where* it is done. Moslems and Jews would do themselves and others a favor in hearing Christ on this point, but they persist in their superstition that certain real estate is holy, and they are prepared to act in very unholy ways to secure it. Much of the Christian world is also in bondage to such ignorance. Observe further that Jesus spoke of “true” worshippers, implying that some are in fact false worshippers. An activity is not worship unless we intend it to be, but intent alone is not sufficient. The Bible plainly and repeatedly declares that few things offend God more than the perverse worship of men, and though Jesus Christ was derided as a friend of sinners, even He had no toleration for corrupt religion. It is therefore very important that worship not be self-contrived, but that it is squarely based in the word of God.

Next, Jesus gave the things that distinguish true worship: “*God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.*” The word “must” conveys the idea that spirit and truth are *necessary* conditions to true worship, but we can also be confident they are *sufficient* conditions as well. It is inconceivable that Spirit-blessed worship could be bogus. Now these two conditions for true worship are not independent, and the Bible elsewhere presents them as being causes of each other. This will surely require an explanation because logic disallows that one thing simultaneously be both a cause and an effect of another.

In one of His earliest promises concerning the Spirit, Jesus said, “*But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you,*” (Jn 14:26). Two chapters later Jesus said much the same: “*Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth...*” (Jn 16:13). These promises teach what every Christian already knows in his own conscience and by the testimony of his own experience, namely, that the Holy Spirit is what

opens the word of God to our minds. But the Bible also teaches that if a man desires the blessings of the Holy Spirit, then there is no better way to secure them than by knowing and submitting to the truth. So Jesus said earlier:

He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.) – Jn 7:38-

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Hence, this blessing of the Holy Spirit is unto those who already have the truth of Jesus to the extent that they believe on Him. Accordingly, Paul told the Galatians they had been deprived of the Spirit because they had departed from the truth (Gal 3:1-5).

So we have what appears a logical stalemate, with the Spirit being the cause of men knowing the truth, but knowledge of the truth also being the cause whereby men receive the Spirit.

Obviously, this problem can be resolved only if one of these two forces can act in a sovereign, autonomous manner. Not surprisingly, this is exactly what the Bible elsewhere claims: “*The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit,*” (Jn 3:8). So a man is born again by a sovereign act of the Holy Spirit. This cannot be by means of the truth as this would leave the stalemate unresolved, and would also contradict an earlier verse that had said, “*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,*” (Jn 3:3). The new birth is a sovereign work of the Spirit that is prerequisite to knowing the truth and whereby the truth is first taught. A man must eat to live and must also live to eat, but it is life that comes first in this sequence. Spirit and truth are similarly related, but it is the Spirit that comes first.

Since the Spirit is a sovereign force, He is not something we can automatically summons, which means we lack complete control over one of the essential conditions of worship. This is why any attempt at worship should be prefaced by a humble request that the Holy Spirit bless it. But it is at this point that the blessing of the Spirit can be dependent upon truth, especially the sincerity of the desire to have it and submit to it. True worship must be in spirit and in truth, but it is a presumptuous hope of it being blessed of the Spirit where truth is disregarded. All this shows the supreme importance of truth to worship, particularly to the aspects of it that we can affect.

Truth is of course not a thing that is unique to worship. Truth should characterize every aspect of Christian life. But worship is distinguished by truth in the sense that it is a special time when truth is *taught*. Almost everywhere we read of worship in the New Testament, it is accompanied by teaching, and teaching was the constant activity of the Lord Jesus Himself. This emphasis on teaching sets the New Testament church apart from most religions of the world. Those religions are apt to put far less emphasis on teaching and far more emphasis upon ceremony and ritual – activities that are remarkably infrequent in New Testament church service.

The importance of teaching can also be seen in Paul's instruction to the Corinthians: *"Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy,"* (1Cor 14:1-2). By "prophesy" he meant to teach or preach, and he said this objective has priority above all else in the church. Verily, even singing and praying should contribute toward teaching because he later said, *"I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also,"* (1Cor 14:15). These verses define and authorize the three regular activities of worship (i.e. preaching, praying and singing), and the Apostle said that all of them should be done such that truth is taught. The specific issue being here addressed by Paul was unknown tongues. Paul objected to them in the church saying, *"For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful,"* (1Cor 14:15). Hence, he commanded that un-interpreted tongues be done apart from church because they do not serve to teach. Then he emphasized his conviction in unmistakable terms: *"I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all: Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue,"* (vss 18,19).

Tongues are an activity actually having scriptural precedent, being documented in several places in the book of Acts. Now if Paul disapproved of them in the church because of their deficiency to teach, it is utterly naïve, or willfully ignorant, to suppose he would approve other activities having the same deficiency but having no scriptural precedent whatsoever. The Bible says absolutely nothing to authorize any of the amusement activities that dominate so-called worship in churches today, and since little if anything is taught by them, one can be absolutely confident that Paul absolutely would not approve them.

When questioning what would cause the Spirit to bless a worship service, the earnest desire to honor and obtain the truth is the only plausible answer that can be given. He surely does not bless simply because He is expected to do so, nor because He is obligated by the fact that the assembly considers itself to be in church. False religionists do exactly the same things. If an assembly has no real interest in truth, but has gathered with other motives, then there is nothing in reason that would lead to the expectation that such a service would be in spirit. Verily, it may be in emotion, but so are pep rallies, boxing matches, musical concerts and romantic movies. What many people think to be spirit is really the same emotion felt at these secular events. While it is an emotionally moving thing to be blessed of the Spirit in worship, it will also be productive of fruits expressly named in the Bible, including especially a higher knowledge of God and His word (1Cor 2:12, Eph 1:17-23), followed by the consequent love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance (Gal 5:22,23). Where these things are not had, there is no real spirit and no real worship.

The truth of the word of God also explains the regularity with which we are blessed in worship. In many aspects of life, the Holy Spirit can at times seem very inaccessible. In our trials and troubles, it can oftentimes seem our prayers are being lost in a vacuum. But those who have been blessed to be part of a true gospel church, where the word of God is honored and taught, have found that with remarkable regularity are they enriched by its service. Their lives are transformed by it. They are motivated by it to walk in a better path. Time and again have they received from it hope and inspiration to press forward when the trials of life were pressing hard upon them. And, with regularity were their hearts powerfully moved with awe and emotion as their minds were impressed with the wonders of God and the blessedness of their Savior. Those who have experienced this will not question it. Those who have not experienced it are to be pitied. Now the reason for the readiness of the Spirit to bless in this particular manner cannot be plausibly explained by anything apart from His readiness to teach and confirm the word of God.

If a man is failing to learn in church, then either there is something deficient with his church or else there is something deficient with him. The emphasis put on learning in the New Testament is virtually endless. The following texts are but a sample:

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. – Mt 11:29

It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me. – Jn 6:45

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. – Jn 8:31-32

Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him. – Eph 1:15-17

Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ. – Phil 3:8

Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection... – Heb 6:1

But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen. – 2Pet 3:18

Any experienced student of the Bible will profess that he who studies the book digs for gold in an inexhaustible mine. Man has not thoroughly explored any discipline of knowledge, much less has he fully explored the Author of all knowledge. With so much to learn and so much to gain, it is tragic indeed that modern Christianity chooses amusement over education.

As with nearly all religions, the New Testament church has rituals, but only three in number. These are baptism, communion and feet washing. All apart from these are human fabrications. Baptism and communion are the most sacred rituals ever observed by any religion; consequently, it is important that they be kept *exactly* as the scriptures have given them. This should be apparent to any impartial mind. How can Christians successfully argue the importance of following the Bible in anything if they do not themselves follow it in even the most sacred things? The testimony of Christians to the unconverted world is surely weakened by their lack of adherence to scripture in these sacred rites. When they offer complex and dubious arguments to justify themselves in their departures from simple, scriptural precedent on these points, then those who are weak in the faith can be expected to do exactly the same thing in respect to other parts of the Bible. *“But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ,”* (2Cor 11:3).

Strict adherence means that baptism must be by immersion, administered by gospel ministers and to professing believers. It means communion should be kept using real wine and unleavened bread, both of which are unleavened substances. Since leaven is repeatedly used in the Bible as a representation of sin, leavened substances such as crackers and grape juice are inappropriate depictions of the body and blood of the Lord. The argument that complains of wine because of its alcohol content is a specious morality that is unworthy of trust. A man who dismisses the word of God in what it allows will also dismiss it in what it disallows.

Feet washing is rarely observed in the Christian world; nonetheless, few things could be plainer than the following words:

If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them. – Jn 13:14-17

Christians commonly dismiss these instructions as conveying no more than a symbolic lesson. It seems not to occur to them that the whole communion service could itself be dismissed on exactly the same argument. There is indeed a symbolic lesson in feet washing, but it is clear the Lord also intended it to be literally observed even as the communion is literally observed. After washing the disciple's feet, He said He had given them an “example” – not merely a type, shadow or symbol. An “example” is by definition something that is to be imitated. Besides,

who can doubt that had He said “eat chocolate” in the place of “wash one another’s feet” then the whole Christian world would be eagerly imitating Him? Whether with communion or feet washing, the purpose of the service is to make an enduring impression upon the memory. In the case of feet washing, the purpose is to remind Christians of what they are always to be to each other. In our corrupting, self-centered, self-serving modern society, who can doubt the importance of this?

16) A Vain End Does not Justify an Invalid Means

While the intent of this book is to deal with church practice and not doctrine, these things always overlap, so that the former cannot be addressed without consideration of the latter.

Notwithstanding Christian differences about doctrine, we anticipate that none would dispute the subtitle above. If a man pursues a vain end with an invalid means, then he has only doubled his error. First, in that he has foolishly wasted time and resources to accomplish the impossible. Second, in that he has used improper methods in the pursuit of his goal. As sensible as this principle is, violation of it has been a primary fault for many problems seen in churches today.

The infraction typically begins when a church contrives some soul-saving ritual having little if any scriptural basis. The scriptural formula is simple: True believers in Christ are saved; those who reject Him are not. But the contrived ritual will require more than this. It is not enough that God quicken a man and change his heart. The man cannot be saved to Heaven unless he also prays the “sinner’s prayer” or goes to the mourner’s bench or joins the church or gets baptized, etc. Nothing could be further from our intent than to minimize the importance of any act of obedience, but as important as they are, none of them are means unto eternal salvation. Rather, they are acts of obedience that are commanded of those who, by the grace of God alone, are *already* blood-washed and born again, as confirmed by the faith of Jesus Christ that God has put in their hearts. Salvation from Hell is the most serious business man can know, so the same gracious God who gave it also gave a multitude of ways in which a man can set his troubled heart to rest and be assured his salvation is real. But no greater tragedy has occurred in Christianity than when men began to misrepresent these confirmations of salvation as being the actual causes of it, thereby obscuring or even contradicting the clear, repeated and emphatic scriptural declarations that salvation is altogether the gift of God.

The Lord Jesus said, “*Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,*” (Jn 3:3). Observe, a man is not born again *by* seeing the Kingdom of God, nor is he born again *by means of* seeing the Kingdom of God, much less is he born again by choosing the kingdom upon seeing it, nor is he born again by anything he does after choosing it. Rather, the text says that the new birth is *prerequisite* to all these things. It is the cause of them – not caused by them. So when we have successfully shown a person the kingdom or the King, there is no occasion to boast of saving them to Heaven. Their ability to see and rejoice in what we show is confirmation of the fact they are *already* born again. This is something God did, not us. No man in the history of the planet has ever saved anyone by means of a humanly-contrived ritual. No man in the history of the planet has ever been saved by our silver or gold, or through anything it can buy (1Pet 1:18). As John clearly said, men are born again “*not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God,*” (Jn 1:13).

But it is reasoned that since salvation is through the ritual, almost anything that will persuade, seduce or coerce people to observe the saving rite is justifiable. If the end is to save from eternal

Hell, what reasonable complaint could be brought against any potential means? So if it takes a long-haired, tattoo-covered, electric guitar player to induce a kid to perform the sacred rite, then, by all means, let it be so. Never mind that the tattoos violate the Old Testament and the long hair violates the New. Why concern ourselves with such trivialities when Hell is at stake? Such is the reasoning of thousands of Christians today. Many of these Christians will acknowledge, and even complain, that such tactics produce far more pseudo-Christians than the real thing, but the reasoning is that if so much as one soul be saved by them, then the end justifies the means.

Ironically, these methods are invariably accompanied with promises that God loves the unconverted and earnestly desires their salvation, yet the desperate extremities taken by the presumed soul-savers would suggest quite the contrary. Indeed, the appearance is that the soul-savers are far more concerned with the unsaved than God is. Since God evidently does not love enough to provide a man with the necessary means of salvation, the conclusion is that we must do anything and everything we can, and by whatever means, to finish what God seems content to leave undone. Modern Christianity is rife with such superstition. For very absurdity, nothing among the pagans surpasses it. On the other hand, the Bible very sensibly says, "*He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?*" (Rom 8:32).

The Bible has directly addressed and repudiated these superstitions. Ironically, it is done in a place that is commonly abused by these "soul-savers" when practicing their craft. This is in Christ's account of the rich man and Lazarus, recorded in the 16th chapter of Luke. In this story, a rich man, who fared sumptuously every day, had a destitute beggar living outside his residence. The poverty of the beggar was so severe that he would have rejoiced to even gain access to the rich man's garbage can. The rich man neither felt nor practiced pity. Next, both men died and went to their respective abodes: The poor man to Heaven and the rich man to Hell. Graphic descriptions are then given of the rich man's torment. It is at this point that the text becomes so useful to the "soul-savers." Many a man has been scared into drinking their soul-saving elixir by means of these graphic descriptions of Hell, but the actual intent of the story is to show the very futility of such practice. The rich man, upon seeing Lazarus in bliss with Abraham, begs that Lazarus be sent back from the dead to frighten the rich man's living brothers lest they also join him in torment. His request was denied. He was told that his brothers should instead consider the Bible (i.e. "Moses and the prophets"). The rich man said nay, the Bible would not be enough, but if one were to rise from the dead, this would surely frighten his brothers to repentance. The story ends with the rich man being told that if his brothers would not listen to the Bible, then neither would they be persuaded even if one were to rise from the dead.

The principle in this story is very simple: If people will not be persuaded by the word of God, then signs and wonders will do them no better. Much less then can they be turned to God by recreation, amusement or any of the other methods that modern Christians so commonly justify on the pretext of saving people from Hell. Now the long-haired, tattoo-covered, electric guitar

player may indeed bring forward a few sincere, Christ-seeking kids who will thereafter prove to be faithful servants of the Lord, but the same people would have been won by the word of God alone, and without being accompanied by all the vipers fleeing from wrath to come (Mt 3:7).

Carnal methods can only attract carnal people. Jesus said, *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit,”* (Jn 3:6). Hence, flesh only begets flesh, and spirit only begets spirit. Further, the Bible unequivocally says that natural men will not receive the things of the Spirit of God (1Cor 2:14). It says their only interest is in things of the flesh (Rom 8:5), and that their carnal minds are at enmity with God. So any church that fills its pews with this class of person will either find itself trending toward carnality or else God will be made a liar. Nothing has contributed more toward the carnality observed in so-called churches today than the errant ideas presently being considered. On the other hand, the word of God will attract only such as are truly spiritual. *“He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God,”* (Jn 8:47). *“To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice,”* (Jn 18:37).

But the greatest tragedy of these unauthorized means is not the deluge of hypocrites produced by them. Rather, it is the sincere, Christ-seeking souls who are carried along in the flood of sludge. There is no greater event in our times than when a person turns from himself and the world to serve the Savior in obedience and praise. Heaven rejoices over it (Lk 15:7). We should do the same. Anyone who does it, especially a young person, should become the object of our joy, interest and care. Unfortunately, this is less apt to happen under the methods here being condemned, because even the practitioners of those methods know they are more productive of dross than of silver. The silver is oftentimes lost in the dross, and rather than observing a reaction that is commensurate to the occasion, one is more apt to observe eyes on the clock and minds on the kickoff.

17) Centralization and Concentration of Power

Bible-based Christians have an instinctive aversion to centralized and concentrated power, whether in church or government. The same was true of most Americans in earlier years, though they have become dangerously accepting of it in recent generations. This opposition to centralization, as well as other traditional American tendencies on government, had their origin in the Bible, though most Americans today, including even Christians, have little knowledge or appreciation of this fact.

Christianity has been harmed by errors deriving from centralization for almost as long as the religion has existed. Mergers of church and state, corporate rule by counsel rather than independent rule by the word of God, aggregate training of ministers in large seminaries, and other like forms of centralization, have all been significant causes for the introduction and propagation of error. The problem has taken a new form in the evolution of the modern mega-church – a movement showing that little has been learned from the errors of the past. These impractically huge churches do not serve any legitimate Christian function more effectively than the smaller churches they cannibalized in their ascent, and when the movement has finally played out, there will be a hefty price to pay for its effects. The movement will indeed meet its end. Anything that thrives on the herd instinct of man will eventually wither on the same account. When great houses are built on sand, they are doomed to fall, and great will be the fall thereof (Mt 7:26-27).

Throughout the scriptures there is a clear pattern of opposition to centralization and concentration of power. The form of government supported by the Bible is consistently small, local and republican. By “republican” we mean government wherein law is the highest authority as opposed to rule by a king, counsel or majority opinion. The United States is theoretically a republic. Though having a strong mixture of democracy, it is primarily a republic in that law is the supreme rule. This is in fact the scriptural way. Even ancient Israel with its kings was not like true monarchies because the king himself was strictly obligated to the law of God.

The scriptural pattern against centralization and big government began to unfold at the Tower of Babel (Gn 11), where the people of the early earth, for fear of becoming fragmented and scattered, sought to establish a city and tower for the purpose of centralization. The first book of the Bible presents a wicked Babylon and so does the last. The final Babylon is to be a city “*which reigneth over the kings of the earth,*” (Rev 17:18), and is therefore a place of concentrated power. The first Babylon was motivated by the same Devil and had the same intents. Both are viewed by the Bible as evil and corrupting. God foiled the attempt at the first Babylon by confounding their languages. The effect of this was to fragment mankind and scatter it into independently governed societies. It is foolish to suppose this effect was not intended.

There were likely very negative consequences to what God did at Babylon, and the magnitude of the evil being averted may be inferred from the price that was paid to avert it. One likely consequence was a major technological setback to mankind. Historians have been baffled at the brilliance of very ancient man and also mystified as to how his knowledge became lost to subsequent generations. While the Bible does not plainly divulge this information, there is no better theory than that it was lost at Babylon. Specialization is a hallmark of an advanced society, but such a society would suffer a huge setback were its specialists to lose ability to communicate with each other. Another adverse consequence of the Divine act was numerous wars between the nations that were afterwards formed. As bad as these things are, they were better than the consequences of the entire race succumbing to the iron grip of a single oppressive and corrupting power. Many wicked tyrants have arisen in world history, and have ruthlessly seized large portions of the earth, but there was always someone left to resist and limit them.

The scriptural pattern continued in the book of Exodus (Ex 18), where Moses set up a system of local government over Israel, and while his system involved a hierarchy, it was primarily a decentralized system because it had the business of government working from the bottom to the top rather than the top to the bottom. All matters that could be handled locally were handled in such manner. One remarkable aspect of this area of scripture was that Moses was then at the height of his glory, having been blessed to destroy mighty Egypt and deliver Israel, yet he heeded the admonitions of his father-in-law; acknowledged the impracticality of concentrating too much control in himself, and relinquished control to the hierarchical system he then created.

Centralization was again opposed when Israel foolishly wished to imitate other countries in having a king (1Sam 8). God conceded to them on this point, but with clear warning they were taking an inadvisable course. Even in the Divine concession, strict limits were placed upon the king, which, if obediently implemented, would have maintained a primarily republican state. The wisdom of His warning has been proven over and over again by the facts of history. This is why monarchy was opposed by the American Revolution, but opposition to it did not begin with America. It began with the Bible, from which the American Revolution was largely inspired.

In the New Testament one will find exactly the same tendencies. The first of its lessons was taught by Christ Himself, who, though of Divine royalty, set Himself to serve the people rather than being served of the people. He charged His Apostles to the same effect, saying:

The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? but I am among you as he that serveth.” – Lk 22:25-27

Though the Gentile world at that time considered monarchy a good thing, even praising their kings as virtual deities, Christ denounced totalitarianism as inferior government, and replaced it with the very principles honored by all free people today. New Testament Christianity opposed insurrection and anarchy; therefore, it did not call for revolt against kings, but Jesus Christ effectively slit the wrists of monarchy by His example and teachings, so that this inferior form of government has been bleeding to death ever since. It now exists only in backward societies.

Christ also taught important principles concerning law. He denounced the lawyers of the Jews saying, *“Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers,”* (Lk 11:46). He was here referring to the onerous legal system of the Jews with its endless regulations, few of which had Divine authority. On the other hand, The Supreme Lawgiver, Jesus Christ Himself, had but two simple rules to govern all human conduct (Mt 22:36-40). The Divine wisdom here teaches that a good legal system is one that has a few well-reasoned laws that are equally enforced upon all men, whereas it is a degenerate legal system that has a multitude of laws, but laws that can be bent by those in power to exempt themselves or those they favor. This is truly despotism disguised in republican garb.

The Apostles faithfully continued this type of government after the ascension of Christ. Never has God given mortals more authority than the Apostles. Christ said to them, *“Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven,”* (Mt 18:18). Further, He said they would *“sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel,”* (Lk 22:30). Notwithstanding, in one of their most important decrees, they wrote to Gentile believers, *“For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things...”* (Acts 15:28). Hence, they imposed their authority only where necessary. This sentence is truly momentous. The history of the church and world would have been very different had another stance been taken. Being unencumbered by needless regulation, the early church could remain undistracted from the essentials of Christianity, and left free to spread throughout the varied societies of the world.

The wise governance of the Apostles is further seen when they set up the office of deacon. Though endowed by Christ with unsurpassed authority, the Apostles exercised restraint in their power and enforced democracy when commanding the church: *“Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business,”* (Acts 6:3). Hence, they did not take it upon themselves to choose the men to occupy this important role; rather, they put that authority in the hands of the church. Their actions also teach the important principle of checks and balances in government. The actual authorization of the deacons was to be conferred by the hands of the Apostles, yet the selection of the deacons was put into the hands of the people. Each party was endowed with sufficient power to serve as a check against the other. American government has persevered for two centuries because of its implementation of this important principle of checks and balances.

Again, when appealing to Philemon, Paul exercised restraint in his authority, saying, “*But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly,*” (Phm 14). The principle here is that nothing should be legislated and enforced if it can be done voluntarily. As there is much more honor in the latter, this is what Christianity should seek. Accordingly, there is a difference between being a legislator and being a leader. A legislator forces people into compliance by means of law. A leader first does the right thing himself and then inspires others to voluntarily do the same. Hence, Peter wrote:

The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. – 1Pet 5:1-3

Laws are of course necessary, but there is more virtue in doing or inspiring the right thing in freedom than in coercion. America today has many legislators but not many leaders.

This principle of freedom is especially true in matters of religious conviction. The concept of religious freedom defended by the American Constitution is once again a principle that was borrowed from Christ. He commanded His disciples:

And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city. – Mt 10:14-15

Thus, the unbeliever is not to be coerced or harassed, but his error is to be left in the hands of God. Religious freedom is sometimes misconstrued as the right to believe whatever one wants, but this is only a right before human government and not before God. The true reason for religious freedom is that a forced believer is no better than an unbeliever.

Sadly, we now have a state-sponsored religion in America called “evolution” or “Darwinism.” This violation of the Constitution derives from the illogic of legally distinguishing a religion by its belief in a God. The error of this can be seen in the fact that if God were scientifically verifiable, the Constitution would have said nothing of the right to believe on Him. This is because the right to believe what is verifiable is axiomatic to law. Therefore, the distinguishing feature of a religion is not its belief in a God, but its belief in that which is not verifiable by scientific method, or equivalently, by its dependence on *faith*. Since the majority of Americans and a formidable number of scientists agree that it takes more faith to believe in evolution than to believe in God, evolution is a religion for legal purposes.

The biblical concept of government is also illustrated by the structure of the church as formed by Christ and perpetuated by His Apostles. Churches were established as independent, self-governing bodies under the law of God. Neither Christ nor His Apostles ever made any provision for a super-church entity to govern the affairs of the churches. Therefore, when Christ set up His well-known procedure in Mt 18 for resolving differences between brethren, His commandments made the local church the final point of appeal. The New Testament acknowledges no higher authority than the church, excepting only Christ Himself. Anyone familiar with the biblical tendencies previously described would never dismiss this fact to oversight or indifference. It was completely consistent with a well-established scriptural pattern.

These facts are sufficient to show that the form of government supported by the Bible is consistently decentralized, unobtrusive and under the supremacy of law. It is not difficult to see why the Bible has taken such a position. History plainly shows that centralization will be followed by oppression, corruption and inefficiency, which will then be followed by failure and ruin. The Western World was recently on the brink of economic collapse on account of it. The failures of Communism and Fascism in the last century are also convincing examples. The corruption and oppression seen in modern Middle Eastern dictators serves as yet more proof. Any student of the Bible will know that bad monarchs vastly outnumbered good ones in that book. Centralization and concentration of power are sure recipes for corruption and ruin.

Centralization makes corruption an easy chore for the Devil. He can corrupt the whole simply by corrupting the single point of authority. This will be easier to do than corrupting the various subordinates. Experience plainly shows that those competing for power are oftentimes too willing to compromise principle to obtain it or maintain it. There is an uninspired proverb that says, "Power corrupts, and absolute power absolutely corrupts." Though uninspired, the truth of this proverb is undeniable. Excess power is more than human pride can bear, and granting such power is a foolish bet against human depravity.

Centralization poses a threat to freedom, and the experience of history gives absolutely no reason to trust it. On the other hand, decentralization is one of the surest ways to preserve freedom. In the United States, if one state were to abuse its power, then its citizens could move to another, depriving the former of tax revenue and giving it a well-deserved bankruptcy. Competition between the states also promotes efficiency and innovation and better service to their citizens. All this is lost when a power monopoly is created at the federal level. The biblical plan is to leave government at a local level where feasible, and to put it at a higher level only when not.

Experience also shows that when competing parties are unable to secure power over the entire body, they will oftentimes attempt to draw away a faction, thereby creating divisions. In the realm of civil government, the testimony of history plainly shows that war and bloodshed are the likely results of concentrated power. While people can become divided at all levels, rifts caused by power struggles are almost never mended because doing so will require much more than mere

agreement among the dissenting factions. There must also be a willingness to forfeit authority and control. This is not apt to happen because power has a bad habit of becoming obsessively bent upon self-preservation. This obsession obscures judgment and renders judicious leadership all the more improbable. Another consequence is that it creates a government that tends to be ratcheted upward in size and control, and simultaneously ratcheted into greater degrees of inefficiency and abuse.

Centralization is oftentimes favored under the assumption it will promote a greater state of coordination and homogeneity, but the opposite may in fact be the case. It is far better that men be united under sound principles than under a human authority. This will explain why nearly all advanced countries of the world have been under republican, constitution-based governments, whereas countries under monarchy or dictatorship have almost invariably been backward, discontent and unstable. No body of people has ever been blessed with a completely sound and comprehensive set of principles like the church, and this will explain why God set no human authority over His churches collectively. The facts of experience will show that denominations under centralized authority have done poorly in maintaining homogeneity and harmony, and when they have become fractured, the divisions have almost invariably been permanent. Independently-governed churches are capable of a greater degree of homogeneity, and the rifts between them are far more apt to be corrected with time, and will definitely be corrected if all will continue to honor the Bible. People who all follow the same rule-book will all eventually follow the same rules and then be at harmony. When a group of boats are independently anchored in the same harbor, then all of them will stay put, but if they are all tied to the same boat, the whole cluster will drift in a spurious manner. Also, if any church goes astray, it is more apt to be corrected by the positive example set by a multitude of other independent entities of like kind than by a single central entity that can be easily and credibly dismissed as prejudicial, corrupted, or driven by ulterior motives.

A primary mark of any true gospel church is a disposition to repent of its errors. There is no such thing as a perfect Christian, and therefore no such thing as a perfect church. But there are definitely such things as living churches and dead ones. The living ones tend to recognize their errors and repent of them. The dead ones will accumulate errors in a steady diversion toward apostasy. Suppose there are two men prostrate on the ground, both having a laceration on the right arm, but with one man being dead and the other man being yet alive. The living man will prove his life as the laceration progressively heals. The dead man will prove his death as the laceration persists and putrefies. The same is true of the saved people versus unsaved people, and of true, living churches versus dead ones. These observations explain the enormous importance that Jesus put on repentance. He said Heaven rejoices more over one who repents than over 99 supposedly just persons who sense no need of repentance. It is better to be a member of a church with many imperfections but having a disposition to repent than to be in a church with few imperfections but having no disposition to repent.

This then brings us back to the issue of centralization. Independent congregations of reasonable size can soon realize the possibility of their errors; confirm those errors by the word of God, and immediately move to correct them. But a man is a fool if he holds his breath while waiting for such to happen in a bureaucratic behemoth.

18) Church Discipline

New Testament clearly and repeatedly calls for disciplinary action against members of the church whose conduct brings reproach on the Cause of Christ. Notwithstanding this, very few churches in the modern world have any meaningful disciplinary standard. Departures from Bible teachings on this point are so severe that in a great number of modern churches it would be impossible to implement scriptural discipline without stirring a storm of controversy and provoking mass defections.

Part of this sad state is due to the malleable morality of our age. When sin is committed, it is much easier to minimize, rationalize and excuse it than to discipline it. Disciplinary action is the most unpleasant business that a church can do, so there is always a great temptation to seek an easier path. The modern negligence of proper discipline also derives from a perverted view of the priorities of the church. Membership in the church is viewed by many as entailing no more obligation than membership in a local gym. Whereas the gym exists to keep them physically fit, they think of the church existing primarily to keep them spiritually fit, and that either the gym or the church can be used on an as-needed basis. While spiritual fitness is indeed a function of the church, its primary purpose is to bring glory to God and to Jesus Christ. When members live in such a way as to do the very opposite, reproaching the name of Christ, either in hypocrisy or in professed disregard or denial of His teachings, then a scriptural church must demand repentance, and if not forthcoming, then that church must remove the recalcitrant member from her rolls.

The numerous verses teaching this include:

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. – 2Thes 3:6

Context will show this verse refers especially to lazy members who will not provide for themselves or their dependents. The Bible elsewhere declares that such people are even worse than infidels (1Tim 5:8). The damage done by an unbeliever to the Cause of Christ is small in comparison to that of a man who arrogates the name of Christ to himself and then brings reproach upon it. It was exactly this form of behavior that the Lord intended in the third commandment when He prohibited taking His name in vain. In giving that commandment, the Lord strictly warned that “...*the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain,*” (Ex 20:7).

Now if the Bible would impose this high standard even against dilatory behavior, then it surely would not approve the permissiveness of modern churches toward immoral behavior. This is confirmed by:

I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person. – 1Cor 5:9-6:1

Earlier in the same chapter, Paul called for the excommunication of a man who had committed gross fornication:

For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us. – 1Cor 5:3-7

Some Christians will dismiss Paul in these scriptures by pretending that the teachings of Christ Himself were not as severe; however, they obviously fail to consider His own instructions in:

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. – Mt 18:15-17

These verses clearly call for excommunication because it is inconceivable that Christ would have brethren in the church treating each other like heathens. The case considered is where two members are at variance because, in the judgment of the church, one has wronged the other. When the church demands that correction be made, then either it must be made or else the offender is to be excommunicated. Sadly, countless churches have suffered through unending anxiety and grief because they refused to obey Jesus Christ in dealing with such members. When the joy of innocent members is destroyed, and the reputation of the church tarnished, because two quarrelling members refuse to be reconciled, then the Lord clearly commands that one or both of the offenders be given an ultimatum.

A church without standards will be a church without respect. While we may be temporarily appeased by those who do not hold us to account, in the long run we will never respect them.

Many sons have related fond recollections of their fathers and praised them for what they taught, but never will one find a son praising the memory of his father on account of the father allowing him to be irresponsible, dishonest or immoral. Many athletes will speak in praise of former coaches, but never will this gratitude be directed at coaches who allowed them to be selfish, undisciplined and lazy. Teachers and professors having no rigor are soon forgotten. Those who made high demands of us and pushed us to learn are forever impressed upon our memories. In the long run, the ones we love and respect will be those who held us to high standards and compelled us to heights we would have never achieved if left to our own choices. Such persons should be sought out and embraced. We will surely be weeping at their graves. Better to do it in good conscience than in bad.

True love necessarily forgives error, but there is no love whatsoever in that which excuses, condones, encourages and abets error. *“Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful,”* (Pr 27:6). *“Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend,”* (Pr 27:17). *“He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes,”* (Pr 13:24). Jesus forgave sinners, but *never* did He excuse their actions. To minimize sin is also to minimize what Christ did to put it away.

It is very common in this age of homemade theology for people to actually commend themselves as being nonjudgmental for disregarding the commandments of God concerning church discipline. The truth is they are guilty of the very thing they disclaim. When the Bible commands against judging, one of the meanings is that, since all men are ultimately answerable to God, and since God alone has authority to determine the rules, it is wrong for one man to condemn another for violating a humanly-fabricated, liberty-denying rule that God never authorized. Now if God has commanded His church not to keep company with fornicators, but members choose to disregard this commandment by excusing these things, then those members have occupied a judgment seat they have no right to take. On the other hand, those who obey the Lord in such matters are not being judges, but are simply submitting to a judgment the Lord has already made. When a bailiff handcuffs a condemned man and carries him off to prison, he is not judging; rather, he is obeying the judgment of the court. Accordingly, when a church acts in compliance with the commandment of God in removing a wicked member, the church is obeying a judgment, not making one.

One of the most abused areas of scripture in the Bible is the account of the adulterous woman in Jn 8:1-11. As all know, Jesus said to the woman’s accusers, *“He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.”* This statement has been construed to mean that church discipline of almost any kind is judgmental and therefore wrong. Now if this position were consistently taken, courts would be wrong for condemning criminals, and any Christian seated on a jury would be acting against the Bible if not acquitting even murderers, thieves and rapists. Further, no Christian should ever desire or seek reparation under law from crimes committed against them. This shows the hypocrisy with which this position is taken. The same Christians

who appeal to this scripture to excuse what they wish to excuse will readily lay it aside when condemning what they wish to condemn.

As for the actual meaning of the text, it is a well-documented fact that the scribes and Pharisees were themselves guilty of adultery, though oftentimes cleverly whitewashing it with their abuse of the writ of divorcement. Women could be married and divorced on even adjacent days to create a ruse of legitimacy on what was truly and simply adultery. These wicked Jews were also capable of hatching up different rules when dealing with Gentile women than when dealing with Jewish women. When Jesus referred to these men as a wicked and *adulterous* generation (Mt 12:39, Mt 16:4, Mk 8:38), His meaning was literal. Consequently, they were unfit to condemn anyone of adultery because they condoned and practiced the very same thing among themselves.

This is in fact one of the things the Bible intends when it condemns judging: For a man to condemn another man for doing a thing wherein he himself is no less guilty. Hence, in His most famous statement on this subject (Mt 7:5), the Lord characterized the unqualified accuser as beholding a mote (i.e. splinter) in his brother's eye while he himself had a beam (i.e. board) stuck in his own. The Lord followed this by saying, "*Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye,*" (Mt 7:5). Observe, the Lord did not say it is wrong under any circumstance to behold and remove a mote from a brother's eye. Rather, He said it is wrong to do it in hypocrisy. The person who excuses sin and refuses to implement scriptural church discipline against it has done nothing to obey this commandment of Christ. The clear instruction of the Savior was to first repent of the sin yourself, then secondly to act toward correcting the same sin in your brother. In His own words, "*...first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.*"

A man who reviles his neighbor does wrong in reviling his neighbor and is unfit to judge another man for doing the same, but if he were to see another man within moments of murdering this same neighbor, and were he to idly sit by when he had opportunity to save his neighbor, then he only adds to his sin a far more egregious error. Indeed, all would agree that he had a right in that case to take the life of the intending murderer. Now it is sheer sophistry to claim he would have a right to take his life but would have no right to judge him.

Some of the sharpest rebuke to be found in the New Testament was when Paul condemned the Corinthians for *not* judging cases within their membership (1Cor 6:1-8). Members were instead carrying their grievances against each other to public courts of law, thereby bringing humiliation upon the Cause of Christ. Paul charged that the Corinthians were utterly at fault in shameful behavior, and that it had been far better if they had endured wrongdoing at the hand of others than to humiliate Christianity before the eyes of the unconverted world. This shows that in disciplinary matters, as well as in all other matters, there is no higher priority of the church than that Christ and His Cause are represented in honorable ways.

But the honor of Christ and Christianity also require that the church not be overbearing, and that it happily accept repentance when it is forthcoming. If an errant member expresses sorrow and apology for their error, and there is no reason to question their credibility, then this should be accepted in most cases as a sufficient basis for repentance. But if their credibility has been compromised, either by the very nature of their offense or because their past expressions of penitence have proven unreliable, then it is reasonable that the church suspend their membership until they have both *stated* and *demonstrated* repentance. Of course, all disciplined members should be assured there is an open door for them if they repent, and the terms of repentance must be fair and reasonable. The terms are not reasonable when it is demanded that the person fix what cannot be fixed, undo what cannot be undone, or they be demanded to correct one wrong by committing another. While reparation should be made for the damage done by sin where reparation is possible, any believer in salvation by grace understands that only God can fully mend what sin has torn.

19) Church Perpetuity and Succession

Isaiah said concerning Israel, “*Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah,*” (Isa 1:9). There is a simple principle in this scripture that is well-established elsewhere in the Bible: It is that God never leaves Himself without a witness in the world. Isaiah said that if his nation had become void of a witness, then it would have been removed from the earth like Sodom and Gomorrah. It was preserved on account of a *very small remnant* of witnesses. The same is true of the earth in general. It was created for God’s glory. When it no longer serves to this effect then it will no longer have a reason to exist. However, it is preserved on account of the true believers in it, who Jesus called the “salt of the earth.” This witness has at times been very small, but never nil.

One of the most touching illustrations of this can be seen in the darkest hour of world history. When Jesus was abducted in Gethsemane to be condemned to death, His disciples fled in fear and despair. However, providence arranged that John would follow Him all the way to the cross. Jesus had formerly taught, “*For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it,*” (Mt 16:25). John put his life at risk in that critical hour, and legend says that John lived to be a very old man, and that he was the only disciple to escape a martyr’s death. There is likely no coincidence in these facts. However, upon seeing Jesus suffer and die, John himself fell into the same despair as the others. At that point, the Lord moved upon the heart of the crucified thief to cry, “*Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom,*” (Lk 23:42). When all others had lost hope that Jesus was a king, the thief was enabled to see otherwise. Then, as life slipped from the body of the thief, and it appeared that, notwithstanding all, the world would be left without a believer, the Lord moved upon the centurion and his fellow soldiers to say, “*Truly this was the Son of God,*” (Mt 27:54). As one witness falls the hand of God raises another. The witness is a fire that cannot be extinguished.

Jesus said, “*...upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,*” (Mt 16:18). By the “rock” He meant Himself. Some have errantly claimed the term referred to Peter, but the writings of Peter himself will show otherwise (1Pet 2:1-8). The promise was that all the combined powers of Hell would never be able to extinguish the church. Again, in a famous text, the Lord said,

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen. – Mt 28:19-20

This is of course the so-called “Great Commission” because it commissions the church to teach and baptize throughout the world, and then declares plainly that Christ will *always* accompany and strengthen those laboring in this commission so long as the world remains. A

similar statement was made of the communion service: *“For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till he come,”* (1Cor 11:26). Hence, there will be a people in the world administering His baptism and communion until the very day Jesus Christ returns. For these reasons Paul said, *“Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen,”* (Eph 3:20-21). If the world has not ended, then God is somewhere being praised in it.

It is an unfortunate fact that, notwithstanding these clear declarations to the contrary, numerous men have emerged over history claiming that gospel truth had been lost from the earth, and that the Lord had distinguished them with the honor of restoring it. In some cases, they claimed that the planet had gone void of truth for several consecutive centuries. In every case, they followed such assertions with palpably unsound doctrine and practice, and no wonder given that their religious movement was itself rooted in a lie. One reason for their success at duping so many is that most Christians have been predisposed to such ideas by their belief in the myth that the world persisted several centuries prior to the Reformation with no churches apart from those of the Catholic denomination. Such claims are not only refuted by the historical record, they are also completely incompatible with the inspired word.

This then leads to a second issue that has been the subject of vigorous debate, namely, whether the perpetual church promised by scripture has existed, and will exist, in an unbroken succession. Most agree that the historical evidence of such is respectable, but the debate is whether the evidence is sufficient to constitute proof. While such historical studies are worthwhile and inspiring, they are accompanied by inevitable limitations and complications. Obviously, one limitation is that the historical record is incomplete and sometimes inaccurate. The other is that the analyst must make subjective judgments as to what qualified as a church in the sight of God. Some historians will be too generous in these judgments and others too severe. A merciful, forbearing God might bless an errant group as a church where a historian would not be so forgiving. One must also consider the principle given by Jesus: *“For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required...”* (Lk 12:48). Hence, God might be forbearing of errors in a poor, persecuted and Bible-deprived people that He would not forbear in others under more favorable circumstances.

But the relevant practical question is whether the scriptures do in some sense call for churches to conform to a succession. The answer to this question is unambiguous: They surely do. This being the case, such conformity is duty regardless of what the historical record suggests as to what God has actually done in respect to succession. A distinction must be made between what God has himself chosen to do and what God has commanded to be done. For example, God may or may not prosper the evangelistic efforts of a church, but this has no bearing on the fact that every church is commanded to evangelize. God may or may not heal a man who is sick, but this has no bearing on our obligation to pray for him. Accordingly,

even if God had not preserved churches in an unbroken succession since Christ, churches are still under direction to carry on in a succession.

This direction is implied in several ways: First, the ordinance of baptism clearly implies conformity to succession. The new believer is baptized into the church by one who is already converted and baptized. Second, it can be seen in the ordination of elders. The new elder is authorized by means of the laying on of hands of existing elders. The same practice is used with deacons. The scriptures offer no precedent for a spontaneously-generated or self-appointed church member, elder, deacon or church. Third, Acts 19 records the single instance where a group of believers emerged in isolation from authorized churches. In that single case, all of those believers were baptized again. Finally, it can be seen in the calling of Paul. Though he was to be distinguished as an Apostle, and as one of the most influential Christians in history, and though he was to be taught primarily through revelation of Jesus Christ and not of man, Paul was commanded by Jesus Christ Himself to seek out an ordinary elder of an ordinary New Testament church to receive an ordinary baptism. If Jesus Christ made no exception for Paul, then it is presumptuous to suppose He would do it for anyone else.

Therefore, any sincere believer desiring baptism should seek out a sound elder that has been authorized by a sound church. Accordingly, any man having a burden to preach the gospel should not take this authority to himself but receive it in compliance with the scriptural pattern of succession. The same is true of any group of believers wishing to be organized as a church. Experience shows that such groups will likely be blessed with success. But they should not assume the posture of reinventing the church to themselves upon the supposition of no viable alternative. This is in contradiction to the principle that God never leaves Himself without a witness in this world, and it especially contradicts the promise of Christ that the gates of Hell would never prevail against His church. Such a group of believers should seek out a sound church or elder and be organized under their authority.

Yet, it is not our intent to endorse extreme positions that have been taken on this subject. Some have gone so far as to say that if a succession of sound and faithful churches were found, but their succession had a dubious origin 1000 years ago, then all such churches should be considered as bogus along with their baptisms, ordinations, etc. The position is that, notwithstanding all evidence to the contrary, such a group could not be considered as churches if their pedigree were wrong. In contrast to this, the Bible says that when Christ returns, He will judge every man according to His *works* (Mt 16:27). It does not say a word about Him judging any man according to his pedigree. Further, He said:

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good

fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. – Mt 7:16-20

We are confident in saying on the strength of the above principle that if a body of believers is not being blessed by God as a church, then it *will not* persevere in soundness. Perseverance in soundness is therefore powerful evidence that God has blessed them as a church, in which case, other believers should recognize them the same. There can be no doubt that God forbears and forgives errors of both past and present. *“If thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared,”* (Ps 130:3-4). This includes errors in origination as well as errors in continuation.

Still, the greatest commendation the Lord has ever given anyone may have been to the woman who anointed His feet. He simply said, *“She hath done what she could...”* (Mk 14:8). Every reasonable effort should be made to follow scriptures in its pattern of succession. One would be hard-pressed to show that the hypothetical case considered in the prior paragraph actually exists anywhere in the world, but even if it did, a Divine accommodation to a special case does not authorize change to what He has commanded to be the general case. The fact that David was permitted in an exigent circumstance to eat the showbread in the Tabernacle did not mean that men were freed to convert the Tabernacle into a grocery store. It only meant there is a reasonable and merciful God in Heaven.

Adherence to this scriptural pattern is especially obligatory in the modern world where travel and communication have been facilitated to a degree never seen before. Notwithstanding all the evil that has come of it, Internet now allows believers all over the world to communicate with each other. There may be fulfillment of a prophecy in this. Malachi, in speaking of the last days, said: *“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another...”* We can rejoice in that he went on to say, *“...and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him,* (Mal 3:16-17).

Compliance with the scriptural pattern of succession is therefore both our duty and our joy. God is the loving parent over His redeemed family. Any parent wishes for their children to seek each other out, communicate with each other and to fellowship in love.

20) Interchurch Fellowship

Fellowship between churches of like faith and practice can be one of the most joyous aspects of Christian experience. It is especially beneficial for smaller churches, who can compound their effectiveness when combining efforts and resources in evangelical and charitable projects. However, a state of interchurch fellowship can also prove precarious if not prudently managed, and when it degenerates into a state of dissension, all churches involved will be greatly damaged. The dissension becomes a distraction and preoccupation, removing focus from the more profitable things commanded by God, and the discouragement it causes will lead to despair and defection, especially among church youth.

For this reason, churches in many denominations make very little attempt at meaningful fellowship with sister churches, and the relationship between churches can be more competitive than cooperative. They would prefer to peacefully go their separate ways, even in respect to points of doctrine and practice, than to endure the troubles that come with aspiring to be a unified voice. Because they bear the same denominational name, and agree to turn a blind eye to their differences, they successfully create an appearance of homogeneity and peace that does not truly exist. On the other hand, churches that aspire to interchurch fellowship can struggle in efforts to resolve small differences and create an illusion of heterogeneity that does not truly exist. These churches may in fact be in far greater doctrinal and practical harmony than those of the former class. Few people are wise enough to see through these illusions, and many quarreling churches are unwise enough to reinforce them to their own detriment.

The same type of situation can be created by churches having strong conviction and strong commitment to principle as opposed to churches having little. Strong conviction can quickly lead to strong disagreement, whereas absence of conviction can create an illusion of peace. Anyone favoring the latter state on this account has been seriously deceived. God commands to strive for peace, but never by means of casting conviction and principle aside. Further, people who remain committed to principle, especially biblical principle, will eventually resolve their differences, repent of their strife and reunite, but people having no commitment to principle, but who go wherever personal opinion and preference lead, will almost surely drift apart.

There is a common saying in modern ecumenical Christianity that “doctrine divides.” Nondenominational churches have flourished in recent years upon the strength of this presumed proverb. It is well-calculated to deceive the simple, but is an absurdity to anyone who cares to think. The opposite is actually true. Nothing unites us like doctrine. Many a troubled marriage has been saved because a husband and wife, though at odds with each other, remained committed to a sound doctrine. Many a battle has been won because fearful soldiers refused to succumb to their emotions and remained committed to the principles they were taught in training, especially principles that preserved them as a unified, coordinated force. The United States would have been torn apart long ago had its people not been committed to the doctrine set forth in the

Constitution. This nation will come to an end when commitment to that doctrine ceases, in which event it will fragment into separate entities. The truth is that sound doctrine unites, and no unification of men can endure without it. This is why men throughout history, in seeking agreement, have signed covenants and contracts, drawn treaties, ratified constitutions, etc. – all of which expressed a doctrine or derived from such.

Though modern Christianity is fragmented into many doctrines, it was not commitment to doctrine that divided Christians; rather, it was a lack of it, and their multiple doctrines are a symptom of the true problem rather than the cause of it. The modern ecumenical movement in its effort to achieve unity by discarding doctrine has instead done the opposite. Strife and instability within churches are now as bad as they ever were. Churches do more to devour each other than cooperate in causes that would truly promote Christianity, and the movement toward the emotion-fed, doctrine-dead mega-church has only cast a rug over a growing chasm of dissent among Christians on even the most basic of Bible principles.

Real and enduring peace cannot be secured without a firm foundation in doctrine. It is for this reason that the Bible, while putting great emphasis on the importance of peace, is no less emphatic on the importance of doctrine. Indeed, the same Bible that commands protracted forbearance and forgiveness also commands that a corrupter of doctrine be dealt with promptly: *“A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject,”* (Tit 3:10). *“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them,”* (Rom 16:17). *“But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed,”* (Gal 1:8). Forgiveness, forbearance, mercy and peace are all uniquely beautiful aspects of Christianity, but these concepts are built upon a doctrinal structure. They will fall and shatter when that structure is broken. This is why the usual rules of forbearance do not apply to those who corrupt doctrine. A man cannot consistently claim to value forgiveness, forbearance, etc. while laying doctrine aside. The latter is the only enduring foundation for the former.

This then leads to a case where interchurch fellowship may not be scriptural. If a church or group of churches has departed into doctrinal error and become entrenched in it, then the scriptures command that sound churches withdraw their fellowship. This plainly shows the error of the ecumenical movement. If doctrine is important enough to justify such drastic measures, then the dismissive attitude this movement takes toward doctrine must surely be in gross error. The ecumenical movement claims to make fellowship of higher priority than doctrine, whereas the Bible clearly makes doctrine a higher priority than fellowship. Indeed, under the scriptural meaning of “doctrine,” it is the *only* thing having higher priority than fellowship. The scriptural meaning refers not only to what a man believes but also to how he acts. Of course, how a man acts likely makes a more accurate statement of his true beliefs than the mere words of his mouth.

The drastic measure with which heresy is to be dealt also dictates that any charge of it must be substantiated beyond reasonable doubt. The charge of heresy has been a convenient excuse for those who were already bent on dividing, and were therefore eager to make much over differences that Christians should be willing to forbear. A man stands nothing to gain from another man who thinks exactly as he does. So our differences, if handled properly, can serve toward our mutual progress. It must also be considered that thousands of sound Christians have been censured and excommunicated under the charge of heresy when the true heretics were actually their accusers.

What then is “heresy?” Interestingly, the literal meaning of the underlying Greek word is “a choosing” or it can also refer to “that which is chosen.” It is a self-willed choice that puts personal opinion or preference above the authority of truth. But the scriptural usage of the term also shows it especially means someone who imposes his self-willed, truth-defying choice in a *contentious* way. Because of this, what would have otherwise been a small error can become significant if promoted so as to stir strife. It is reasonable in that case for the church to deal with the issue as though it truly had the importance its divisive advocate pretends. This is a fair principle of justice since Jesus Himself said, “...*with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again,*” (Mt 7:2). The reverse can also be true: More forbearance can be shown to an errant idea when it is peacefully held as a private opinion. So in determining what is heresy and what is not, it will oftentimes be necessary to consult the spirit of the one who is advocating it.

Doctrinal errors do of course come in varying degrees, some of which are bearable and some of which are not. The first question addressed by religious doctrine is of course: Who is God? The second is: What does He teach? Pursuit of this will lead to a third question: Where does He teach it? The first question leaves no margin for error. We must be at agreement on who is God. This implies we must also be at agreement on who is Jesus Christ. It is surely a heresy that denies the basic biblical facts concerning the identity of Jesus. Such facts include: His divinity as the only Son of God; that He is the promised Messiah; that He was born of a virgin; that He genuinely became a man; that He led a sinless life; that He was crucified for our sins; that He was buried and rose the third day; that He ascended to Heaven, and that He will return to resurrect the dead, bless the righteous and damn the wicked. God strictly commanded that we are not to have any other gods before Him. Anyone who denies these and other basic biblical facts concerning Jesus Christ, the very image of the invisible God, has fabricated to himself an alternative to the biblically-revealed God and become a heretic in so doing.

Nor is there any margin for error on the third question. If we cannot agree on where the teachings of God are to be found, then it is naïve to suppose that we can be at peace on what those teachings happen to be. A belief in the inspiration and authority of the Bible is therefore absolutely essential to soundness. While some who are called “Christians” claim belief in the inspiration of the Bible and others do not, they are in fact birds of a very different feather. They should be regarded as two separate religions, even though they errantly bear the same label.

The second question is of course much broader and more complex. We will not undertake to identify every essential aspect of what God teaches; however, there are two generalizations we can confidently make: First, the Bible says concerning Jesus Christ: *“Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved,”* (Acts 4:12). Next, it says, *“For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power,”* (Col 2:9-10). Add to this: *“Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, according as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue,”* (2Pet 1:2-4). Other verses could be added conveying the same general idea, namely, that Jesus Christ is *absolutely necessary* and also *absolutely sufficient* for salvation. Any doctrine denying either is a heresy. Hence, the doctrine of inclusivism is a heresy, because it denies the necessity of Jesus, claiming instead that there are multiple paths to God and Heaven. Accordingly, all doctrines that base salvation, in whole or in part, on human works and merit are also heresies, because they deny the sufficiency of the works and merit of Jesus Christ. So also are doctrines that dishonor Christ to the spiritual conscience, or deny Him the praise and credit He is due. As such things are antithetical to the very purpose of Christianity, they are deserving of the harsh label “heresy.”

But this great emphasis upon the supreme and ubiquitous role of Jesus Christ in true religion does more to condemn common breaches in fellowship than to justify them. If we are truly *“complete in Him”* and if *“it pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell”* (Col 1:19 & 2:20), then it follows that those who are at sincere agreement on Him, and are at agreement on who He was and what He taught, have all the basis for fellowship they should ever need. The sad fact is that many breaches in fellowship have occurred between brethren who neither had, nor even claimed, any difference concerning Jesus Christ. Further, we can generally state that where unwarranted strife has existed between ministers and churches, or even within churches, the most common root cause of it was that fellowship and peace were conditioned upon something *other than* Jesus Christ or *in addition to* Him. Quite commonly, it was conditioned upon agreement about Jesus Christ *and* another man or group of men.

Once we implement this foolhardy system that conditions fellowship on people or things other than Jesus Christ, division will be the inevitable result. It may take a year, decade or century but the outcome has been predetermined. The Holy Spirit carries men toward a common opinion of a common Savior, but He does not carry men toward a common opinion about all things, much less to a common opinion about each other. If He did, then all people would be fans of the same team, thus leaving it with no other team to play. All men would be in pursuit of the same wife and all women desirous of the same husband. All churches would be competing for the same pastor. And any deceiver capable of duping one man would be capable of duping them all. Were this commonalty carried further, then the results would be even worse. In that case, every man would want to be a painter, and no man a plumber, or every man a farmer, and no man a

pharmacist – the result being total economic and social collapse. A common ploy of Satan is to take essential, God-ordained differences between men and turn them into division and strife. When two people are at agreement on Jesus Christ but divide because they cannot agree on the color of the carpet, then they have been thoroughly duped by Satan, and have abased themselves to the most abject form of fool.

Further, this type of system not only preordains division, but also creates circumstances for cascading and escalating division. A common scenario is that one preacher becomes at odds with another and then demands that other preachers and churches share his opinion of this man. His dubious terms of fellowship are therefore that there must be agreement on Jesus Christ *and* that one must love those he loves and hate those he hates. A second preacher is then censured because he has a different view of the man at issue, then a third is censured because he consorts with the second, and so forth, thus creating a fragile, precarious and volatile system where division tends to escalate. Since offenses between men are an inevitable fact of life, it is obviously a foolish system that inherently fans such sparks into forest fires and turns coughs into contagions. Our fellowship is conditioned on agreement about *One Man*, Jesus Christ. The terms of this agreement should be detailed and rigorous, but even in that case, peace and fellowship will be attainable and sustainable goals.

Oftentimes divisions have been blamed to heresy when in fact the blame belonged more on differences about people than differences about principle. While the Bible is clear that heretics are to be rejected after the first or second admonition (Tit 3:10), men are apt to disagree on what is true heresy and what is a mere semantic difference, or on what is a difference in principle as opposed to a mere difference in emphasis. Even if there is agreement on this, there may be a difference of opinion on whether the evidence is sufficient to sustain the charge. Such differences are to be expected. This is why juries have more than one man. These differences will be manageable provided that all parties understand that fellowship is based strictly on Jesus Christ. The Bible says to reject a heretic. It does not say to reject an otherwise sound man having a dissenting verdict on one who is accused of heresy. Much less does it authorize rejection of a man, who does not reject a man, who does not reject a man, etc. who is *thought* to be a heretic. A man who fails to reject a true heretic is in error and should be admonished, but his error is one that can be treated with usual degrees of scriptural forbearance provided he himself remains sound. This will also be the prudent course because such disagreements will usually resolve themselves with time. True heretics seldom become any better. They nearly always become worse, at which point, all parties will be able to see them for what they are.

If this rule is not followed, then division becomes an eventual certainty. Heresy is a fact of life. No generation of the church has been without it or allegations of it. When a reasonable degree of peace and fellowship can be achieved only if a state of soundness exists across all churches and preachers, then a reasonable degree of peace and fellowship becomes impossible. It demands circumstances that not even the Apostles themselves were able to produce. Since allegations of

heresy are almost sure to occur, it is important that terms of fellowship be such as to minimize their consequences. The word “heresy” mixes two concepts, namely, that of false teaching and that of divisiveness. Satan has prevailed against churches by means of heresy either when he corrupts their thinking or produces unwarranted division among them. Both possibilities should be respected and feared. The solution to this problem is that both truth and fellowship be anchored in Jesus Christ alone.

The Bible praises Jesus Christ the very “Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6). Jesus told His disciples, *“These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world,”* (Jn 16:33). When peace and fellowship are conditioned on Jesus Christ and His teachings, then peace and fellowship can be found, but when they are conditioned on other things, tribulation will be the sure result. Only in Jesus can men find true and enduring unification. *“For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us,”* (Eph 2:14). God confounded the languages of men and divided them at Babel, but He unified their languages and brought them back together at Pentecost. Any attempt to reverse what happened at Babel on terms other than Jesus Christ and His teachings is resistant to the very hand of God and doomed to failure.

21) Priority

Maintaining proper priorities has a role in biblical Christianity that is of enormous importance. In assessing many of the things we do, both in and out of worship, sound judgment cannot be made without closely scrutinizing the intended prioritizations. Indeed, a man can be mostly right in principle about a thing but be in egregious error if his priorities are wrong. This can be seen in the parable of the great supper. When the guests to the supper were called, the Lord then explained:

And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper. – Lk 14:18-24

Obviously, buying land or oxen and getting married are all needful activities that are right in principle, but the offenders here were considered to be in serious error because they gave such things priority over the feast. The offence was so severe that they were denied right to the feast altogether. Even so, our lives can consist of activities that are legitimate when considered by themselves, but if they are not properly prioritized, we can fall far short of the mark and be denied the temporal blessings of God's kingdom.

The same is true of things done in religious service itself. If these are not properly ordered, then the error can be great. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their perversions to this effect:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel. – Mt 23:23-24

Hence, the Pharisees were so diligent in their religious tithing that they included even a tenth of the herbs and spices they grew, but Jesus charged them with being negligent in things of far greater importance. The same was done in:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee,

cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. – Mt 23:25-26

The charge here was that the Pharisees were more concerned about appearance than about reality. Now appearance is not a trivial matter, and even the Bible commands us to avoid the very appearance of evil (1Thes 5:22), but it is obviously more important to *be* religious than it is to *appear* religious. The importance of proper priority can especially be seen in Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees concerning tradition:

Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. – Mk 7:7-9

Tradition can serve a valuable role and can be essential to doing things in an orderly way, but when uninspired tradition is used to authorize what the Bible does not authorize, or to condemn what the Bible does not condemn, or to otherwise disestablish what the Bible has established, then a good thing has been so severely corrupted that it can actually reduce worship itself to vanity. Tradition is important, but never more important than the Bible.

Most of what we need to know about priority is summarized in the following statement:

Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. – Mt 6:31-33

When He said “*take no thought*” about eating, drinking and other material things of life, the meaning was that we should not allow anxiety about such to move us toward improperly prioritizing them. The most important word in the passage is the word “*first*.” There is obviously a rightful place in life for eating, drinking, etc., but the kingdom of God must come *first*, and we must have sufficient faith to invest ourselves in the fact that when we make it first, divine providence will arrange for the other things. The suggestion is that if we do not put God's kingdom first, then the other things may not be provided. Many experienced pastors can attest to this. They have oftentimes seen church members put worldly things above spiritual things only to become bankrupt in both.

Many religionists, including some Christians, have imagined that there is much value in a monastic life-style wherein exclusive religious commitments are made to seclusion, contemplation, etc. The Bible does not command this, and it likely contradicts what the Bible actually does command in that it tends to neglect the needs of others, and it is counter to the

commandment to evangelize. A man will be no less of a Christian for working, attending school, hunting, fishing, etc., provided that he puts the kingdom of God *first*.

There are numerous situations where church practice can err with respect to priority as opposed to principle. For example, consider a church that is to hold a special meeting with an invited preacher who is expected to speak for approximately an hour, and this is to be followed by an ordinary meal. Contrast this to another church that will also have a speaker, but who is expected to talk for only ten minutes, and this is to be followed by a candle-light supper of filet mignon and fine wine served on crystal plates and glasses and on linen table cloths. These two events are apt to be viewed very differently by typical Christians even though they are in principle the same thing. The difference is in priority. In the case of the first event, the sermon is clearly the priority, but the second event is really nothing but a formal banquet with a mini-sermon added to create the appearance of a legitimate church function. As a second example, consider a sermon where the preacher powerfully opens deep truths of the Bible but uses some purposeful humor while making his points. Contrast this to another sermon where the preacher spends almost the entire time telling jokes but mentions a scripture or two along the way. Again, the two events are the same in principle, but they do not strike the conscience the same at all. The difference is in priority. As a third example, consider how many church services today are being broadcast over social media. This could be a very good thing, but not when it is used as a substitute for church attendance. The principle can be right but the priority can be wrong.

While modern church practice has many errors in principle, it may have even more in matters of priority. Oftentimes the emphasis today seems to be on recreation and entertainment, while the word of God has been reduced to a mere side-show. This is true not only in youth activities but even in the main service itself. In most such cases, the error is apparent, but others will be more difficult to judge. Suppose we were to oppose recreation even to the point of prohibiting the kids from playing after service. This would be overbearing and potentially legalistic. So where are the lines to be drawn? The answer to this question will be largely resolved by answering the simpler question: What is the priority?

22) “The Kingdom of God Cometh Not With Observation”

When Jesus said the Kingdom of God does not come with observation, His meaning was that it does not come with an impressive, outward show. By “kingdom of God” He obviously did not mean Heaven. While inexperienced Bible readers are apt to begin with this assumption, they soon learn that something else must usually be meant by the term. In general, it means all places where God is honored as King, whether in Heaven or on Earth, but it generally refers to the latter, especially in the form of the church. Now it is in this earthly form that it does not come with observation. It may in many respects be visible, but not in ways that are impressive to the eye when judged by criteria that are commonly important to humans. If anyone doubts the importance of this principle, then let them consider that the greatest miscalculation in human history derived from the same error.

The Jewish people had been taught to expect a Messiah. In this they were correct. They were also generally correct in some specifics concerning him, including his family lineage, place of birth, etc. But they were not at all expecting a man who would be unimpressive when judged by typical human standards. The most unexpected aspect of all was His crucifixion. As Paul said, “*But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock,*” (1Cor 1:23). There was no problem in preaching to them of a Messiah or Christ provided it comported with their preconceived notions as to who he was and what he should be, but a crucified Christ was so contrary to their expectations that they spontaneously rejected such claims. His crucifixion remains a problem for them to this day. Most would say the Jews erred in expecting too much in this. The truth is they were expecting far too little. They have been debilitated by the error ever since. However, one can be sure that the error derives from a problem that is not unique to them.

There is no greater bane on the human race than its sensation for the superficial and its tendency to be blinded on this account to what is truly meaningful and real. In one of the most outstanding prophecies of all time, and 800 years before the event, Isaiah gave a description of Christ (Isa 53) as detailed as anything ever written about Him after the fact. But Isaiah prefaced his prophecy with the despairing words, “*Who hath believed our report?*” He realized that a large percentage of people, especially among the Jews, would reject what had been revealed to him. The prophet then explained that the man seen in his vision was not at all what most people would expect of the greatest person who would ever grace the planet. Much less would they expect it of incarnate God. Now the truth is that Jesus Christ was exactly what should have been expected and wanted of anyone who took the time and trouble to think. The problem is that not many people are disposed to think at meaningful depth, particularly in matters of religion.

It evidently did not occur to many of the Jews of old that if God were to walk in their midst, He was not apt to do it in the form of a rich, powerful man impressively adorned in a robe and crown. These things, while being important to humans, mean absolutely nothing to the Architect of the Universe. Gold and silver are no more to Him than common dirt is to us. The best of our

apparel is but rags to him. A man aspiring to riches, fame and power would seek to be adorned in the most impressive manner and be very selective of the company he kept, but it is a hasty assumption that such rules would apply to Almighty God. Reason dictates that quite the opposite would be the case. In particular, we could expect Him to be merciful to those held in contempt as sinners by others. To Him all men are sinful. Social and racial distinctions would also be meaningless. All men, regardless of race or social standing, appear to Him as poor, weak, fallible and unaccomplished. He would not dismiss children on account of their simplicity. To Him all humans are simple. He would not dismiss women on account of their weakness. To Him all humans are weak.

Further, while we could expect great miracles from Him, we should expect feats of a practical nature and not done for the mere purpose of show. This is because He is in no need of man's approval. He is no better off if we accept Him. He is no worse off if we do not. By believing on Him, we can only help ourselves. Accordingly, He would exhibit consummate confidence, void of any confusion, uncertainty, anxiety or fear. The past, present and future are all firmly in His knowledge and control. This would include a complete knowledge of the hearts of all men around Him, and we could also reasonably expect the state of the heart to be very important to Him. All men instinctively know from their youth that with God it is the heart that counts.

Now anyone who has read of Jesus Christ, as described by those who personally knew Him, will readily recognize that what we have here said is an exact description of who He was. To a thinking man, He was exactly what should have been expected and wanted of incarnate God, but Isaiah was acutely aware that humans are far more apt to judge things by superficial criteria than true and meaningful substance. God has challenged man in this respect from the times of the beautiful, forbidden fruit in Eden, but that challenge reaches its very climax in the form of Jesus Christ. As is the challenge with respect to the King, so also is the challenge with respect to His Kingdom. As is the human failure in expectation of the King, so also is the human failure in expectation of His Kingdom. It is for this reason that He warned us that "*the kingdom of God cometh not with observation.*"

The challenge is not only a test of human intellect, but is especially a test of human vanity and pride. A man cannot come to a reasonable assessment of the Kingdom without a reasonable assessment of the King, and he cannot come to a reasonable assessment of the King without a reasonable assessment of himself. True religion is largely built on two fundamental questions. The first is: Who am I? The second is: Who is Jesus Christ? Men are fond of pretending that the second question is the greater issue, but the first question is where the battle of mind and heart is really fought. When the first question is answered properly, the answer to the second will not be far behind. Jesus Christ will make very little sense to a man who has a deluded, prideful assessment of himself. He will be very sensible to a man who has come to grips with reality. This will explain why common and poor people have always been more disposed to believe on Jesus than those at the top of society. A man who is rich, educated or highly honored

has an advantage over the common man in almost every other respect, but he is disadvantaged in this one crucial regard. The favor life has conferred upon him easily distracts his mind from some facts about himself that are difficult enough for even poor men to properly appreciate.

Who am I? It is a remarkable thing that, while humans have a multitude of religious views, and commonly have sufficient conviction to kill for them, they do in fact unanimously agree on the answer to this fundamental question. Indeed, on this point even intellectual atheists can join fellowship with the most ignorant, superstitious heathens. The answer of all men will be: "I am someone God would surely consider to be important, if in fact He exists." It is clear that even Atheists believe this because of their unrelenting emphasis on the so-called "problem of evil." This argument says that if God exists, then surely He would favor us with lives free of trouble and wrongdoing; therefore, since we have trouble and suffer wrong, it is concluded God cannot exist. This reasoning is obviously predicated upon the belief that: "I am someone God would surely consider to be important, if in fact He exists." This statement, though assumed by all men, is laughably egocentric on the very face of it to anyone who cares to think. God's existence has nothing to do with His opinion of men or His care for them. These are separate issues. The fact that even highly educated men commit this error shows that infidelity has its roots in pride and emotion rather than true logic. Infidels may claim their position derives from reason, but the truth is that the matter is far more personal than they would like to admit.

When referring to doubters and unbelievers, Jesus had an interesting habit of describing them as being "offended." For example, the new believer represented by the shallow, stony ground in the Parable of the Sower did soon neglect the word sown in his heart because he became *offended* upon encountering tribulations and persecutions (Mt 13:18-23). At first thought, words like "discouraged" or "disillusioned" might seem a better fit to this statement, but be sure that something will be lost if any word of the divinely inspired text is changed. The new believer, having no depth of root, becomes offended at his troubles because he had naively expected better. This then translates to doubts. He may seek to justify these doubts by logic and science, but they do in fact originate from a personal grievance. Speaking of the last days Jesus said, "*And then shall many be offended...*" (Mt 24:10), which will explain why there are so many infidels in the modern world, with nearly all of them complaining that a god, if he existed, would not allow them to endure so much trouble and evil. Again, the Lord warned his disciples about persecutions to come, and stated, "*These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended,*" (Jn 16:1). When John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus seeking reassurance that He was in fact the Christ, in His reply the Lord stated, "*And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me,*" (Lk 7:23). This surely is not a plea for condescension and mercy. Rather, it is a statement of the fact that such a man has been blessed to overcome the superficial and to grasp what is truly substantial. Finally, on the night of His abduction, Jesus said to His disciples, "*All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the*

sheep shall be scattered,” (Mk 14:27). Since the King was offensive to the carnal reasoning of man, it is reasonable to suppose that His Kingdom could be the same.

All these statements show that unbelief and rejection commonly begin when unreasonable and vain expectations are disappointed. People are offended when they receive less than they expect, especially when they perceive it to be less than what they deserve. When they conclude from such there is no God, their ability to reason objectively has been obstructed by pride and emotion. They do not consider that their infidelity derives from an assumed premise that is itself in dire need of proof, and which, in absence of such proof, is really a dubious proposition. Why should a god, if he existed, consider us important, and why should he have any care whatsoever for our welfare? Such ideas should be dismissed as merely wishful thinking unless there is convincing evidence to support them. The need for such evidence becomes especially apparent when one considers there is much that could be construed as implying quite the opposite.

Scientific discovery never diminishes our concept of God. It only increases it. The simplistic and demeaning notions of God entertained by ancient men now appear ridiculous in light of all we have learned. While these men are not to be excused for their ignorance, some allowance must be made for the fact they had no way of knowing the incomprehensible vastness of His Universe, the unsearchable brilliance He implemented with the creation of life, the wonders of His physical laws, the complexities woven into the fabric of the earth, etc. Whether we peer through an improved telescope or an improved microscope, the conclusions are always the same: The organization, complexity and footprints of brilliant design are found to be greater than what we formerly perceived them to be. Then we must consider that even if we fully comprehended all we observed, we could not know that it even approached the full potential of the creative force behind it. God is at least as great as the Universe implies Him to be. He could in fact be immeasurably greater. It is a formidable evidence of inspiration that ancient biblical writers presented a much higher view of God than any of their contemporaries. Yet even in the Bible itself, one will detect a growing concept of God as they travel from Genesis to Revelation. This was unavoidable, and part of a process which will ever characterize the progress of human understanding, whether in this world or the next. *“Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end...”* (Isa 9:7).

But these facts surely do not comfort us in our struggle with the question: “Who am I?” As science accumulates evidence of God’s greatness, the less plausible becomes the idea that He would consider mere humans to be of any importance. Estimates of the size of the Universe have increased to the point that some have it as much as 150 billion light years across. This would mean that if a whole map of it were stretched over an acre of land, the dot on the map corresponding to the earth would need to be magnified a trillion, trillion times to even be the size of an atom. It takes the best of our instrumentation to even see an atom. Detecting a thing that is less than a septillionth the size of an atom is incomprehensible to us. It is a gross exaggeration to even describe us as mere “specks” in the overall context of what God has created.

But our insignificance does not stop at this. Our bodies are composed mostly of water. Once this is removed, one will be left a few shovels of dirt, which will be composed almost entirely of common and near-worthless elements, such as oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, etc. The scrap value of the human body is mere pocket change. Consider also our transience and frailty.

Notwithstanding the recent search for inhabitable planets, and notwithstanding the fact this search is presently leading to the discovery of numerous planets each month, not a single place has been found in the Universe that would accommodate our vulnerable bodies other than the small globe upon which we stand. Indeed, it is ironic that many humans do not believe in a hell. Every part of the known Universe is an effective hell except for the Earth. The Sun is hell. Mercury is hell. Mars is hell, etc. All of the recently discovered planets are hells. All of the stars are hells. Any man upon travelling to any of these places would be almost instantly dead upon arrival, and even upon the Earth will he be dead soon enough.

These observations are without consideration to man's righteousness or unrighteousness. It would be fanciful to suppose God sees humans to be of any real importance even if they were righteous. Much less could one suppose this if men were judged to be unrighteous rebels. No doubt the common supposition that God cares for us derives in part from our own paternal instinct. If we bring a life into existence, then we instinctively have care and compassion for it. This instinct was surely instilled in us by our Creator, who presumably replicated it from Himself. But we care for babies because we see in them miniature, harmless and innocent versions of ourselves. If the midwife had handed us an ill-tempered, scaly monster with elliptical eyes, then our reaction would have been very different.

So of all the thoughts and delusions men are fond of entertaining, the idea that God should consider them important is no doubt the most fanciful and egocentric of them all. The pride of man is the only plausible explanation as to why both Theists and Atheists readily make this assumption without seriously questioning its merit. It is not a thing to be taken as axiomatic. It is in desperate need of proof. A religion that merely assumes the existence of God or the greatness of His power still leaves this crucial question unanswered. It offers no hope and no practical reason for worship. On this account, such a religion is truly irrelevant. Infidel scientists, bent on doing anything else, have done more to prove the existence and greatness of God than the sum-total of all religionists. Therefore, when the relevance of any religion is to be assessed, the most crucial question will be whether the religion *proves* that God cares about man or whether it merely *assumes* it. The vast majority of religions do the latter, meaning that those religions offer nothing beyond what we could have easily concluded without them. It would also follow that if such religions are willing to ground the most crucial of all issues on mere wishful thinking, then nothing would deter them from doing the same on issues of far less importance.

When a man has put pride aside, and come to grips with his own insignificance in comparison to the incomprehensible greatness of God, then it becomes apparent that any claim of God caring for man implies an extraordinary degree of willingness on His part to condescend. The opposite

would also be true: A willingness on His part to condescend from one who designs, controls and spans the Universe to the lowly state of man would imply an extraordinary degree of care for him. Upon proper appreciation of this crucial fact, Jesus Christ will begin to make sense to a man, and all other alternatives will appear vain and void. Anything short of His own condescension would leave the crucial question in doubt and displace hope with fear. His condescension to the form of a humble man and His acts of compassion and self-sacrifice in behalf of men were no less important than the most spectacular miracles He ever performed. His miracles proved He is God, but His condescension proved that it matters He is God. In absence of this, His Divinity is a mere piece of information that will mean nothing to a man in a grave.

So when the unbelieving Jews disdained Jesus Christ on account of His humble life and ignominious death, they were in fact rejecting the very things they should have revered the most. There is no reasonable basis for hope without them. No doubt many of those Jews were blinded by conceit. They saw no need of the assurances offered by the condescension of Jesus Christ because they assumed their race and nationality were alone sufficient to support the assumption that God cared for them. This is why John the Baptist warned them from the outset against investing too much confidence in the fact they were the seed of Abraham (Mt 3:9). Given the terrible plight of that people since those times, and the fact that God has deprived them of the same superficial glories they demanded of Jesus, and has subjected them to the same humiliation and suffering they rejected in Jesus, God obviously insists that the condescension of Jesus be acknowledged and revered for what it truly is – the very hope of man.

Now it is an unfortunate thing that when men seek out the Kingdom of God, they are very apt to search for the same meaningless vanities which, if found in the King, would have left us without any basis for hope. Huge and extravagant edifices, a gloriously attired clergy sporting impressive titles and degrees, a prominent and affluent laity, huge congregations, etc. are the very things people are apt to seek in a church, but these things are so out of character with the spirit of true Christianity that it would be more reasonable that they draw careful scrutiny instead of unsuspecting adoration. The search for the true Kingdom of God should be guided by:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another. – Gal 5:22-26

The latter part of this verse is especially relevant to our times. Sadly, where churches are found having significant growth, oftentimes a great number of the additions are not new converts to Christ, but former members of other churches who had been coaxed away mostly by “vain glory” and accommodations to the flesh, and by very little having to do with the fruit of the Spirit. Even churches of the same denomination will measure success by their ability to cannibalize

each other. In their escalating game to see who can consume the other, money and effort are diverted from true evangelism and charity to finance ever-increasing levels of vain glory. The long run effect of this will be the decline of all churches taken together, both with respect to their integrity and with respect to the size of their membership.

New Testament Christianity, in obedience to its Author, strives to remain focused on what is truly meaningful. For this reason, it is void of those vanities that too often serve as distractions to men. This is one of several respects in which the Old Testament leads us to Christ. When David desired to build for God a glorious temple, the Lord quickly reminded David that He had never commanded any such thing (2Sam 7:7). Nevertheless, the Lord conceded to David, saying He would allow a temple to be built in the days of David's son. Yet even when Solomon had built the temple, the Lord strictly warned that He would bless it only if the Jews continued in those things He had actually commanded them to do (2Chr 7:19-22). This temple, though spectacular in its glory, almost exactly marked the end of Israel's ascent and the beginning of its decline. Years later when a second temple had been built, the Disciples of Christ beheld it in adoration, speaking of the greatness of its stones, but Christ disdainfully replied that the whole structure would eventually be torn down (Mt 24:2). The vanities and superficialities of men mean nothing to the Eternal, Omnipotent and Omniscient Savior, and for this reason every Christian should take careful heed to the fact that "*the kingdom of God cometh not with observation.*"