

◆ Chapter One ◆

Identifying the TRUE Biblical Faith

What Christian Denomination could we name that doesn't regard itself as being a true and faithful rendition of the religion of the New Testament?

Christian Religions of nearly every persuasion claim to be based on Scripture and many claim "Scripture alone". Yet, they all are found to differ to varying degree on even their fundamental beliefs. Not only do denominations differ from one another, but they also vary in significant ways from the beliefs and practices of the primitive Church found in the pages of the very Scriptures they claim as their foundation of belief.

If you were seeking the True Faith, where would you begin? Where would you look and what teachings would you be looking for? Most don't even consider 'looking', they just continue on, without question, in the things in which they were brought up from childhood. That is the approach of the vast majority. As it says in Matthew 7:13-14, "*Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.*" This relates to religious people also. There is a gate (a way in) that is restricted. Not many find it, as few have the presence of mind to even look for it. There is another that is wide, through which the vast majority 'enter in' completely unaware that they are just following along with the greater flow of blinded humanity. It is the rare individual who realizes that his denomination is at odds with the Words of Scripture and seeks answers.

Then as it says in the next verse, "*Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.*" It would seem inconceivable that sincere ministers would be something other than honest and true in their

representations of the very Word of God, but unfortunately, that is the reality of the matter. A great number are not genuine in their beliefs and for some reason have no interest in being so!

What IS that True Faith?

Should you be among the few who are dissatisfied with the standard fare dished out by the main-stream religious denominations of this world, where would you look to find the TRUTH and the right way, that Way of Life proclaimed by and lived by humanity's only Savior, Jesus Christ?

There is no better place to begin than with the foundational principles laid down in the pages of Scripture. We find those **foundational principles** listed in Hebrews chapter 6. The chapter begins thus: "*Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, [2] Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.*" Here, remarkably, the author lays out the perfect and complete framework for understanding the course a seeker of the righteousness of God must understand and must follow in order to become truly converted (attaining perfection in righteousness). Any course of action, any response to the Call of God which doesn't incorporate each and every one of these fundamental steps, cannot expect to achieve his or her personal quest for salvation. These steps are essential in their order. Each of these seven **fundamental doctrines** are understood fully and taught in God's True Church. (And, yes, there is one, despite competing claims!)

Let's consider each of these comprehensive foundational teachings in the order in which they are given in quest for 'perfection':

Repentance: A word that means being truly sorry for past actions, accompanied with a resolve to discontinue doing those things which are offensive to God. (In other words, SIN, which is clearly defined in 1st John 3:4 as 'transgression of the law'.) Where many denominations, particularly evangelical types, misrepresent the experience under a serious misconception that 'grace' not only absolves a person of past guilt, but that it abrogates the believer from any need to keep the law. True repentance expresses not only real sorrow for having broken God's Law, but forms a resolve to change and discontinue such action. But one thing rarely mentioned when discussing the matter is that it is God who grants the ability to repent! We may think it is our self-generated desire to repent, but in fact it was by His Call that we are led to do so. Romans 2:4 explains, "*Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?*" Keep in mind, this was stated to an audience that was very religious but a long way from being repentant.

Now, it may be our desire to repent, but we need to recognize that we must first be led to that point by the graciousness of God. True repentance must be accompanied by the resolve to cease from sin! And that would be the transgression of God's Holy and Righteous Laws, which He then, upon our conversion, implants within our hearts and minds, under the terms of the New Covenant. (See Hebrews 8:10 and Jeremiah 31:33.) Anything less is not true conversion.

Faith: Normally, we would expect faith to precede repentance. Doesn't it require some degree of faith to lead us to resolve to commit to God's Way of Life? In fact, that idea has certain merit, but we must realize that there are **two kinds** of faith, that which is of ourselves and that which is not. Ephesians 2:9-10 speak to this. While there is a preliminary faith that we ourselves generate, often called 'belief', that must eventually be supplanted with that Faith which is

not of ourselves. There is a faith **IN** Christ, and there is the Faith **OF** Christ. (Galatians 3:22, "*But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.*") This verse explains that our belief is to be superimposed with that promised Faith that is the same that Christ exhibited. (Not that our faith is irrelevant, it is also important in giving us the confidence as we take the first steps toward repentance.) Taking on that Faith which is in fact **His** Faith, developing it within ourselves, is the matter this particular fundamental Doctrine addresses. This Faith is unshakable and is the element that sustains the truly converted person all through their Christian Life, even under the severest trials and persecutions. It explains the unshakable resolve of believers throughout all time.

Baptism: As a public expression of the commitment to enter into a binding Covenant with our Savior, we undergo a symbolic act of illustrating the death of our 'old man' by being immersed under a 'watery grave'. The importance of this act is demonstrated by the forerunner of our salvation undergoing the same Himself. (Matthew 3:15) But this act can be rendered ineffective if not preceded by repentance and at least a preliminary degree faith.

Laying on of hands: More important than might be realized by the lessened degree of emphasis given it by traditional denominations, this ceremony is of utmost importance to the committed Christian. It symbolizes the receipt of God's Spirit, without which a person is in fact 'none of His'! Romans 8:9-11 is quite clear. "*But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.*" Being imbued with the Spirit of God, the very essence of His Nature, is the means of attaining true righteousness and is essential if we are to be considered for the first resurrection.

As we can see from just this one verse, the whole experience of conversion and the hope of the resurrection is dependent upon this one essential experience. The True Church understands and practices this ceremony in addition to baptism.

Resurrection: While most Christian religions acknowledge such an event due to its obvious presence in the Biblical narrative, most have no real use for it in practical fact. Under the common persuasion of the ‘soul’ going to their eternal reward immediately upon death, there is no real need for such an event to happen to them. On this fundamental doctrine alone, one can identify which denomination embraces the Truth of the Bible. Plain and clear Passages of scripture such as Revelation 20 verse 5 indicate that there is not just one resurrection. That passage also explains that only the righteous, who have achieved true conversion by the time of the Second Coming, will arise in what is there referred to as the ‘first resurrection’. The ‘rest of the dead’ will wait in their graves until the ‘thousand years’ are finished. This too confounds traditional representations of God’s Word. There are all too few denominations who can logically and convincingly explain the need for the resurrections, let alone a need for more than one. God’s True Church can do that.

Eternal Judgment: No subject is of greater interest among ‘believers’, no matter what persuasion, than the eternal destiny of their ‘soul’ in what is known as ‘the afterlife’. Despite numerous scriptures which describe the state of the dead as being like ‘sleep’, the world continues to perpetuate the non-biblical belief system which focuses on the ever-conscious ‘immortality of the soul’. While the prevailing world view is that ones’ ‘reward’ is endowed upon the deceased immediately upon death, the true Biblical accounts of the ‘sentencing event’ is that ones’ reward is assigned in a group setting, after a resurrection from the dead. No one is assigned their eternal reward without facing ‘the Judgment’ alive. That is why the resurrections are a vital Biblical Doctrine, as discussed in the previous fundamental Doctrine. Few places explain the event as clearly and distinctly as the latter sixteen verses of Matthew 25 and the final seven verses

of Revelation chapter fourteen. There is to be a general resurrection of all of humanity for the purpose of Final Sentencing. They will arise to Judgment together and be separated according to their respective destinies. The righteous will be ‘harvested’ in what is called the ‘White Cloud Harvest’ and the wicked will be consigned to the Lake of Fire, where their substance and consciousness will be extinguished forever. The idea of an ‘ever burning hell’ is a perversion of this Final Judgment event.

True Perfection: Though mentioned first, it is the comprehensive objective of the other six. While we strive to attain the fullness of the stature of Christ in this lifetime, we can accomplish that only to the degree we allow Him to work His Work in us. Perfection (perfect righteousness) is not something that we of ourselves can accomplish of our own strength. We are His workmanship, as Ephesians 2:10 explains, and that is with intent that we perform those ‘good works’ which He before ordained. No person can, in this lifetime, become fully righteous as He was, but that seed, (His actual character by means of His Spirit) is engendered in us when we receive His Spirit upon conversion and the ‘laying on of hands’ of the brethren who themselves have God’s Spirit. But that only works within us as we strive for perfection, ever developing the righteousness of our Example, who set the example that we are called upon to follow, never ceasing. We are to ‘overcome’ to the end, while a crown of righteousness awaits us in the resurrection. But this speaks to our life experience up until that time. A life of overcoming our own natures and the onslaught of sin which so easily besets us.

The greater attainment of the state of ‘perfection’ (which must remain our life goal) is when we are raised ‘incorruptible’, as 1st Corinthians 15:50-54 explains. That event is at the time of the Second Coming of our Lord, in full Glory and Power. In our fully-perfected state, we are to reign with Him over the subdued nations of the world (those having survived through the great tribulation) establishing the Millennial Kingdom of God on earth. Christ and His Saints (His Bride) will rule the world from that day forward in truth and

righteousness as ever-living Spirit beings. This is the 'Promise', this is the major theme of the entire New Testament, the very message of hope that was the underlying theme of Christ's Ministry. This is by far the under-considered and under-presented message among the religions of this presently deceived world. God's True Church understands the full implications of 'ongoing perfection' and the essential elements of its attainment. There is no other way!

So, from just these few fundamental teachings and doctrines of the early Church, we realize the following:

- 1) Scripture is the sole basis for establishing accurate and sound Doctrine,
- 2) Not all religious denominations accurately represent the Truth of the Word,
- 3) The 'majority denominations' are not right just on the basis of their size or prestige,
- 4) There are seven foundational Doctrines by which a seeker of Truth can identify the True Church,
- 5) These seven Doctrines represent the essential steps toward genuine conversion,
- 6) These seven are non-negotiable with regard to establishing True Doctrine,
- 7) Perfection is the primary objective of our quest for salvation,
- 8) Perfection is unattainable without being imbued with God's Holy Spirit,
- 9) Perfection is the result of God's working His Work in and through us,
- 10) We are to have Christ living IN us, through His Spirit,
- 11) A true called-out Saint must have God's Holy Spirit living within to be 'one of His',
- 12) Death is a 'sleep-like' condition from which all must be awakened in a resurrection,
- 13) Our eternal hope lies in a flesh-to-spirit change or a resurrection as it involves the 'dead in Christ',

- 14) The resurrections are an essential part of the redemptive Plan of God,
- 15) The pre-advent Saints will be the first mortals to 'put on' immortality,
- 16) The Saints will rise first to co-rule with Christ in His earthly Kingdom for 1000 years,
- 17) The first-risen Saints are exempt from the second death even in this lifetime,
- 18) After the 1000 years, the 'rest of the dead' will arise, being restored to physical life,
- 19) Judgment of humanity (in the sense of Final Sentencing) occurs after the 1000 years,
- 20) Final Sentencing will include those converted after the Second Coming along with those not converted.

Two Theological Falsehoods

This is what the early Church understood from the ministry of Jesus Christ as He delivered it and as it was carried forward by His faithful Apostles.

While this chapter thus far deals primarily with the matter of personal salvation, the Apostle Paul added an important precaution later, after seeing the drift that had begun to influence later beliefs. He warned of two important things to be on guard against: ungodly men who would, turn "*...the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Two major theological distortions of great importance: a perverted definition of what grace is and how it works; and distorted ideas regarding the true nature of God.

A Long History of Deception

Anyone who has investigated the Truth of the New Testament and found it, has come up against these major faults in the theology handed down through the centuries.

As Christ admonished us, Beware! "*Take heed that no man deceive you*". There can be no other way to verify what IS Truth than to diligently search the scriptures daily!



◆ Chapter Two ◆

Identifying the TRUE Church

People will often ask, "Where is the True Church? Is my salvation at risk should I be in the wrong Church? How do we identify which Church is one through whom God is working?" The answer may not be what we would expect.

I guess what strikes me the most about many of the world's claimants to this exclusivist self-regard are these two things: 1) The idea that any ministry could be the **one-and-only** group through whom God is working, (claiming all others then must be imposters) and 2) The spiritual barriers to fellowship with 'others' that they erect by posing such self-identity.

Is God So Limited?

We have to wonder **what** people are thinking when taking the position that God is limited, or is limiting Himself, to working in and thru any single ministry / organization. It's like they think this modern generation is all that there is or ever was. It's like they think that God will get all confused if He has to 'work with' more than one group at a time.

How did God do it before this generation, or before THEY, came along? Were there truly converted people back in previous centuries, or were there not?

We've had 2000 years of brethren, living under the most varied of trials with varying levels of understanding. How did God ever function without their awesome representation? (These super-important modern day ministries?) We're looking at only a part of just one generation, when there have been hundreds of generations, hundreds of ministers and ministries (most not 'organized' as we would expect). Ministries that have risen and faded away. Ministries that started out good but later faded into apostasy. Ministries that were good but simply died out, though faithful to the end.

How did this condition happen? Why did God let it happen? The elevation of any particular ministry was not the point. God didn't NEED them, it was the other way around. But to take that association with God, to accept His support and inspiration, and then close out any regard for others elsewhere who are experiencing similar association, is arrogant and not in accord with God's Will at all. Why can't these men see that? They define God down to being as ultra-exclusivist as they are.

Ministries Fade or Fail

God has 'worked with' many different individuals and organizations down thru time. They rise, they fade. Ministries (prophecies even) will fail, as 1st Cor. 13:8 says. They come and they go. Each entity that God uses in their time contributes their little squirt of grease into the overall machine God has set in motion. Each little grease squirt sees himself as being the entirety of what God is doing. They can't see the overall machinery due to their over focus on their particular grease nipple! But generations move on and God's Church moves on. Some remain faithful to the end, others attract and become infected with tares, and their ministries become compromised. That happened with the Worldwide ministry. It got to the point where things couldn't be acceptably remedied, so God had to let that organization embrace error, accept an over-lording structure that imposed that 'new' error, and then had it 'move on', wandering off into irreconcilable uselessness.

Now, we have a bunch of salvable fragments of that experience who see themselves as the

(only) true remnant, and who see the mindset that led to the Worldwide Church becoming useless as the very approach that they should re-employ. In the mean-time, the sheep are divided up, enfolded into narrow little canyons, where they can only see a sliver of the sky, not having the benefit of the perspective of a true horizon, and who are locked into having contact only within THEIR little group. So, they self-pollinate. Some have referred to this as spiritual incest! (A strong but insightful derogatory!) Perhaps 'spiritual interbreeding' would be the better term.

Benefits of Broadened Fellowship

Under the exclusivist approach the benefit of cross-contact is denied God's people. He wants us to have unrestricted correspondence, as Malachi 3:16 explains. These inter-communicators aren't faulted, rather, God praises them highly as **His jewels!** Our various organizations (and all of them project some degree of this fault) seek to impose **strict barriers** to open fellowship. THEY benefit by keeping their contributor base isolated, but the ecclesia is denied the benefit of the open exchange of ideas.

One can see the reason for such an approach when a person is very new, (to isolate the follower against heresies) but after a half decade or more, we ought to be sufficiently conversant in the Truth that we can take on the challenges of divergent opinions that might exist in our greater fellowship sphere. (Heb. 5:12) (I'm not suggesting any interaction with the world's religions.) And if not personally answering, we ought to be bringing these things to others among us who can, and to our ministry who should be sufficiently informed to be able to answer any challenge. And, if we lack good answers, we should be seeking them. We are strengthened that way. Our ministry, it seems, prefers to hide among themselves, limiting themselves and each other, not performing their God-given responsibilities in this area.

So, real spiritual growth that should be occurring is not realized. And, in keeping the

membership 'dumbed down', they won't generate uncomfortable questions either.

But back to the point above: Why didn't God establish a Church organization back in the beginning that preserved and represented His Truth? An 'anchor entity' that would continue in existence thru all these generations? A one-and-only Church that would maintain organizational or ministerial continuity thru all time? There appears to be no such entity. But, in fact, YES there is!

Looking in All the Wrong Places

But it's not the ministry, or any single group. It is the **people** He has **called out** of this evil world, His ecclesia, who are from time to time blessed with true and proper servants. God's Church is the people who have God's Spirit, not the organizations that they sometimes form themselves into, and certainly not exclusively the organized ministry. This is and has been our major error. The congregation (from two or three upward) is blessed with the responsibility of being 'the pillars and grounds of the truth'. (Paul was referring to the people, not to Timothy! (1st Tim. 3:15)) When we assign that over to a ministerial echelon alone, we typically see what inevitably happened in the Worldwide organization.

Apostates worm their way in and apostasy takes root, error supplants truth, and the apostates eventually run-out the good shepherds. Satan operates that way. God allows it when men look elsewhere than to Him. It has been the pattern over and over. Each individual member must keep his mind anchored in the Word, himself. Each must examine the words and conduct of their ministers. Failure to do so results in disaster, as we've seen! We can't rely entirely on our 'professionals' to self-oversee. Professionals have agendas. WE lost our Church due to inattention.

Members are the Anchors

Each religious organization that turns its responsibility for watching over the Truth to its

ministry exclusively, and which gives authority to that ministry to impose what they deem 'the Truth' will see a repetition of what happened in the recent past. Who would've predicted what happened? God wouldn't LET such a thing happen, would He? Not in HIS Church! That's what we told ourselves! Well, that organization wasn't His Church. The faithful and true brethren were the Church. We didn't accept that then, but it was in fact the case, and ever will be. The question is, will we – have we – learned the all-important lesson? The lesson is for the Kingdom. That mentality of seeing the organization as being 'the Church' can't be brought with us into the world-ruling Kingdom of God. Not so long as it puts an entity or a man between ourselves and our Savior!

The other matter of consequence in the typical 'we are the one-and-only' thinking, is that they pose either pointedly or subtly that God makes available His Spirit only thru them. A person is potentially cut off from God's Spirit when and if they fall into disfavor with their administration.

Again, we should ask, thru whom did God pass the flow of His Spirit before THEY came on scene? This too is arrogant beyond belief, but it is common. And the enfolded sheeple accept it!

Are ALL True Saints Of Them?


Are there any converted people out there who never heard of them? Can God call and teach a person directly, should He choose to? Can God give Talents directly, without their supposed all-important authorization? Can God raise up an individual and use him/her who just doesn't have access to modern communications or who

is isolated from others of like calling? Will He draw out the Two Witnesses from within any of these self-aggrandizing organizations?

From what I see, I doubt it. This will be their trial. To accept these two on the basis of what they **are** irrespective of their organizational legacy. I see the raising up of the Two Witnesses, not from among any of them, as a message from God. *"I appreciate your contribution, fellows, but you have yet some things to learn. These two are responsive to me, not to you."*

Think what would happen if He were to draw these witnesses out from among any of them. They have created such disdain against 'others' of like faith that the two Witnesses, if from their ranks, would carry over some of that organizational disdain. Do we think the infected people will suddenly drop their disdain for others that they have been cultured for so long to have?

No, God will need to draw from a clean well. Our current ministries, though perhaps faithful to the Word in large part, are also self-exposed as spiritual pipsqueaks. God isn't going to endow any of them with fire-calling ability. Think what that would do to their arrogant vanity if they were given it.

Where is the True Church? It is the **congregate whole** comprised of those who have God's Spirit, in whatever time, in whatever current venue or in whatever affiliation. Those without God's Spirit are none of His! It must be that all who do Have His Spirit are His! 

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◆ Chapter Three ◆

The FAITH Once Delivered

A Surprising Number of Doctrinal Teachings became Passé in the centuries following the Descent of the Early New Testament Church into Apostasy. What Changed and where did those Changes originate?

You would think that with such a widely accepted authoritative document as the Holy Bible that there wouldn't be a great deal of disagreement as to what the original Faith held by the early New Testament Church actually was. And should there be any question, a modern believer could simply peruse the writings of the New Testament and resolve the matter with certainty. At least, that's the theory.

Then again, we have each of our various denominations **claiming** that they accurately represent those original beliefs, yet they differ from each other doctrinally in so many fundamental ways. You'd think that 'the Faith Once Delivered', theoretically being the common ancestor of all Christian denominations, would be found substantially present in most, if not all of them. Though certain basic elements **are** substantially the same in many, upon closer examination, comparing the differing doctrinal positions against plain and clear Scripture, we are drawn to the conclusion that many 'extra-biblical' ideas have come to play a more dominant role in modern Christian Theology than we might care to admit. In fact, so much so, it would seem that there was a different common ancestor to modern Christianity than the one we might expect! Actually, there was! (See chapter 11.)

True and Original Faith

So, the key question is, does any modern religious creed preserve and teach the fundamental beliefs held by earliest Christians, those who inter-acted with the original Disciples, and who were taught the words of our Lord by them,

without adulteration? And further, should it matter to us?

The benediction ending the last-written Book of Revelation warns against two basic tendencies: **not adding to** and **not taking away from** the words of its prophecy. Not only is doing either a matter of concern, but also it risks having ones' name stricken from the 'Book of Life'. We can also realize from this strict prohibition, that with the addition of the vivid prophetic perspectives of this final New Testament book, there is nothing that **needs** to be added to the Faith there-in delivered. Then, why did later theologians see need to **add** so much? And why are so many basic concepts, beliefs and practices, common in the early Church, **not found** in today's religious belief systems?

So, if we haven't been concerned with the exact teachings of that Faith, as **originally** delivered, we do have reason to be. But more than that, if we find the various 'faiths' of today to differ from what was commonly believed and practiced in the early Church, how should we respond?

When we talk about that Faith once delivered, as opposed to another, we're in effect implying that there **is** a legitimate Truth. Is there such a thing as a "True Church"? Is the concept of a **True Church** even valid in this enlightened 'politically correct' age? (A 'True Church' being the one that preserves and practices the beliefs and customs of the early Church as recorded in the Bible.) What should we do with regard to pursuing the question to a reasonable resolution? Is any convenient and 'worshipful' belief system

just as good as any other? Many are inclined to see it that way. After all, it's far more agreeable than having to contend for what's right and true in a world with such divergent opinions as the one in which we find ourselves.

But the underlying question remains, and is itself a **matter of Faith**, the very issue under consideration. In what do we put our faith, and is **any** faith format equally acceptable to God? Is the one Faith God delivered, established by His own brutal death and widely witnessed resurrection, of prime importance or is any revised version of it equally valid with respect to attaining the greater promises conveyed with and thru that delivered Faith?

Earnestly Contend!

In the late 60's AD, Jude wrote in verse 3, *"Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was **needful** for me to write unto you, and **exhort you** that ye should **earnestly contend** for the **faith that was once delivered unto the saints.**"* The very issuance of his exhortation strongly suggests that the theological developments of his day were not all good! Men posing as believers were creeping in among the various congregations and perverting the True faith. He then goes on to list two issues that were having negative impact on the theological developments of the time, which issues we'll consider shortly.

We need to keep in mind that Jude's exhortation did not put a stop to the theological drift. That drift continued onward with ever increasing fervency. The Church that emerged from the 'veiled' first and second centuries was a dramatically different entity from the one we read about in the New Testament, in beliefs, practices and political form. So, what was that Faith once delivered, how does it differ from modern belief systems, and is there any religious organization in this age that preserves its essential elements and practices? To know, we need to know what that Faith was!

Perhaps before we consider the beliefs and practices of the early New Testament Church, we

ought to be reminded that the 'Scriptures' that they had were what we call the Old Testament. Epistles and Gospels came later, were written and came into wider possession piecemeal, being penned some thirty and up to sixty five years **after** the Day of Pentecost, and were not omnipresent in all congregations. Some had some, others had others. At least, in that first full generation, which we read about in them. What we see in the New Testament is as much a reflection of their prevalent beliefs as a source of them. By no means was the Old Testament passé in their minds, as it is in most circles today.

What we do find in the New Testament is a Church engaging profound theological issues, how to regard ceremonial practices, what 'authorities' to hold as credible, and how to factor into their belief structure and life style such things as faith, grace and works. The highly commended Bereans '*searched the scriptures daily whether these things were so*', but had only the Old Testament with which to do so. Obviously then, the true Faith **can be found** in and verified by the Old Testament! Can we say as much for common teachings of the churches of today?

Sabbath Keeping Remained

Touching briefly on some of the most obvious characteristics of the early Church, we see them being consistent Sabbath keepers. In the first twenty years prior to the beginning of the ministry of the Apostle Paul to the Gentiles, the Church consisted nearly entirely of ethnic Jews and Jewish proselytes. For there to have been any suggestion of a change in something as fundamental as this practice would have provoked a similar uproar as we see regarding the first suggestion of dispensing with the practice of circumcision. Absence of mention of even the slightest suggestion of such a controversy strongly suggests there was no such idea introduced in those intervening two to three decades between the cross and the progress of the writing of the New Testament.

One significant place where the matter **was** mentioned, it pointedly affirmed the practice of

keeping the Sabbath as regarding the peoples of God. (Hebrews 4) The re-mention, but that time in opposition to the practice in the early fourth century at the Council of Nicea, reveals that it remained an ongoing practice in some congregations of Christianity and under sufficiently strong persuasion to warrant official repudiation, along with other “Judaic observances” such as keeping of the Fourteenth Passover.¹

Even the suggestion among evangelicals that the Sabbath was later changed to Sunday is a tacit acknowledgement that it was otherwise originally. What we need to demand is authoritative scriptural proof that such change was Biblically sanctioned, otherwise, we must admit that the idea was added! Of course, in all these centuries, no such proof has emerged! In fact, quite the opposite!

Prophecy illustrated in Holydays

Another area deliberately overlooked is the presence of evidence of Old Testament Holydays being observed in the early Church. A prime example being the separate observance of the Day of Pentecost. Had there been no such inclination, the book of Acts would’ve begun very differently! But to **know when** this day had “*fully come*”, they had to factor-in the Passover, the Days of Unleavened Bread, the Wave Sheaf ceremony on the ‘morrow after the (weekly) Sabbath’ that fell within them. The Day of Pentecost is a derivative of each and all of these as **a culminating event**. Referring again to the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, at which critical mention of those who continued to observe the fourteenth Passover² shows it to have been a continuing practice thru three centuries, though

¹ The reader should investigate the fourth century “Quarto Deciman Controversy”.

² A practice, which by this reference, is shown to be distinct from the more prevalent “Jewish” practice of observing Passover late on the fourteenth, actually after sunset into the fifteenth. The early Church apparently wasn’t populated by those who imitated Jewish practice, but had a tradition of their own, in keeping with Christ’s personally handed-down observance. But in later centuries, obsession to repudiate anything ‘Jewish’ from their litany of teaching, such distinction was ignored!

under increasing suppression, until the apostate authorities banned its observance entirely under threat of the sword. We also see Paul instructing the Gentile Corinthian Church not only in how to properly observe the New Testament Passover, but also admonishing them to keep the Days of Unleavened Bread in sincerity and truth.³ He and they are also seen marking and observing, in a unique way, the Wave Sheaf dependent Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) on numerous occasions.

But the Church recognized and focused on, not so much their historic significance but their underlying *prophetic* significance. As Paul later wrote of them, referring to Holy Days, as “*a shadow of things to come*”, a phrase that could be rendered in modern English as ‘**an outline of future events**’. Modern theology tends to present this phrase in a negative light, as though Paul was presenting a reason for their **not** keeping them, where Paul was actually acknowledging that the Church was coming under criticism from strict ‘legalists’ for **how** they were observing these days!

The later written Gospel of John added a nuance not evident in other Gospels, that of the Holyday seasons in Christ’s ministry. Each of his narrative settings are related to and set in a particular Holyday season.⁴

Who is Jesus?

One of the significant matters Jude mentions in his epistle (verse 4) was the matter of the denial of the Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. In what way is that denial accomplished?

Perhaps the central teaching of True Christianity is the recognition of the Divinity of Jesus, not only as God, but as the God of the Old Testament. Though He is identified in places

³ 1st Cor. 11, **1st Cor. 5:8**, 1st Cor. 16:2 (making reference to the first Day of Weeks, the day it first became ceremonially legal to begin harvesting that year’s crops) Acts 20:16, 1st Corinthians 16:8, etc. See my article, “*Are the Holydays Done Away?*”

⁴ See “*A Harmony of the Gospels*” by Fred R. Coulter, York Publishing, ISBN: 0-9675479-1-1 for a most thorough and informative presentation of this unique substructure.

such as Isaiah 9:6 as the Father of the nation, His mission included making known to mankind the person of His Father,⁵ a Being alluded to in certain passages of Old Testament Scriptures, but otherwise not generally known to them. (Psalm 110:1 being a prime example, mention of which assured Jesus of a swift and certain death sentence!) Israel's primary interaction was with and their focus was on their 'LORD God', who Jesus claimed was He Himself!⁶

Elizabeth and Mary both acknowledged that He was their Lord and God. (Luke 1:43 & 46-47) Thomas did also. (John 20:28) God Himself calls His Son "God" (Heb. 1:8 (quoting Psalm 45:6-7))

Paul in numerous places made a clear point that He was the God of the Old Testament, the Being who God employed to create all things and who personally interacted with the patriarchs and with the emerging nation of Israel. (Hebrews 4:4-8, 1st Corinthians 10:4)

John especially made it clear that He was the one thru whom God created all things. (John 1:3) (see also Ephesians 3:9, Colossians 1:16 & Hebrews 1:10)

Later, apostate theologians such as Marcion⁷ put forth the concept that the stern and harsh God of the Old Testament was a **different** Being than the mild and merciful God of the New! A significant conceptual error. Despite being regarded as heretical, that view would later come to enter and impact Christian theology in subtle and profound ways.

Duality of the Godhead

The early Church at first recognized the distinct and separate Persons of the Father and the Son. It was later in the first century that this understanding began to be undermined, partly due to the mis-conception that was emerging, as

⁵ Matt. 11:27, Luke 10:22, John 1:18, 5:37, 16:3, 17:25,

⁶ I am Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:5), Moses wrote of me (John 5:46), Abraham rejoiced to see my day (John 8:56), Moses and all the prophets, expounded the things concerning Himself. (Luke 24:27), etc.

⁷ See my article "*Marcion Marches On*"

mentioned in the paragraph above, posing that the God of the Old Testament was, instead, the Person of the Father, overlaid upon the more prevalent Jewish belief in the numerical singularity of God, rather than their unity⁸ so clearly expressed by even Jesus Himself. (John 17:11)

As early as the middle years of when the New Testament was being written, this problem issue was emerging. A concept that the elderly Apostle John identified as the spirit of Antichrist! "*Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son.*" (1st John 2:22) These two contrasting phrases define each other! The perception that the Old Testament LORD God was God the Father, and that He is the Only God there is, left doubts as to who Jesus was. Thus the challenge to His true and full Divinity and to His being God's Anointed (Christ). The elder John wrote of that developing mis-conception and the dangers associated with it with pointed clarity! But Jude also identifies it as one of the basic elements of faith that we must earnestly contend for!

Perverted Grace

The other of the two major concerns Jude gives us is the matter of the perversion of grace. In verse 4 he writes: "*For there are certain men crept in unawares...ungodly men, turning the grace of God into lasciviousness...*" Grace that was being re-defined as something other than what it really is! In our 'earnestly contending', we are obligated to recognize that there is a mis-defined grace out there, and we should be especially attentive to the fact. In its most basic form, that perverted grace is one which justifies or legitimizes a person continuing in sin (under the intellectual guise of spurning what they've come to label as 'legalism'!) We can see the emergence of that idea in Paul's reaction to it, where he writes in two places in Romans 6. "*What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid.*" (v.1), and, "*What then? shall we sin, because we are*

⁸ The Hebrew word '*echad*' most often pictures a unity between two or more individuals, not a singularity of being.

not under the law, but under grace? God forbid." (v.15) History proved mis-represented grace to be an idea with staying power, drawn from the depths of our basic (Romans 8:7) natures, that keeps coming thru!

The Resurrections

Another major drift in perceptions involved the laying aside of the doctrine of the resurrections from the dead. (Identified in Hebrews 6 as one of seven fundamental doctrines of the Church.) Paul made clear the essential nature of this doctrine in 1st Corinthians 15:12-20. Some in his day were introducing the idea that the resurrection was not an essential event, and even past (or passé). 2nd Timothy 2:16-18 also makes reference to the theological contaminant of being dismissive of the resurrection. *"But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. 17: And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; 18: Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that **the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.**"* These two were **not** referring to the resurrection of Christ, as that event was obviously in the past. If the doubt were of that, Paul would have made reference to the many witnesses to the event. This reference is to the resurrection involving **the rest of us**. Their error regarded a needed resurrection of those who are dead in Christ!

The belief system of the early Church was directly dependent upon the attainment unto a resurrection from the dead. No more it seems! (As it's **not** regarded as essential to be resurrected in order to go to Heaven!) In fact, how do we integrate the belief system of people 'going to Heaven' (or Hell) immediately at their death, with a requirement of a resurrection? What would one facilitate? And, in what form are they to be resurrected? This also was a belief that hadn't found its way into the early New Testament Church, though it was a common contemporary idea in surrounding ancient societies. (The reader is urged to search the internet with regard to Mithraic and Gnostic beliefs. Mithraism and Gnosticism (Hellenism) was assimilated into even pre-Christian Jewish

religion. And where do we think the Islamic terrorists got their ideas about the 72 virgins awaiting them in paradise?)

Righteousness thru Faith

Another significant issue that came to bear as the Church's theology developed was the issue of the attainment of the righteous condition. Specifically, not the righteousness which was by works, but that which is by faith. The religious environment out of which the Church emerged was oriented to a works mentality, that understandably was the legacy of the Old Testament belief system. One entirely appropriate prior to the sacrifice of God's True Passover. But thereafter, the dynamics changed.

As the Church, at first regarded as a sect of Judaism, began to exhibit a separate identity, and especially as the Church began to acquire a more Gentile population, matters of the efficacy of ritual performance were re-evaluated. The problem for this age is the mis-application of the many direct statements in the New Testament to the efficacy of ceremonial performances as though they're speaking against God's **moral** law, where such statements were intended, rather, to address the **ceremonial**: ritual performances, both those specified in the Old Testament, and even more so, those extra-Biblical 'requirements' manufactured under Jewish reasoning and tradition.

Further complicating this matter is the common consideration of many of the statements in Paul's writings as being applicable to Jewish law, where it is more correctly applicable to Gnostic beliefs and practices. The books of Colossians and Galatians being prime examples of that!⁹

The other major mis-application is the regard for Paul's statements as being anti-law, where he was instead only making the point that keeping the law does not effect the **remission** of sins (the justification process). That poses a **great**

⁹ See my free articles: "*Gnosticism and the New Testament Church*" Acts 15:29 & Rev. 2:14 shows that pagan societies also had their sacrificial systems!

difference. In other words, we can't earn salvation by performing any righteous moral deeds. The penalty for sin was and is always only death. Nothing we can **do** after the fact can remove our guilt other than meeting its death penalty, either personally or substitutionally! Few note that Paul, where-ever he **seems** to be negative toward 'the law', it's always in the context of justification. But his regard for the law as the definition of how we ought to live, once having been justified, he's wholeheartedly positive toward it! ¹⁰ A very important distinction missed by most!

Just because future lawkeeping is not effective in rolling back any guilt accumulated in the past, the idea that we are then free to disregard keeping the law is an aberrant perversion of logic: A logic well entrenched in today's religious climate. This is not new, and explains Paul's strongest exclamations in places such as Romans 6:1 & 15.

Eternal Life

Another subtle shift in thinking from the belief system of the early Church is the matter of the immortal soul. Their belief was that eternal life was something to be **acquired**, not something always inherent. Even such oft-quoted passages as John 3:16 exposes the fact. It presents 'perishing' as our inevitable state, but the acquisition of eternal life as a strictly conditional contrasting alternative. Our believing on Him is that condition, without which we **do not have** immortality.

The idea of an eternal consciousness after death, in either of two places, though quite common in peripheral religions from ancient times, was **not** the concept of the early Church. Such passages as 1st Corinthians 15:12-20 reveal their understanding of the state of the dead rather pointedly. "*Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?* 13: *But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen:*

¹⁰ Romans 7:22 & 12 "*For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: ...Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.*"

14: *And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and **your faith is also vain.*** 15: *Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not.* 16: *For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised:* 17: *And if Christ be not raised, **your faith is vain;** ye are yet in your sins.* 18: *Then they also which are **fallen asleep in Christ are perished.*** (That word again.) 19: *If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.* 20: *But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the **firstfruits of them that slept.***" This is profound in its clarity! The resurrection is inclusive of **all of us**, not just Christ! Paul makes it clear that the dead in Christ are in a hopeless condition **IF** there is no resurrection from the dead. These are '**perished**' otherwise, and were not regarded by them as having gone to their conscious eternal reward at that time. They regarded it as a sure eventuality, but strictly dependent upon their first being resurrected.

(A side point we should note in this passage is the statement that we are yet in our sins, **IF** Christ is not raised! It is commonly taught that our sins are absolved by the **death** of Christ, where Paul shows that to be a **PART** of the process. We are actually "saved by His **Life**". Notice the clear definition found in Romans 5:10 "*For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the **death** of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his **life.***" Christ's ongoing Service on our behalf before the Throne of God in Heaven **and** our incorporation of His Life within us is essential in attaining eternal life, not just having our sins forgiven! ¹¹

¹¹ Hebrews 7:20-26 "*And inasmuch as not without an oath he was made priest: (For those priests were made without an oath; but this with an oath by him that said unto him, The Lord sware and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec:) By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament. And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an **unchangeable priesthood.** Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make **intercession for them.** For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless,*

(Hebrews 2:17, 3:1, 7:25, 8:1-2 & 9:24) Does your pastor make that perfectly clear?)

The Millennial Kingdom

The prime hope of early Christians wasn't the idea of going to Heaven, as we might expect. Their focus, rather, was centered in the Millennial Kingdom. The Disciples' question, recorded in Acts the first chapter, is very revealing. *"When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? 7: And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. 8: But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me ...unto the uttermost part of the earth. 9: And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. 10: And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; 11: Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven."* Keep in mind that this narrative was written down some three decades after the fact. It reveals that this group of men who spent more than three years under Jesus' personal tutelage didn't draw from anything He had said to them that it was man's destiny to go to or spend eternity in Heaven! It remained their perception, and the perception of the writers, that the key event was the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth, with Christ present in it, centered in the earthly nation of Israel.¹²

The writers didn't inject any suggestion that it had become a belief system in the intervening decades that it was mankind's destiny to ascend to Heaven, nor did they in any way amend what the angels declared, that their being reunited with Jesus would occur when He returned in the

undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens;"

¹² Israel, politically re-united, as Ezekiel 37 so graphically reveals. The word 'restore' suggests they considered this.

clouds, in reverse operation of what they'd just witnessed. Jesus (or those angels) could so easily have said, "You'll be coming up to join Me shortly!" Instead, what we see written is what Luke thought important to record for posterity!

The thief on the cross stated something that spoke of a similar concept just days before the above event. His insightful request, *"And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day¹³ shalt thou be with me in paradise."* To many, this passage in Luke 23 suggests the thief went to heaven that very day. (That raises the question, was Jesus conscious up in Heaven that very day?) But that is viewed from the understanding of our society, not theirs. Luke 19:11 earlier reveals that the common understanding of the first century was quite different. *"And as they heard these things, he added and spake a parable, because he was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear."* 'They' being even the general public!

Obviously, their expectation of the Kingdom was not the existence of Heaven, per se, but of a new world situation: Christ governing from Jerusalem, as so many Old Testament prophecies reveal. No one, even in our generation, would expect that Heaven would immediately appear! Again, had their perceptions been off base, the writers some three decades later had time to clarify their misunderstanding. But, no, it's our generation that doesn't understand what theirs understood.

The thief's request first acknowledged his recognition of Jesus as Lord. Second, it reveals his understanding that this Lord was to have a Kingdom and would establish it in his nation in time. Third, the thief had no time or opportunity to become converted in his situation, so how could Jesus speak with such certainty that he

¹³ The placement of the comma can change the apparent meaning. Was this 'being together' to occur 'today' or was the statement made that very day of the certain future? Believing John 3:13, written much later, would suggest the thief had been duped, IF the comma is well placed in Luke 23.

would? Fourth, his request referred to Him coming into His Kingdom, not ascending up to His Father's.

An Earthly Government

The answer comes with a correct understanding of what the Kingdom of God is, when it is to be, and what that Kingdom's purpose is. These narratives aren't referring to the opening up of Heaven for an influx of new destinees. Modern teachings regarding Heaven leave the Truth, as the early Church understood it, out of the picture. As the old hymn: *We've a Story to Tell to the Nations*, says so well, "... and Christ's great kingdom shall come to earth..." That's the essential Truth as the early Church understood it!

The last writer, John, maintained and presented the same understanding clear to the end of the first century, writing in Revelation 5:10, referring to the Saints, "***And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.***" First century writers, three decades after the crucifixion are seen writing that no man (even David) had ascended into Heaven! Nor was such not their expectation! The idea of going to Heaven or Hell had extra-Biblical origin, a fact easily verified in the historical record.

Absolute Glorification


Another component of the picture of what the early Church understood is the expectation of the form of and state of existence of the resurrected '**sons of God**'. Paul addressed the question rather directly in 1st Corinthians 15 (the resurrection chapter). 21: "*For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.* 22: *For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.*" Notice here that experiencing death and being made alive are two separate and distinct events!

Continuing... 35: "*But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?* 42: *So also is the resurrection of the*

dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: 43: It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: 44: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. 45: And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. 46: Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. 47: The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. 48: As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. 49: And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly." His point is clear, we don't take on the image of the heavenly immediately at death, but at the resurrection. (2nd Corinthians 5:1-10 affirms the same.) This is what the early Church understood!

Romans 8 has more of the picture of what the early Church understood: "*For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. 19: For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. 20: For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, 21: Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. 22: For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.*"

Creation itself awaits the glorified Saints to appear and reorient the world condition. These 'sons of God' will not be kept 'asleep' in the grave forever.

Much, much more could be said regarding the early New Testament Church's theological understandings. But, we'll let this much suffice in this chapter! 

◆ Chapter Four ◆

TWO Kinds of FAITH

Christians Everywhere Recognize the Absolute Necessity of Having TRUE and Demonstrable Faith. Faith can find Expression in a Number of Ways. But, What Kind of Faith Must We Have in order to be Acceptable Before God?

Though we are given the fundamental definition of faith, in places such as Hebrews 11:1, we're all too often too casual as to what kind of faith we have and where that faith originated. Religious people nearly always see themselves as having faith but without having explored its true definition and without realizing that there's more than one kind of faith. It stands as a potent recipe for miscalculation!

We ALL Have faith!

People of every persuasion have faith in something. The evolutionist has faith that chance and the natural selection processes are able to explain interdependent and highly complex life on Earth as we find it. The atheist also believes firmly that his view using rational sciences to explain apparent realities for them dispenses with any need for a belief in any Divine Beings' existence. Each of these has a faith of a sort. Religious viewpoints aside, we each have certain faith in the natural world as we see it and the reliability of the laws of nature to continually produce predictable results. We are certain what'll happen if we jump off a cliff. We aren't careless with fire and we handle explosives or poisons with care because we know there are natural laws that impose predictable consequences. And, what person doesn't have faith that we all will die someday, as surely as we do that the government will tax us?

Each of us has beliefs, some perfectly valid, some not. We tend to believe what we're taught

from childhood and what we come to understand from personal life experiences. Some believe in the existence of a God while others don't. But, is belief the same thing as faith? I think we can see from the above that the answer is, **no**, not entirely. But what about belief **in** God? Is belief **in** God the same thing as faith? Is that belief alone sufficient to establish the fact that we have faith? Is belief alone sufficient to 'save' us as the Bible speaks of?

A prominent religious luminary of the late renaissance era professed belief that "we are saved by faith and **faith alone**", despite the only place in the Bible where the word faith is coupled to the word alone (*only*) it is prefaced by the words "not by"! James 2:24 has: "*You see then how that by works a man is justified, and **not by faith only***". That theologian regarded the book of James as "an epistle of straw!"

Faith played a major part in his theology, organized around protest, but was it the kind of Faith the Bible stresses? Did the KIND of faith he envisioned satisfy the requirement for the Faith that the Bible calls for? The Apostle James' conclusion as seen above should raise serious questions. He exposes the fact that real and living Faith is a Faith that produces a certain kind of response: that referred to by him as "works"! There is an inter-relationship between Faith and works. It is that relationship, what could be called the **appropriate response**, that provides evidence of a person having true Faith according to James.

The WORKS Trap

Now, it could be interpreted that James was advocating a “works only” formula, where he is not. James saw and explained at length the fallacy of a “faith only” orientation. One quite common in today’s religious world. James saw a Faith that was exhibited by works (of a certain kind, not just any set of deeds) not just faith of and by itself. He realized true Faith produces a response and ultimately is demonstrated by how we live our lives.

The essential question has to be, what is the ultimate **source** of faith? What is the relationship between faith and works? Do works produce faith? Are our works in any way required to bring us into a state of faith or does it work the other way around? Does James give us any indication?

Though the word faith is used only 16 times in the book of James, mostly in chapter 2, nevertheless it is a subliminal theme in much of what he writes.

In chapter 1 we find that we should appreciate the impact on our faith that various trials impress. We can see from this that faith is something that needs to develop into a more perfected state. 2: *“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; 3: Knowing this, that the trying of **your faith** works patience. 4: But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. 5: If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that gives to all men liberally, and upbraids not; and it shall be given him. 6: But let him **ask in faith**, nothing wavering. For he that wavers is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. 7: For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. 8: A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.”*

First, James refers to ‘our faith’ and that common trials develop patience which has a perfecting effect. He also wraps wisdom into the

equation, in that we need a good sense of the process of faith-being-perfected. We see in his exhortation a faith that is not a foregone conclusion from the start. Faith also must become refined with experience, particularly through wisdom in dealing with trials.

But what is also insightful is his mention in verse 6 that the ultimate source of the perfecting process is from a source other than ourselves alone. Catching the sense of what he is saying, we see we are to **have** faith, but that it is to be re-processed into a more perfect state by external provision!

Faith, Repentance, Baptism

It is well known that the process toward conversion involves three key steps: faith, then repentance, followed by baptism. Feat accomplished!? Well, not quite! The interesting thing is to notice that we first must have faith, sufficient faith to truly believe. That belief then produces the confidence to submit and commit to God’s Will for our lives, to begin to **change** our deepest motivations, rejecting all that we ever did or were that violates God’s Righteous standards. But what we should take note of is the fact of having faith that precedes baptism and the subsequent receipt of God’s Spirit through the laying on of hands. There must be a degree of unrefined faith already in place before we can enter into the Faith-building process.

By Grace through Faith

Ephesians 2 adds to our understanding in its well-known verses 8 & 9: *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that **not of yourselves**: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”* Now, does this contradict James? Some people say yes! We’ll consider that further along.

But first, let’s consider what is being stated here. We’re saved by grace, but it is through the efficacy of faith. But then it further clarifies that

it is a faith particularly “not of ourselves”! There is a faith that is **not** OF ourselves, it does not originate within ourselves, though it must be within ourselves. But what about that faith which we must have first in order to believe and to desire to genuinely repent? That faith has to be in place before we receive God’s Spirit, which is key to any further development spiritually. The point here is that there IS a first faith that, to a large degree, IS OF ourselves! It is also true that there is a Faith that is **not** of ourselves. That Faith is developed (perfected) over time, and is what James points us toward.

Paul doesn’t leave the thought in Ephesians 2 without clarifying the matter of how works factor in. He isn’t contradicting James, but he is bringing works into the picture in their proper relationship to faith. Continuing in verse 10, what most preachers deliberately leave off the sentence: “*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto **good works**, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*” We see in this key part of Paul’s sentence that salvation produces works, not the other way around! Good works: those pre-ordained at some point in the past. Good works as defined by the (before ordained) Laws and Righteousness of God! We might also say, Good works as demonstrated by His Living Example! Effectively, works are the appropriate **result** of conversion, not the means of attaining it, as stated both by James and by Paul.

Religious people everywhere, it seems, are locked into the idea that the **only reason** a person would do good works is to earn salvation purely by their own efforts. They, in their anti-law bias, are locked into this shortsighted conceptualization. What they miss by taking that position is that there are **other** reasons for performing works than just the quest to earn salvation. It’s also the correct and appropriate response to having been ‘justified’ and having received the free Gift of Salvation.

Dead Faith?

Now, that thought in mind, going back to James’ point in his chapter 2, where does it leave those ‘people of faith’ (and especially of the ‘faith *alone*’ persuasion) who don’t, won’t or can’t exhibit their faith through demonstrable works? James says of them, their faith is in effect **dead!** (verse 2:20) Of what value is that?

“From faith TO Faith”

A passage that injects some clarification into this subject is found in Romans chapter 1. Verse 17 has: “*For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.*” A number of important questions are addressed in this potent sentence. It affirms that God’s Righteousness is expressed through faith, but also that faith is a development process. There is a preliminary kind of faith that must by practice develop into another kind of Faith, and that the exercise of that perfected Faith is essential to the justification process. We move from one kind of faith (that which **is** of ourselves) into another kind of Faith, that which **is NOT** of ourselves, but is the expressed Faith OF Christ. We are to move from a faith IN Christ into the Faith OF Christ. There are two KINDS of Faith! (Not to diminish the importance of the first faith, it also is necessary initially.) And, it’s the Faith **of** Christ that we must live by, not just by our maintaining a belief in Him! A threshold many have not fully crossed in their religious life’s quest.

How DO We Tell?

But how do we know what **quality** of faith we’re in possession of? And, is our faith level sufficient for a successful Christian life?

The Apostle Paul saw that there’s a faith barometer in operation even in his own life in this regard. In Romans chapter 7 he puts forth a most astounding self-admission. Starting in verse 5: “*For when we were in the flesh, the*

motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. In other words, our natural conduct leaves us guilty of sin and worthy of death. 6: *“But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.* A much mis-interpreted statement. We by grace are released from a consignment to death, but are then by that obligated to adhere to (serve) God’s righteous standards as defined by His Commandments. 7: *“What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.”* Paul is asking, is the law of and by itself our mortal enemy? He then discourages that we think such a thing. (We have people today who advocate that it is actually wrong for us to try and keep the law.) 8: *“But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence.”* It is the law that creates in us the awareness of the true definition of what sin is! *“For without the law sin was dead.”* Ah, the bliss of ignorance. 9: *“For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.”*

Becoming aware of the law created the awareness in him of his true spiritual condition. 10: *“And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death.”* Here, an institution intended to reveal the way of life, by his natural violation of it, exposed the fact of his justly deserved death sentence! 11: *“For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me.* 12: *Wherefore **the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.*** 13: *Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.* 14: *For we know that **the law is spiritual:** but I am carnal, sold under*

sin.” Referring to his, and our, natural condition apart from grace!

OUR Internal Conflict

It is at this point in his narrative that Paul reveals his innermost struggles with his personal nature. And, it has everything to do with the matter of operational faith. 15: *“For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.* 16: *If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good.* 17: *Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me.* 18: *For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwells no good thing: for to will is present with me; but **how** to perform that which is good I find not.”* We see a desperate struggle between his mental commitment and his natural pulls. Who can’t relate to that? 19: *“For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.* 20: *Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me.* 21: *I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me.* 22: *For I delight in **the law of God** after the inward man:* 23: *But I see **another law** in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.”* (That law referred to in Romans 8:7) 24: *“O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? 25: I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.”*

The question is, what is **our** primary motivational force? Which dominates our conduct? The answer is found in the degree of the Faith of God we are given and that we apply.

Paul in another place addresses this matter further. In Galatians 2:17 he writes: *“But if, while we **seek to be justified** by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid.* 18: *For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I*

make myself a transgressor. 19: For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. 20: I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” The key to resolve this conflict is found in the Faith OF God. Where people lose to such internal struggles in life is when relying only upon that faith which is of ourselves, not moving on, maturing into the aura of Faith which can be supplied from Christ.


Perhaps in that we find the truest answer. Upon what kind of faith is our Christian life based? As Paul so well explained, we're naturally predisposed to a sinful state. Upholding the standards of righteousness in our lives is extremely difficult. Our life struggles are directly related to the kind of faith we are living by. We have personal desires that can overwhelm our mental commitment to conform to God's standards. That faith which is *of ourselves* can at times provide us with a degree of compliance, but usually with great personal effort. To the degree we have the faith OF Christ, those carnal desires diminish, and exhibiting His true Righteousness becomes easier.

With this we can see why James 1:3-6 exhorts us to “*ask in faith*” for the perfecting efficacy of the Faith OF Christ and why Paul ultimately committed himself to living by the Faith of the Son of God. That is what works!

Though we must initially possess and maintain a faith that is largely self-generated, we need to ask for and develop it into the Faith of Christ, which creates in us His sinless (law compliant) Nature.

Giving us more on the faith versus works issue, Paul presents this in Galatians 3: “*Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. 22: But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. 23: But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. 24: Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”* There was a ceremonial structure in place to keep worshippers in a right orientation with God, but without absolving their sins at that time. They remained guilty (as Romans 3:19 defines it: ‘under the law’). 25: “*But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.”* Ritual ceremony and the important spiritual lessons contained within them was no longer necessary once faith became available, which says something important regarding the ultimate source of faith: it not being of ourselves, or OF the law, otherwise *they* too could have generated it! 26: “*For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.”* We can also see from this that the incorporation of the Faith of God engenders us into His Family. (Another essential Truth!)

When we understand the dynamics of True Faith, we realize that it's a collaborative effort. We should be “*Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith;..*” (Hebrews 12:2).

Our faith needs to become enhanced through the perfecting process of doing battle with life as it comes to us together with the supply of Faith provided through Christ. 

◆ Chapter Five ◆

Explaining the Differences

Christians are admonished to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks you a reason of the hope that is in you...” Depending on the response we hope it to elicit, how we answer can make a huge difference.

When called upon to explain how Church of God beliefs differ from main stream belief systems, our regard for ‘the Sabbath and Holy Days’ is often denoted as prime example. With most traditional churchgoers, this can be a conversation ender. They may mean a lot to those who are aware of their historic and prophetic relevance, but the general religious public usually sees these as archaic and downright irrelevant in this ‘evangelical’ age. We can lose them if we’re not careful.

Perhaps it would be more effective to lead off with more relevant differences, such as the issues: mis-defined grace and the immortal soul. These differences have sound Biblical backing and cut straight to the **heart of the essential distinctions** between Biblical teachings and the errors of apostate Christianity.

The popular religions embrace a mis-defined “**grace**” that justifies and even legitimizes disobedience. Paul saw that tendency even in his own time, and specifically forbade that we think such a perverse thing. No matter! It’s so bad in some quarters, that many see ‘obedience’ to anything Biblical (especially Old Testament) as an offence against the auspices of grace, interpreting any apparent compliance with Biblical instruction and example as ‘**legalism**’, not realizing what the term really means, let alone that it isn’t used in the New Testament! Taken to the logical extreme, such reasoning makes obedience a virtual SIN, as it (in their view) expresses a certain degree of contempt for ‘the Grace of God’! Can we see the challenge? Ephesians 2:10 (a verse modern religion usually

disregards) sets a correct final trajectory on the defective idea developed from the oft-quoted verses 8 & 9, typically used to launch toward a wrong conclusion.

The most prevalent idea of ‘**Going to Heaven**’ is another major distinction with potent leads-into further conversation, should the hearer be remotely interested in further pursuit. The Bible doesn’t mention going to heaven, and in fact, reveals much to the contrary. The early Church set their hope firmly in a **resurrection!** But one needn’t be resurrected in order to go to heaven as taught by modern religion. Following this issue thru to its logical destination, there’s an opening to also undercut the non-Biblical (but common in ancient pagan religions) idea of the ‘immortal soul’. It is Biblically evident that God has a **better plan** than religionists envision, in the **Millennial Kingdom of God** on Earth, which involves resurrections (more than one) and a visible return of Christ to take power over the nations. Thus it’s also evident that there is no ‘end of the world’ as mankind usually expects, but rather, a **new age**, under the administration of Christ and His Saints. Not your typical picture of things! God’s Plan also addresses the enigmatic question of what happens to those who died not having had any real opportunity for salvation!

IF considering the Sabbath and Holydays as differences, we should note the potent historical references. For example, the New Testament Church **was seventh day Sabbath-keeping** well into the fourth century. This is a clear fact found in the historical record. It **kept the Passover**, as Paul also instructed the gentile Galatian Church

to do, well into the early 300's AD, a fact also well preserved in the historical record. **Pentecost**, the anniversary of the founding of the New Testament Church and of the outpouring of God's Spirit, was a long-established Old Testament Holyday, strictly determined from within the several interdependent Holydays associated with the first annual harvest, not the least of which being Passover, the day commemorating when the Lamb of God finalized the process of taking away the sins of the world!

Holydays are presented as **the outline for understanding end-time Bible prophecy**, carrying a greater interest factor than just a mention by themselves. Biblical Holydays frame and help place the astounding events described in the books of Daniel and Revelation

in a light that no other lines of explanation can remotely come close to. Anyone who correctly understands end-time prophecy will immediately see the correlation! And, oh yes, the banishment of Satan from society for a thousand years should also provoke a certain degree of profound thought as to what kind of world order that will be. This being yet another anomaly that 'doesn't compute' from the typically taught 'heaven and hell' perspective.

It is anticipated that the reader is generally aware of the many scriptures that re-enforce these basic differences, and if not, it is suggested that one review where they are to be sure our quivers are full of irrefutable and thought-provoking arrows. Our 'differences' are in fact profound, exciting and vital.

◆ Fundamental Biblical Truths: ◆

The LAW is NOT "Done Away"!

1. Think not that I am come to abolish the law: *Matthew 5:17*
2. The Law is holy, just and good: *Romans 7:12*
3. The law defines what sin is: *Romans 7:7*
4. True Faith establishes the law in our hearts and minds: *Romans 3:31, Hebrews 8:8-10.*

The 'law of sin and death' is immutable:

1. The wages of sin is death: *Romans 6:23, Ezekiel 18:4 & 20*
2. Without the shedding of blood there is no remission: *Hebrews 9:22*

Grace is not 'license to continue in Sin':

1. What, shall we sin that grace may abound? God forbid: *Romans 6:1-2 & 15*
2. We are to follow Christ's righteous example, who did no sin: *1st Peter 2:21-23.*
3. Willful sin under grace is potentially lethal: *Hebrews 10:26-31,*
4. Being released from the death penalty creates in us a new obligation: *Romans 7:6*

The human 'soul' is not an immortal entity:

1. God only has immortality: *1st Timothy 6:16*
2. The soul that sinneth, it shall die: *Ezekiel 18:4 & 20* Souls CAN die!
3. God is capable of and will destroy both body and soul in Gehenna fire: *Matthew 10:28*

Only God's True Saints will be raised immortal:

1. We shall be changed, at the last trump: *1st Corinthians 15:51; 1st Thessalonians 4:13-17.*
2. We die corruptible, but shall be raised incorruptible: *1st Corinthians 15:42 & 50-54*
3. We must take on immortality, we aren't born with it: *1st Corinthians 15:53*

An eternity in Heaven is NOT mankind's destiny:

1. Christ will be present on earth with mankind during the 1000 years: *Revelation 7:15*
2. Christ will leave Heaven and dwell with and rule over all mankind: *Zech. 14:9, Rev. 11:15.*
3. God will ultimately dwell with (Spirit born) mankind: *1st Cor. 15:24-28, Revelation 21:3*

Hell (gehenna) in the Bible is a brief gateway experience to extinction:

1. There are two types of hell: the grave / the lake of fire (hades / gehenna) *Matthew 10:28*
2. There is no consciousness in death: *Psalms 6:5, Ecclesiastes 9:10*
3. The wicked will be burned-up (rendered extinct): *Revelation 14:20, Malachi 4:1*

God's Sabbath Day is not abolished in the New Testament:

1. Sabbath-keeping remains to the people of God: *Hebrews 4:4-10*
2. It will be kept in the millennial age: *Revelation 14:7; Isaiah 66:23*

Biblical Holydays provide understanding of Prophecy:

1. They are a shadow of things to come (an outline of future events): *Colossians 2:16-17*
2. They illustrate personal salvation (spring set) and world salvation (fall set).
3. They explain how salvation will be made available to all who have ever lived. *Heb. 6:2*

The Kingdom of God will rule the entire Earth for 1000+ years:

1. The Saints will co-rule with Christ: *Rev. 1:5-6, 5:10 & 20:4&6, Daniel 7:27, 2nd Tim. 2:12*
2. The Apostles will each head one of Israel's 12-tribes: *Matthew 19:28*
3. King David will be raised to be king over the whole nation: *Ezekiel 37:24-25*

The resurrections are essential to God's Plan for man:

1. If there is no resurrection, we are left with no hope: *1st Corinthians 15:16-19*
2. There needs to be a restoration to a conscious existence for there to be an 'afterlife'.

True conversion is thru Faith, Repentance, Baptism & the receipt of God's Spirit:

1. If any man doesn't have the Spirit of God, he is none of His: *Romans 8:9*
2. God cannot give His Spirit to those who do not obey Him: *Romans 8:12-14*
3. Our ultimate destiny is to be born of the God Kind: *Romans 8:22-30*

The Being who became Christ is the God of the Old Testament:

1. The "Father" was an unseen / unheard entity: *John 5:37; Col. 1:15; 1st John 4:12*
2. It was Christ who gave the Law on Mt. Sinai: *John 18:6-8*
3. It was He also who led Israel through the wilderness: *1st Corinthians 10:4*

There are Two Kinds of Faith :

1. That which is of ourselves: *Mark 2:5; Mark 5:34; Luke 7:9*
2. That which is NOT of ourselves: *Ephesians 2:8-10*
3. Both factor into a pursuit of conversion unto salvation.

There will not be a pre-Tribulation "Second Coming":

1. The "Rapture" scenario as commonly taught, is to occur at the Second Coming:
2. The Last Trump ties the second coming and the first resurrection together: *1st Cor. 15:52*
3. The First Resurrection is clearly tied to the time of Christ's return: *Rev. 11:18; 1st Thess. 4:16*
4. That event begins the millennial age with Christ and His Saints ruling on Earth. *Rev. 5:10*

◆ Chapter Six ◆

Oh, For the LOVE of God!

Inarguably One of the Vital Components in Our Relationship with GOD is Love, unfortunately, it is as Misrepresented in Expression, as are other Popular Conceptions of what the Bible Actually Teaches with Respect to our Relationship Requirements and Gods' PLAN for Man!

It doesn't take very long when among evangelical Christians, especially in the environment of a religious service, that a passionate love for God, primarily the person of Jesus, comes to the fore. 'Praise and Worship' is structured around what is often a profuse outpouring of expressed heartfelt love of the Lord.

Not to suggest in any way that the Love **of** and **for** God and an open expression of that love is inappropriate. After all, the first recitation in the 'greatest commandment' is that we must "*love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind*"! (Matt. 22:37, quoting Deut. 6:5) This, at least, seems to be non-negotiable, as is the second recitation, "*you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" (Perhaps we should ask, should our visible emotional expression be drastically different in the first recitation from its expression in the second?)

But it isn't the love itself that is at issue. Rather, it is the wide range of expression. The Jews of Jesus' day would have affirmed most emphatically that they fervently loved God, yet their external expression of it would be quite different than a modern evangelical would exhibit. The question is, what amount of visible expression ought we to demonstrate? Is there a minimum? Is there an 'upset boundary' after which it becomes 'too much'?

Then there's the question about witnesses. If some in audience are turned off by what they

regard as too much expression, should we defer to their sensitivities? (There's 'political correctness' after all!) Secularists and atheists often see only peoples' emotional expressions, and regard their faith to have little more to it than that. Are there situations where the profusion of expression would be better if lessened and substantive dialog increased? In other words, can there be such a thing as religion that's **too** emotional and **insufficiently** informational? Can 'faith's expression' be over-demonstrated while under-substantiated? This is often another 'dividing line' between religious organizations, as if Christianity didn't have enough division without this one also factoring in.

Then, out in front, we have the professional expressionists, who are most spectacular with their stage performances, but who turn the switch off as soon as the cameras are turned-off and the crowds dissipate. Who doesn't recall seeing the broadcast of the world-famous charismatic TV evangelist's tearful repentance after having been 'de-frocked' for frequenting brothels, only to learn later that after being 'forgiven' by his peers, his habit continued. Such examples cast a long malodorous shadow among sincere people.

This brings us to another question. Where does the emotional expression come from? Is it **put** within us, or is it something we add into the picture from within ourselves? How should it be? Then, are those who are the most expressive the most converted? Ponder that one!

What is Required?

Basically, what does God want of us in this regard? Is there an expression of love that is appropriate, even required, and is there any expression that's less appropriate? Is there anything a person might fail to do that would negate his expression, making it immaterial? Is God bound to accept all love and praise expression presented, or are there basic pre-conditions for acceptance? Would Cain's offering experience provide a useful clue?

Are there proscribed components in our expression of our love that are essential? After all, not everyone is as expressive or as outwardly emotional as others. Does that render their love inferior to the more expressive worshippers? We should know.

This really is **not** a hard question to answer.

The New Testament says much about love, even the love of God. In addition to the quote above in the second paragraph about loving God and also our neighbor, we have the one whom Jesus loved personally quoted as making specific statements in this regard. In fact, He makes love a pre-condition to acceptable worship. Here also, not only love toward God, but toward neighbor as well. 1st John 4:20-21 makes the case well: "*If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we **from him**, That he who loveth God love his brother also.*" From this we can detect a quality in the kind of love that God requires. One in which it is demonstrated widely, not just toward God to the exclusion of fellow man! Also, the point that it's possible to think we love God when in fact we don't even know Him. How often does this happen?

If You Love ME...

Jesus said, "*If you love me, keep my commandments.*" That leaves a major portion of His

modern day followers scrambling to identify a set of commandments attributable to Him that they're willing to keep. In MANY cases, NOT the Ten Commandments, as those are 'Old Testament'! So, already there's a considerable 'problem'. A prime condition of love toward Jesus is a subject embroiled in controversy right in the thick of the 'Grace versus Law' issue!

Jesus posed an insightful rhetorical question when he observed a common situation in His day. He said, "*And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?* (Luke 6:46) He continues: "***Not every one** that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that **work iniquity.***" (Matt. 7:21-23) Iniquity is lawlessness!

This disturbing affirmation speaks volumes! That an obedient response is an essential to personal acceptability. Here we see actively religious people who 'worship' the Lord, doing all kinds of commendable things, but those things don't count for much, due to their being largely 'disobedient' despite what they do being done 'in the name of the Lord'! Obedience is not such a minor issue! Our own personal conduct path, no matter how 'devout', can be a trap. Cain learned that lesson, and in him it provoked murderous rage! He thought he'd get back at God by killing His true servant.

Then, there's a whole orthodoxy in the world of evangelicalism, adamant that no 'deeds' at all *should* be practiced. They see that as just 'works', an affront against the grace of God! A quote from a booklet by the Berean Call says: "*The gospel is all about what Christ has done. It says nothing about what Christ must yet do, because the work of our redemption is finished...To combat 'the gospel of the grace of*

God', the great deceiver has many false gospels, but they all have two subtle rejections of grace in common: ritual and / or self-effort...Ritual makes redemption an ongoing process...and self-effort gives man a part to play in earning his salvation." In contrast to that, in Philippians 2:12, Paul said, "*Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*" Hardly expressing a view that their salvation is a foregone conclusion from the first moment. And Ephesians 2:10 "*We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works which He has before ordained that we should walk in them.*" These are not the all-time favorite verse of evangelicals!

In Spirit and in Truth

Another statement relevant to this matter is that as components of worship, we must incorporate two essential elements. "*God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.*" (John 4:24) This suggests rather pointedly that incorporating doctrinal views or practices that are not true or which violate the spirit of the law, or which frustrate the leading of the Holy Spirit can contaminate worship. What if ones' theology was infused with pagan concepts? What if Biblically ordained practices were to be repudiated and non-biblical customs embraced. Are we to believe that it makes little difference? What if Christian worshippers were to insist that Jesus was born on a day that He wasn't born on? And then, what if that date was found to be the 'birth date' of "Sol Invictus"? What if the day of Jesus' resurrection were to be re-named after a female pagan goddess, does that fall within the auspices of *spirit* and of *truth*?

In the doctrinal area, if elements of paganism or Gnosticism had been blended into official teaching, would complicity with that persuasion diminish the acceptability of one's expression?

If a worshipper didn't bother to "...*study to show himself approved unto God*", as 1st Timothy admonishes, would his worship be just as acceptable as the student who did? If a worshipper was aware of doctrinal discrepancies in a particular denomination's belief system and disregarded it, preferring instead their dynamic 'worshipful environment', would that matter at all? What if he were to grow only to a certain level and then stop growing in grace and knowledge, would his worship be just as acceptable as the person who did continue growing?

In 1st Corinthians 3:1-2 Paul lamented the obvious lack of spiritual growth of that congregation. "*And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able.*" He saw this condition as not only lamentable, but the source of other spiritual problems, as described in his following chapters. How many charismatic worship environments are structured around meat rather than just milk, and diluted milk at that, often as not?

We live in an age in which professing Christians are less educated in the fundamental truths of the Bible than at any time in history. Should the mass audiences of the popular charismatic ministries **ever** become exposed to a Biblical Scholar who laid out before them the important matters of substance, the clear fundamentals of the New Testament, we'd see the demise of those audiences in short order! It isn't what they've come to hear, nor is it what they want!

The 'love of God' and the 'love of the Truth' have been severed and made exclusive of one another in modern times, though Jesus showed them to be co-dependent! "...*they that worship (God) must worship him in spirit and in truth.*" Being 'in the Spirit' does not inspire or lead us toward truth rejection! God's Spirit would not

lead toward error, nor can it work fully in its sense-dulling environment.

The love OF God

Hearing the expression ‘the love of God’, we’re more inclined to visualize that phrase as referring to our love toward Him. But there’s another quality to this that we ought to be careful to notice. The kind of love that the Bible refers to is that which He instills within us, that we would otherwise be unable to genuinely express. *“And hope makes not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.”* (Romans 5:5) Here, the love of God is receptive, imparted by the Holy Spirit. *“Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me;”* (Romans 15:30) This isn’t love directed toward the Spirit, but that which is imparted **by** it, in this particular case, toward Paul’s need.

The Love of God is something that over time becomes more matured. The uncomfortable thing for some is that they prefer to define love their own way and express what wells up from within themselves, while dismissing important elements. *“But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.”* (1st John 2:5) Jesus discerned an attitude among God-worshippers of His day: *“But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you.”* (John 5:42) *“As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall **abide in my love**; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love.”* (John 15:9-10) Love is perfected by keeping something! Have you thought about that?

There is an aura of love which extends out from the Father and from the Son in which we and He abides. This love is from God, not toward Him! We can swoon with heartfelt emotion toward

God, and yet be ‘outside’ of His love, if we don’t commit ourselves to following His obedient example, as defined by His Law!

John the Apostle in 1st John 2:6–7 has more to say on this theme: *“He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even **as he walked**. Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which ye have heard from the beginning.”* The way He walked was in keeping with the Father’s Words and Commandments!

1st John 2:15 is particularly disturbing when we consider what it’s actually saying. *“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”* Here, the love of the Father clearly is not ours toward Him, but His toward US! If we ‘love the world’, we are not prepared for receipt of that love which emanates out from Him, and our affection for the world, which He does not have or generate, is clear evidence of that!

*“But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth **the love of God** in him?”* (1st John 3:17) This also, in the way it’s worded, cannot be referring to our love for God, but rather, the ‘love’ component in ourselves that is FROM God. 1st John 4:7, 12 & 17 affirms the same: *“Beloved, let us love one another: for **love is of God**; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God...If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and **his love is perfected in us**. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world.”* Do you see where Godly love comes from?

A Difficult Point to Miss!

For those who need specific definition, 1st John 5:3 provides it! *“For **this is the love of God**, that we **keep his commandments**: and his com-*

*mandments are not grievous.”...“And **this is love**, that we walk after his commandments. This is the commandment, That, as ye have **heard from the beginning**, ye should walk in it.” (2nd John:6) Love is defined! The kind of love that matters to God! This isn’t the kind expressed most of the time!*

To sever love from its proper expression, to sever love from its proper source, to sever love from its proper definition, places self-generated love that we might otherwise present into the category of Cain’s offering. It’s not wrong to have emotion toward God, so long as the other practical elements are present: A heart willing to obey His Commandments, an equal expression toward our fellow man, and a heart in receipt of that love-enhancement that comes from Him: HIS love working within us!


It isn’t well published, nor would it be well received in all places, but it is possible to express profuse love toward God and the person of Jesus and have it **not** be received! The old love song says, “...love is a many-splendored thing.” As any lover knows, the love received can sometimes be more to serve the interests of the ‘giver’ though supposedly expressed toward the other person.

Well, the Love of God ‘is a many-factored thing’. It requires certain component factors be present for it to become fully acceptable to God. He does not ‘receive’ it from a worshipper who by his lifestyle is willfully disobedient. Who does not and will not demonstrate love toward his neighbor. Who will not keep all of His Commandments. That person who is so in love with his own worship expression and in ‘his own world’ that God cannot place His love

within him, can be so wrapped-up in his self-absorbed worship expression that the Truth into which the Spirit continues to lead us becomes excluded.

If I Have Not Charity

First Corinthians 13 is a comprehensive lesson in charity (love). “*Charity suffers long, and is kind; charity envies not; charity vaunts not itself, is not puffed up, Does not behave itself unseemly, seeks not her own, is not easily provoked, thinks no evil; Rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; Bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Charity never fails: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. ...And now abides faith, hope, charity, these three; but **the greatest of these is charity.**” We all would benefit if we’d self-evaluate and refine any love-expression that we put forth on this basis.*

The elder Apostle John, sums the matter well: “*He that says, I know him, and **keeps not his commandments**, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keeps his word, in him **verily is the love of God perfected**: hereby know we that we are in him. He that says he abides in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.* (1st John 2:3-6) That love which is ‘of ourselves’ pales in comparison to that which is not of ourselves. 

◆ Chapter Seven ◆

Letters to the Seven Churches: Historical or Prophetic?

A Recurring Controversy within Theological Circles is the Applicability of the Messages to the Seven Churches of Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, Prophetically, to Subsequent Church Ages.

By Clinton Whalen, [published in *Ministry* magazine, November 2007: pages. 12-15]

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Does the historicist interpretation that the seven churches of Revelation represent the **entire sweep** of church history over seven historic periods really make sense? ^[1] That these letters are ultimately addressed to everyone becomes clear from the admonition at the end of each letter: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” ^[2] If these letters are for everyone, why does it matter whether or not the seven churches represent **seven prophetic periods**? More perplexing still, why would Jesus seem to give every indication that He wrote these letters to real Christian congregations in Asia Minor if He really intended them to be understood quite differently, as prophetic depictions of the church throughout history?

From the historicist point of view, these letters could not really be understood until hundreds of years later rather than during the historical times they describe. But wouldn't such a position be reading history back into the Bible rather than accepting what appears to be the obvious meaning of the text? This objection needs to be taken seriously since it suggests, as preferable, a

preterist interpretation that the first few chapters of Revelation, if not the whole book, apply to the first-century churches.

First, we will look at whether or not these letters were meant to be read like other letters found in the New Testament. Next, we will look at some textual clues which seem to suggest that the letters should be read prophetically. Finally, we will discuss whether or not these letters should be read *primarily* as a prophetic portrayal of the church rather than as ordinary letters to churches in the Asia Minor of John's day.

Like other New Testament letters?

The opening chapter of Revelation describes Jesus appearing in vision to John on the island of Patmos and commanding him to write what he was about to see to the seven churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Rev. 1:11). Even though the letters to these churches take up just two chapters (Rev. 2 and 3), Jesus actually addresses the whole book to them (Rev. 1:4; 22:16). So, if we restrict the application of these letters to the local churches of Asia Minor, why not the whole book? A failure to recognize this connection of Revelation as a whole with the seven churches is one obvious problem with a strictly local application of Revelation 2 and 3.

A careful study of the text shows that these are no ordinary letters, and they cannot even compare with the other inspired letters of the New Testament. First, unlike the New Testament epistles that were written by the apostles, the letters in Revelation do not come from John but from Jesus Himself as the opening lines of each letter make clear. In harmony with ancient practice, each letter begins by identifying the author of the letter but, unlike the epistles, Jesus identifies Himself as the Author using the apocalyptic language employed in John’s earlier description of Him while closely connecting the letters with the book’s opening vision (Rev. 2:1, 8, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; cf. 1:9–20). Second, Jesus *dictates* them to John, telling him at the beginning of each letter to “write” and using phraseology in Greek that emphasizes their divine origin and authority.^[3] Some even refer to these letters as “prophetic oracles” in order to distinguish them from the epistles.^[4]

Scholars from different denominational backgrounds have long recognized that the letters to the seven churches pertain to more than just local issues. As one commentator observes, the fixed structure and symmetry of the letters “betray a purpose that goes beyond ethical instruction to seven particular churches in the Roman province of Asia.”^[5] Also, the content shows that the letters concern more than just the given congregation as they share in common several themes.

Jesus’ desire for a close relationship with His church expresses one of these themes. The church of Ephesus has left its first love (Rev. 2:4), reminiscent of how the classical prophets describe Israel’s departure from God (e.g., Jer. 2:2; 3:1; Hos. 2:12–15). Jesus assures the church in Smyrna that He knows their suffering and poverty and encourages them to be faithful until death (Rev. 2:9, 10; cf. 1:5). Those in Pergamum are commended for “holding fast” to the name of Christ and not denying their faith in Him (Rev. 2:13). Jesus commends Thyatira for its love, faith, and service to Him and reproves them for tolerating Jezebel, who always leads many away from Him and into idolatrous

practices (Rev. 2:19, 20). Those in Sardis who do not defile their garments can look forward to walking with Christ in white (Rev. 3:4). The church in Philadelphia has a special bond with Jesus because they have not denied His name and have kept the word of His patience. Jesus also says of those who do not have such a relationship with Him, “ ‘they will learn that I have loved you’ ” (Rev. 3:8, 9). By contrast, the church of Laodicea continues in their lukewarm attitude to Jesus (Rev. 3:16). Nevertheless, He knocks and waits, longing for a deeper, closer relationship with His people (Rev. 3:20).

Another important theme is the genuineness of one’s profession. Several letters refer to false claims of being apostles or Jews (Rev. 2:2, 9; 3:9). The Jezebel in Thyatira calls herself a prophetess but leads the church astray. And then comes a more general warning: “ ‘all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve’ ” (Rev. 2:23). As for Sardis, it has a name of being alive but is in fact dead (Rev. 3:1). Worst of all, Laodicea, as self-deceived, thinking itself rich and in need of nothing, does not recognize itself as actually poor and in need of everything, even clothing (Rev. 3:17). Related to the need for genuineness is the concern over false teachers, including Balaam, the Nicolaitans, Jezebel, and those who focus on the “deep things” of Satan (Rev. 2:14, 15, 20, 24). By contrast, Christ’s followers should be like Him—faithful witnesses (Rev. 2:13; 3:14).

These themes of relationship, genuineness of profession, and giving a faithful witness can be seen as applicable in every place and at all times, not just for a particular first-century church. At the same time, of course, these letters also held historical significance for the local churches in these locations, since they so clearly display a knowledge of the history, topography, and economics of these cities and utilize this information to address the needs of Christians there. **But might not these cities and their characteristics be also intended symbolically like much of the rest of the book?**

Only historical or also prophetic?

A careful reading of Revelation suggests that the seven churches have a significance beyond a local application to congregations that have long since perished. In Revelation 1:19 Jesus commands John to write down what he saw (a clear reference to John's vision of Jesus in vv. 11–16), as well as “ ‘what is, and what is to take place after this.’ ” **Ostensibly this would suggest that these letters deal with the condition of the churches both in John's day and in the future.** Confirmation of this may be seen from the explicit indication of sequence in chapter 4. Jesus, having just finished dictating the letters to the churches, carries John in vision from earth to heaven and begins revealing to him “ ‘what must take place after this’ ” (Rev. 4:1). **At this point in the book, attention shifts away from the present and future toward a more exclusive focus on the future only.**

As the sidebar diagram illustrates, the book of Revelation can be read as comprising two principal visions, each of which contains prophetic messages from Jesus. ^[6] The first vision, set on earth, shows Jesus walking among seven lampstands, symbolizing the seven churches (Rev. 1:12, 13, 20) and dictating to John messages for these churches (Rev. 2:1–3:22). The second vision, set in heaven, seems to show heaven's involvement in events on earth that affect the church: the Lamb opening seven seals, angels who stand before God blowing seven trumpets, and angels coming out from the heavenly temple and pouring out seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth. The climax of the book pictures the physical reunion of God and His people. Marking the end of the separation between heaven and earth that was caused by sin is the solemn pronouncement by the Alpha and the Omega: “It is accomplished.” ^[7] With this as the only time in the visionary portion of Revelation when the Alpha and Omega speaks, highlighting the importance of the verse for the narrative's development becomes apparent. The goal to which the entire book presses is here finally achieved.

Viewing the book as two principal visions, which depict the divine work of reuniting

heaven and earth, underscores the claim made from the beginning, that the book is a revelation from Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:1). It also helps us recognize that the letters to the seven churches, with their repeated call to hear and understand, intend not only to encourage readers to pay attention to the message of a given letter **but also to prepare readers for comprehending chapters 4–22.** ^[8]

Apocalyptic character of the letters

The prominence given to these letters, in terms of the overall structure of the book, as well as the fact that they constitute the first of Revelation's four series of sevens, **suggests that they may also have a prophetic significance.** As with the seals, trumpets, and bowls, the number seven points to comprehensiveness in the case of the churches not only geographically but also temporally. ^[9] **There were other churches and more prominent ones in the Asia Minor of John's time,** such as Troas, Miletus, Colossae, and Hierapolis, to name a few (Acts 20:6, 17; Col. 1:2; 2:1; 4:13). Yet, considering the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3, it is striking that arguably the *least significant* among them, namely Thyatira, has a letter far longer than any of the others. Also, **the chiastic arrangement of the seven letters lends further credence to the notion that they are intended for a broader application.** ^[10]

Most significantly, the fact that apocalyptic imagery and ideas permeate each letter leads the reader to suspect that the churches themselves are meant to be understood symbolically as well and that the letters, like the rest of the book, should be interpreted as apocalyptic prophecy. Each letter begins with language from the initial vision of Jesus in chapter 1, which itself recalls the apocalyptic language of Daniel (7:9, 13; 10:5–12). Imagery in the body of the letters, such as the lampstand being removed, the sword coming out of Jesus' mouth, hidden manna, new names, Jezebel, the rod of iron, the morning star, white garments, gold, eye salve, open and closed doors are all clearly symbolic. Closer study of these symbols reveals an intimate connection with (and

prepares readers to understand) the later chapters widely accepted as apocalyptic.

A prophetic portrayal of the church

Viewing the letters to the seven churches as apocalyptic and applicable until the end opens the possibility of their being treated not only as historical but also as *prophetic*. This means that their message, with the primary purpose of

predictive prophecy to strengthen faith, becomes especially relevant for the end time (John 13:19). Many Christian interpreters through the centuries have understood these letters as prophetic of the condition of the church in successive ages from the first century to the end, and some today continue to do so.^[11] Within the limited confines of this article it is possible only to sketch in broad strokes certain features of these letters to illustrate the appropriateness of applying them prophetically. These chapters deserve further study along these lines.

The letters begin with the description of a “first love” experience, fitting of the apostolic age but already waning by the time John wrote. And they conclude with a view of materialistic abundance so characteristic of the church in the modern age. Interestingly, only in the letter to Ephesus that heads the list do we find the mention of people claiming to be apostles (Rev. 2:2), a problem of the first-century church evident from references elsewhere in the New Testament.^[12] The persecution described in connection with Smyrna fits well with Rome’s persecution of Christians in the early centuries^[13] that was followed by the assimilation of the pagan Roman culture into Christianity,^[14] evidently reflected in the syncretistic tendencies plaguing Pergamum and Thyatira. The letter to Thyatira, notable for its length, fits well the long period of church dominance during the Middle Ages. As a counterpoint to this dominance, the victor in Thyatira is specifically promised *rule over the nations*. Significantly, in this letter we first hear of “faith” and “love” and that Thyatira’s *last* works exceed the first ones—a description that fits well the onset of the Reformation (Rev. 2:19). Also at this point in the series of letters, we see a “remnant”


beginning to form (Rev. 2:24). By the time of Sardis, however, reforms have stalled and appear near death.^[15]

Finally, the appellations with which Jesus describes Himself to the Philadelphian and Laodicean churches, rather than pointing backward to chapter 1, point forward to judgment and the Second Advent. In connection with the letter to Philadelphia, the description of Jesus as “holy” and “true” compares closely to that of the One to whom the martyrs under the altar cry out under the fifth seal for vindication (Rev. 6:10). The “key” and “open door,” alluding to Isaiah 22:22, are apparent references to the intercessory ministry of Jesus,^[16] suggested already by the description of Jesus in priestly attire walking among the sanctuary lampstands (Rev. 1:13; cf. Exod. 25:31–35; Lev. 24:4; 1 Kings 7:49; Heb. 9:2). To Laodicea, Jesus stands at the door, “which means in the language of the New Testament that the end is near (Matt. 24:33; Mark 13:29),”^[17] and the fellowship meal points to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7–9). The description of Jesus as “faithful and true” (both of which are connoted by the Hebrew word “*Amen*”) compares similarly to the description of the One coming on a white horse to judge righteously and make war (Rev. 19:11). Many examples, such as these mentioned in connection with Laodicea, demonstrate the close connection between the apocalyptic imagery of the letters and later chapters of Revelation. Sometimes the connection appears by way of contrast: The period of the Laodicean church corresponds to that of the “remnant” of Revelation 12:17. **Understanding Revelation 2 and 3 as a prophetic portrayal of God’s visible church throughout history provides interpretative help for the later chapters.** The final image of the faithful remnant must be balanced by the humbling image of blind and naked Laodicea.

Despite this perceptible progression in the seven letters toward an increasing focus on the end time, the first-century perspective of the imminent return of Jesus continues to figure throughout them in some way. Already the emphasis on the nearness of the Second Advent is prepared for in the inaugural vision. In

Revelation 1:17 Jesus says, “ ‘I am the first and last.’ ” And likewise in Revelation 22:12, 13, “ ‘See, I am coming soon; . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.’ ” The letters themselves refer several times to the “coming” of Christ and yet give no clue as to *when* that coming might be or even *how soon* it might be (Rev. 2:5, 16, 22, 23; 3:3, 11). The book of Revelation quite definitely maintains that it is in a little while (1:1; 22:6), near (1:3; 22:10), and soon (2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). At the same time, the end is only contemplated in connection with Christ’s return, not before.

In Conclusion

The letters to the seven churches are distinctly different from the New Testament epistles in that they come from Jesus Himself and, when viewed together as a group, display a stylized structure, chiasmic symmetry, and universally applicable themes. These features suggest that the letters are concerned with more than matters of merely local interest to a few particular churches. The number seven also suggests comprehensiveness in terms of their scope and application. When compared with the subsequent series of sevens in the first half of the book, i.e., the seals and the trumpets both of which culminate with the end of the world, there exists every reason to understand the seven churches in a similar way. Furthermore, the fact that the letters are permeated with apocalyptic symbols and ideas gives us reason to conclude that, like the rest of Revelation, these chapters may be intended as prophetic. Jesus Himself seems to suggest a future, as well as a present, application for them (1:19). A brief comparison of the letters with church history confirms this suggestion. 

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Endnotes:

[1] Jon Paulien, “The End of Historicism? Reflections on the Adventist Approach to Biblical Apocalyptic—Part One,” *Journal of the Adventist*

Theological Society 14 (2003): 15–43, speaks of a “developing consensus” at one of the Daniel and Revelation Committee meetings that Rev. 2 and 3 “reads most naturally along the lines of the New Testament epistles” (39 n. 123). Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), 117, 121, nods to the historicist tradition in his interpretation of Rev. 2 and 3 but uses noncommittal language (e.g., “Those seeking to apply. . .,” “One might see . . .”). For a more in-depth study of this topic, see Clinton Wahlen, “Heaven’s View of the Church in Revelation 2 and 3,” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 9/2 (2006): 145–56.

[2] Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22. Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

[3] Septuagint uses the striking wording *tade legei* (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; cf. Acts 21:11) to announce prophetic oracles with the words, “Thus says the Lord.”

[4] A. Feuillet, *The Apocalypse*, trans. Thomas E. Crane (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1965), 48, 49; J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 35, cf. 52; G. K. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement series* 166 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 303, 304.

[5] Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation, New International Commentary on the New Testament* 17 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 84; cf. the recognition by Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 16, 17, that the letters address representative contexts which Christians in later periods have found applicable also to the church of their time.

[6] No agreement exists as to the overall structure of the book (Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 25). For details on the outline proposed here, see Wahlen, 147–49; Richard Sabuin, “Repentance in the Book of Revelation” (PhD diss., Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, The Philippines, 2006), 54–61.

[7] Translation by the author. The Alpha and Omega also speaks once in the introduction (Rev. 1:8) and once in the conclusion (Rev. 22:13).

[8] So W. Popkes, "Die Funktion der Sendschreiben in der Johannes-Apokalypse. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Spätgeschichte der neutestamentlichen Gleichnisse," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 74 (1983): 90–107; cf. Beale, *John's Use*, 312, linking the hearing formula with the "visionary parables" of chapters 4–21.

[9] E.g. Beale, *John's Use*, 302. The trumpets are throughout history what the bowl judgments are at the end time; the trumpets are a foretaste and forewarning of the seven last plagues (Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 39).

[10] Various studies have identified themes spread across the letters in a chiasmic pattern. E.g., Robert L. Muse "Revelation 2–3: A Critical Analysis of Seven Prophetic Messages" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 (1986): 147–61, finds a pattern that we could summarize as *a b a a b a* (*a* for a "warning of judgment" and *b* for a "promise of salvation"), Beale, *John's Use*, 303, sees the condition of the churches described in an *a b c c b a* pattern. Sabuin, *Repentance*, 112, notes that the call to repentance in the letters conforms to a chiasm (*r – r r³ r – r*).

[11] E.g., Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse Through Hebrew Eyes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 29–48; James L. Boyer, "Are the Seven Letters of Revelation 2–3 Prophetic?" *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (1985): 267–73.

[12] See 2 Cor. 11:5, 13; 12:11, 12; cf. Matt. 7:15; Gal. 2:4; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 4:1.

[13] Though having periods of greater and lesser intensity, persecution was persistent in the second and third centuries, culminating in the "severest of persecutions under Diocletian, from 303 for a decade." See Henry Chadwick, "The Early Christian Community," in *The Oxford History of Christianity*, ed. John McManners (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 21–69, esp. 47, 48.

[14] Robert A. Markus, "From Rome to the Barbarian Kingdoms," in *The Oxford History of Christianity*, 70–100, esp. 73, 74; cf. 79: "The fourth and fifth centuries saw the wholesale

Romanization of Christianity and Christianization of Roman society."

[15] The period surrounding the Reformation is extremely complicated, as Patrick Collinson's carefully nuanced treatment makes clear (see "The Late Medieval Church and Its Reformation" in *The Oxford History of Christianity*, 243–76). Protestantism quickly established its own confessions which served to bring coherence and consensus out of confusion and to crush theological deviance and dissent. *Ibid.*, 273.

[16] The ancient Aramaic translation of Isaiah, known as the Isaiah Targum, makes this explicit in its "interpretative translation" of Isa. 22:22: "And I will place the key of the sanctuary and the authority of the House of David in his hand; and he will open, and none shall shut; and he will shut, and none shall open" (Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum: Introduction, Translation, Apparatus and Notes*, The Aramaic Bible 11 [Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1987], 44).

[17] Doukhan, *Secrets*, 44.

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A Postnote:

To those unfamiliar with the issue this chapter addresses, it has been understood for centuries that these assessments of Christ (the Husband of the Bride – the Church) intended these messages be applied to all generations. Not just those of that historical setting.

There are three distinct applications that can be made. The letters to these seven Churches of Asia Minor were of course applicable to each **historically**. But they are also applicable **typically**, in other words, any person in any age can exhibit the characteristics described therein. But also, it is held by many that there is also a **prophetic** application, that the primary spiritual characteristic of the various ages are illustrated in succession down through time. This is that understanding known as "Church Eras".

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Growing in Grace and Knowledge

The Apostle Paul, uniquely educated as few others have been, would without doubt, be Astounded to see the Spiritually Stifling Situations within what are represented as being ‘the Churches of God’ in the modern Era.

We are admonished, rather emphatically, to “grow in grace and knowledge” in 2nd Peter 3:18. While this objective is commonly ‘encouraged’ in our churches, the full implications of this admonition are under-realized and as a result, under-achieved. This particular admonition addresses the matter of our personal maturity, and the key word in it is “grow”, which suggests the ongoing development of our personal attributes, not just the attainment of a certain level of maturity at which point growth would effectively level off. It suggests an ongoing development process. But do we realize the process and have we adequately developed in the knowledge area so that we can more fully employ a real grace-growth dynamic in our lives?

Few people have any problem understanding what the word ‘knowledge’ means. It isn’t that part of the admonition that we struggle to comprehend. It’s more the other word that presents a challenge. Do we have sufficient ‘knowledge’ to understand what is meant by the word ‘grace’ in this particular application?

Growing in Grace

How do we ‘grow’ in Grace? The question alone poses an intellectual challenge. It’s one thing to receive grace, but is grace something in which we grow? This passage says we are to! When mentally limiting the definition of Grace to God’s unmerited pardon, which is one definition of the word, we can fail to get the real

message Peter intended.¹⁴ The definition of Grace that he here employs is more than that. As unmerited pardon, that Grace is what we could call, ‘incoming’. Something extended to us as a result of God’s favor toward us. But there’s another definition of Grace, a broader definition, which can include that favor which we extend out toward others. You see, when we have God’s Spirit within us, we take on His personality characteristics, and are similarly gracious toward others. It isn’t that incoming grace that Peter is here referring to, but that internal quality, developed in imitation of Christ, as He lives and grows in us. In that area, we can and must grow. Being ever more gracious ourselves in our demeanor toward others.

So Peter’s admonition addresses our spiritual condition in a direct way. Our maturation process involves continuing development of our spiritual character, reinforced or structured around increasing knowledge. But that knowledge can have the ‘sounding brass’ quality Paul speaks of in the first verse of 1st Corinthians 13. Accompanying knowledge, there must be the element of love (charity) which is a near definition of grace as Peter presents it. Love is the major component of outgoing grace. Without it, there can be no real extension of grace toward others. Genuine grace wells up from within the heart. It does with God, and it must with us.

¹⁴ For a more comprehensive definition of Grace in its many facets, request the article #3 “*Growing in the Grace of our Lord*”.

Fertile Ground

What is important is that we recognize how we grow in these qualities. And, to grow, there must be the environment in which to grow. Some environments are detrimental to effective growth, while others are very conducive to it. We have all experienced situations or environments where we have seen a difference. What this article addresses is the need to evaluate ones' own personal situation, as it affects our growth potential. The question for us is, should we remain contentedly within any environment which does not actively encourage personal growth, to say nothing of remaining with those environments that stifle it?

Let's be honest with ourselves, there ARE those congregations, there are those administrations, which are seriously detrimental to personal growth development. They exude a subtle negative feed-back. The environment within them functions much like a 'smother blanket'. Members within their fold are more than encouraged to hide their lights under a bushel basket. Anyone really growing in grace and knowledge is, often as not, held 'under watch', and that typically not with high regard, rather with guarded suspicion.

Who Serves Whom?

Much of this condition accounts to the way certain organizations choose to operate. They don't necessarily start out that way, but in any organization of men, an internal political structure tends to form which promotes and protects the authority of its leadership. That's not all bad, but as it jealously protects the prominence of its upper echelon, and dampens the growth of its membership, it can be detrimental to the overall objective of the God who called them to love and good works, to growth in grace and knowledge, to the development of the fullness of the stature of Christ. This is no small matter.

Enabling Our Overlords

Though generally viewed as being a 'ministerial situation', we members are, often as not, equally complicit. As Jeremiah 5:31 explains, (and this passage does two things for us, it shows that the situation can develop in any organization, even the Priesthood of Israel, but also that people tend to become satisfied with the situation, and support it), "*...the priests bear rule by their means, and my people love to have it so...*"! God then asks, what will you do when this comes to its ultimate fruition? Why ask that? Is there something wrong with rulership? Or is it the anti-growth aspect?

Well, there can be. When 'rulers' impose restraints on the spiritual growth that God intends, they provide no service to Him or to His people. The phenomenon is detrimental not only to individuals, but it also can dampen the vibrancy and growth dynamic of the congregations of God's ecclesia.

Regarding 'the people loving to have it so' department, some see their organizations as "homes", being sort of a "social club" or "feathered nest" or a contented "spiritual retirement enclave", where they never see a need to consider broadening their achievements, or even 'moving-on' if conditions warrant. As a result, their spiritual development can become stunted at a level below what could be.

In Matthew 13, there's the parable of the Sower broadcasting seed. We usually interpret this message as though it relates only to those natural conditions we might expect potential sprouts to encounter. Do we also take into account that these 'stony places' can correlate to the environments in our congregations? When organizations keep the members in a poorly informed state, feeding them spiritual pabulum forever, when they fail to actively promote **real** growth (each member individually 'taking root') and

when they discourage the personal growth that **is** taking place, is this not also one of those situations? And when God's sprouting seed falls among thorns, do we picture that condition as being only the deceitfulness of personal cares? Can't it also represent those 'thorny' political environments that can exist in the echelons of self-serving men? After seeing so many of this past generation roughed-up and cast-aside, why would such a consideration not register? (Read Ezekiel 34)

This chapter calls attention to those environments which tend to stifle spiritual growth, rather than actively promote it. Sleepy members can often develop a certain contentment that blinds them to the dangers of their comfortable stagnancy.

Overcoming is a Growth Facilitator

To overcome these conditions, we need to realize that our organizations don't **own** us, though most of them tend to **act** as though they do. We are not obligated to remain within their control sphere if what they provide us with, by way of a growth environment or service opportunities, do not measure up to our personal God-given Talent potentials. We're not obligated to remain with them just for their own names' sake!

Organizations do not control the dispensation of God's Holy Spirit but often intimate that they do, and that for us to step out from under their periphery of control, its availability is cut off. Such, if remotely true, would still be God's prerogative, not theirs!

Talents and growth (in both grace and knowledge) are from God, not from the organizations of men. However, opportunities to use those talents are all too often throttled by the self-serving interests of men occupying positions of overlord, as opposed to the biblically established responsibilities of over-sight. There **IS** an important distinction between overlording and overseeing. Men

tend to gravitate toward being overlords. It takes a good measure of God's Holy Spirit to properly **oversee** God's flocks as He mandates they do.

My mother was a piano teacher. She would take on beginner students, but after a few years, her students would develop to a point that exceeded her teaching level. At that point, she would pass them on to other professionals who didn't have the interest to work with beginners; teachers that could take them on to more advanced levels.

We also develop educationally through grades in school, but eventually we need 'higher education'. No-one chooses to remain in grade school, though that would become easier and easier. We go on to pursue our educational needs in some college, and if appropriate, with post-graduate studies.

Organizations also can have upper limits as to what they can offer. What is especially disconcerting is to find that some are set-up with intent to limit the knowledge levels of their members. They also can deliberately limit personal service opportunities, and be resistant to allowing personal initiatives. For control reasons, they can be uncomfortable with uninhibited growth. (In some cases, even downright contemptuous of it!) Where they ought to be sensing it, appreciating it and directing its development, instead they prefer to stifle sincere personal initiative and accomplishments.

Promotions within overlording type organizations are typically based on a person's devotion to the established control system. It should involve the promotion of Talents and Understanding, it should involve providing Service opportunities. But, such are effectively discouraged, if the member is not submissive to the preferred operational model. What's especially detrimental is when their ministry is similarly kept in an under-developed state.

In our Christian walk, we ought to draw whatever educational benefit we can from our organizations, but when they exhaust their limit of what they can offer us, we ought to see ourselves free to move on to other venues to continue our education and spiritual development. Depending on the situation, to remain in place could lock our Talent use and development in a retarded condition, not developing to the extent God intends.

Reacting to Shadows

Before concluding with this, we ought to also consider that believers, having been subjected to overlord-type administrations, see any oversight as that same situation. In other words, being so reactive after having been subjugated to the mis-guided wills of men that they see even a properly acting servant as just another with the same bent, when that isn't necessarily the case! Pursuit of growth can be misinterpreted as a form of 'rebellion' when viewed by a person cultured to accept a suppressive environment.

Indicators to Consider

There has long been an aversion to focus upon or to even use the term: 'our personal relationship' to Christ. Such a suggestion causes the believer to consider his or her personal obligation to Someone other than the esteemed organization or leader. Their preference is that we all see our relationship to Christ as being subordinate to their over-structure: Our access to Him (or His Work) being through their all- important leadership. In other words, placing the organization or the man between the believer and his LORD! That, as opposed to our being directly accountable to God.


They are likely to prohibit (or at least strongly discourage) any interface with any other group, despite there being little or no discernible difference between the groups doctrinally. The matter of the possession of

God's Spirit in 'other' brethren apparently isn't factored into such discouragement.

It is this stifling environment that to great degree accounts for the frustrating lack of dynamism with-in the Churches of God today. The upper echelons of their administrations tend to impose a 'smother blanket' over their own ministry also just as they do their members. This writer has personal experience with this phenomenon: that of suppressing any exceptionalism among their fellow ministers OR service achievements of their members.

Any 'interface' between other organizations, no matter how similar they may be, are soundly discouraged, even to the point of censure or expulsion from further service opportunities. This achieves two objectives: first it minimizes their followers being exposed to any 'questions' that scholarly individuals might present, but as a more important second, it maintains their hold on their contributor base.

We need to ascertain, is God pleased with this situation? Does it provide for a healthy Bride, or do the various self-exclusivist fellowships within it work to develop certain idiosyncrasies in doctrine and attitude among its membership?

Growing in His Grace is our personal exhortation. We need to take it seriously, with that being reflected in a zeal to grow in service to God and man! 

◆ Chapter Nine ◆

Grace, Works and Reward

Failure on the part of Theologians to Comprehend the Full Auspices of Grace Can Confound the average Worshipper as to What Response is Appropriate on the part of Those who Truly Have Been Brought Under Grace.

One would expect that if there is anything the Christian world would understand well, it would be the matter of God's Grace. So much is said about it, so much depends upon it. God's magnanimous Pardon is a major component of New Testament Theology. Where there's often a breakdown is in the area of whether or not we are called upon to reflect having come under Grace with any kind of responsiveness. The Evangelical world especially has problems comprehending the aspect of our receiving a "reward" after having lived a successful Christian life. Reward suggests Merit! Something earned!

This chapter addresses the question of Works, and what bearing they have on the Christian life and how, IF at all, they factor into a Christian's ultimate Reward.

It is the question of what part do we individually play in the attainment of ultimate Salvation. Some would raise objections already to the wording of this sentence, in that it suggests we have a certain amount of involvement in what they regard as strictly and solely a matter of applied Grace.

What Do You Mean...?

Key words in this discussion first need to be set forward. We can't understand this matter correctly so long as we confuse or intermingle these terms. A certain amount of intermingling aggravates the problem with certain modern mainstream religions. Let's consider some of the primary subject areas

that have bearing on our question: **Is there any merited Reward offered to the Christian, and do our actions have any bearing on the quality or quantity of that Reward?**

Remission: Having the accumulated guilt of past sins removed. This is not something that can be earned, though it does involve a personal commitment. Sin's penalty is not removed (brought into remission) without the conscious plea and the acceptance on the part of the recipient of Christ's shed blood. Also, not without a prior attainment of certain essential milestones in life: Belief and True Repentance which reflects a commitment to cease sinning (breaking God's Law) (1st John 3:4, Hebrews 9:22, 10:18-20, Matt. 26:28, Acts 2:38, Jas. 2:24, etc.)

Justification: The state of being we are brought into once our sins are forgiven. Again, this is not a state that can be attained by any works that we do. No amount of good deeds in the present can atone for a bad deed of the past. Nor is any form of 'penance' effective in attaining real Justification. Nor is this reconciled state one we can remain in without a commitment to cease from sin. (Romans 5:9-11, Romans 2:13, 3:30-31, Galatians 3:8-9.)

Salvation: The act of God rescuing each individual from a Spiritual Death sentence, which is our just due on account of our natural sinful state. (Romans 8:7) No effort

on our part is sufficient to merit it. Salvation entails the removal of the death penalty, making possible eternal life. (Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 6:23, 2nd Timothy 1:9.)

Grace: The undeserved acts of kindness of God toward us: The initial application of it being the forgiveness of sins. But Grace follows with us thru the entire process of the perfecting of our spiritual lives. We don't just receive Grace, **we come under it!** It involves more than just the forgiveness of sins and the maintenance of a sinless condition. Grace also conveys the obligation to labor on behalf of our Savior and Master. (1st Cor.15:10, 2nd Cor.9:8) This broader aspect of Grace is not commonly understood or presented in most churches. We will consider also its broader application. (Romans 12:6-18, Ephesians 4:7-16, 1st Peter 4:10-11.)

Faith: That confidence which expresses belief and dedication toward the precepts and promises of God, seen or unseen. (Heb. 11:1) There are two kinds of Faith: That which is of ourselves, and that which is not! Both have their part to play in the conversion process. See chapter four: "*Two Kinds of Faith*". (Ephesians 2:8) There are two expressions of Faith: That which is responsive and that which is not! (James 2:14 & 20.)

Lawkeeping: That state of mind which is oriented to and attempts to keep the precepts of the Laws of God. This is an activity which can operate under two different motivations: self-effort **or** love of God. Lawkeeping is generally perceived as defining the things we are not to do. It's unfortunate that people often seek remission of sins by their own self-effort, a condition referred to as '*legalism*'. The matter is further confused when other people mis-identify someone's motivation as being an attempt to 'earn' salvation, when in fact they're exhibiting the effects of having received it! (Heb. 8:8-10, Ps. 19:7, 1st John 3:4, Rev. 14:12 & 22:14.)

Works: Those things we do as a result of our desire to serve God and keep His Ways. It involves activities beyond just keeping the Law. Again, there are two basic motivations: Desire to earn something **or** an appropriate expression of gratitude for what we have been given. It is religion's typical reaction to the idea of 'earning' anything that unfortunately carries over onto the other more commendable expression of gratitude and service. Their confusing the issue in this area can undermine a Christian's potential for Reward! (Eph. 2:10, Matt. 16:27, John 6:27, 14:12, 1st Tim. 6:18-19, 2nd Tim. 3:17, Titus 1:16, 2:14, 3:8, Heb. 10:24, Jas. 2:14-17, Rev. 2:26, 14:13.)

Reward: Those additional benefits which are assigned to us, appropriate to what we've done with what we have been given. Not forgetting that those Talents given to us are also provided under God's ongoing Grace. (Matt. 25:14-29, Luke 19:12-26, Jas. 2:26, Rev. 22:12.)

Mis-Defined Grace

The unfortunate condition within mainstream Christianity has been the development of an attitude which is actually contrary to the condition of being 'under Grace'. While salvation is not earnable in any manner, yet there is an **appropriate response** on the part of the recipient of it to repent of sin, not just those of the past, but any which he may presently be committing. Under Grace, we're forbidden to sin! (Romans 6:1) The Word defines for us exactly what sin is: "*The transgression of the Law*"! (1st John 3:4)

As if a mis-conception of what Grace involves isn't enough, we also have to deal with the mis-identification of the Christian's motive. Some see ALL interest in keeping the Laws of God as just an effort to **earn** salvation. Especially if it involves Old Testament precepts! This is in gross disregard of the **fundamental intent of the**

New Covenant to implant God's Laws into ones' heart and mind. (Hebrews 8:8-10 quoting Jeremiah 31:31-33) It seems the critics just can't understand the concept of lawkeeping expressing the love of God. (What's hard to understand about John 14:15 and 1st John 2:3-7?) Expressing Love toward God thru keeping His Laws is entirely appropriate. Well-intentioned critics set about to discourage anything resembling that! What do they not understand? Is it the many-faceted application of Grace?

More Than Just Forgiveness!

The sub-title above refers to the 'Full Auspices of Grace'. What's meant by that is that Grace involves **more** than just the forgiveness of sins. An earlier paragraph refers to a 'broader application'. We see in places such as Romans 12:6-18 a lengthy list of attributes we may expect resulting from the Grace of God toward us. "*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given, let us use them: ...*" He then goes on to list no less than twenty-seven attributes which we, according to the gifts given us, can *USE* in our Christian conduct, in service to our fellow man and use in expressing our gratefulness for what we are given.

Zealous Workers

Titus 2:11-14 "*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.*" We see in this verse a reference to remission (redemption), the maintenance of a pure state (justification) and 'works' with zeal as our responsive expression of being made

'special' to God through His Grace toward us.

The **ultimate manifestation of grace** is to be revealed at Christ's appearing: see 1st Peter 1:13. Also 1st Corinthians 15:49 and Philippians 3:20-21. The investiture upon us of our Immortal Spirit Bodies is also by Grace.

Another Grace that we won't ultimately receive unless we remain faithful unto the end is this: "*And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations:...*" (Revelation 2:26 & Luke 19:12-26)

None of these things are earnable; Not the forgiveness of sins, not the means to develop perfect Christian Character, not the means to serve others using the fruits of God's Spirit and the Gifts (Talents) He provides thru His ongoing Grace, and by all means not the investiture upon us of our Spirit Bodies in His very likeness at His Coming! So, where does that leave us with regard to the question of 'works' and any resultant 'reward'?

Christ Explains this Matter

A clear parable is given to us that should clarify and explain the matter of how and where works come into play, and what rewards are. There IS a reward potential set before each one of God's called out ones, and that reward is **in addition to** Salvation of and by itself. This isn't well understood. Consider the **parable of the Talents** found in Matthew 25:

"14: *For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods.*

15: *And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.*

16: *Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made*

them other five talents.

17: And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two.

18: But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money.

19: After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them.

20: And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more.

21: His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee **ruler over many things**: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

22: He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them.

23: His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee **ruler over many things**: enter thou into the joy of thy lord .

24: Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed:

25: And I was **afraid**, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine.

26: His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and **slothful servant**, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed:

27: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury.

28: Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents.

29: For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even

that which he hath.

30: And cast ye the unprofitable servant into **outer darkness**: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

There are a number of important things we need to consider in this narrative: First, the servants are not the world in general. Talents were given to just his own ‘called’ servants. They were made his servants by some prior determination. Secondly, these Talents were not in any way earned, other than perhaps by their having exhibited ability and faithfulness in other ways beforehand. Third, they were expected to **add** their own skills and initiative into employing what they’d been given in order to produce a worthy increase. The first two considerations are acts of grace, but the third involves input on the part of the recipient to add their own efforts toward producing a return pleasing to his master. This is given as **an illustration of the Kingdom of God**, as the lead-in verse explains.

Upon returning, the master calls his servants into account and receives the increase of his servants’ personal efforts (and notice, there is a difference between individuals. They didn’t all achieve the same return or receive the same reward). This increase was **not** their reward. The Talents were the means to the increase, but the increase itself was not the reward. It was their use of what they graciously were given that **made possible** their ‘reward’, and that reward was out of all proportion to the nominal value of the original Talents given them. Their Reward was being placed in high positions of rulership over cities (as the text here and in Luke 19:12-27 also suggests.) Their Reward also was in proportion to what they’d achieved, their rewards weren’t all the same! If the reward was Salvation alone, there wouldn’t be a difference. And in the example of that third servant we’re also cautioned against failure to employ our aptitudes, using our God given Talents effectively.

But, what about any other servants? Did he have only these three? The context suggests there may have been others. These three likely were called-out from among others. Consider the others, those who weren't given Talents when these were. Did that mean they were not his servants, or may we assume they **were** servants, but only that. Theirs' was the gift of true servanthood, but without the same gifts and potential for reward. Though these others may possess the gift of grace, being included among his true servants, they are only that. This corresponds to the condition of just being forgiven of sin, (receiving grace) but not moving up into that echelon of those chosen for the potential of greater accomplishment toward reward.

The underlying message in the parable of the talents is that there is a **potential** Reward set before each of us, but that it very much depends on what we do with what we're given. Using these God given 'gifts' can and does increase our Reward status when we're brought into the Millennial Kingdom. In this, Works plays a very significant part. This is not that area where, as some suggest, 'Christ has done it all for you'.

As we're also admonished here in Matthew 25, we need to consider the approach taken by the slothful servant. Though in receipt of the grace of being called, (the same as the others in that respect) and beside that, selected for service, he was too faithless to step out and use the Talent given him. The result was that he lost even what he originally did have. Being cast into outer darkness is a vivid illustration of losing ones' salvation! May we conclude that a failure to minimally pursue a potential reward is salvation-threatening?

How Much Does it Matter?

When we are given the Grace of being called, of having our sins forgiven, and being made a

servant of the living God, in other words, being 'saved', are we safe in our salvation? Does our taking it upon ourselves to perform 'works' in any way put that salvation in jeopardy? The theological positions of many is that our doing so would in fact be an offence against Christ's full and complete salvation!

Laborers Together with God

There's an interesting, even revealing passage by Paul on this question found in 1st Corinthians 3. He reflects on the situation we find ourselves in once we are in receipt of God's Grace, that it doesn't stop there. Being forgiven, being cleansed of our guilty past, is a first step. We are then made co-laborers with God. We are made His Servants, expected to use the 'talents' we're given, the gifts inherent with the indwelling of God's Spirit. Starting in verse 9: *"For we are **labourers together** with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building.*

10: *According to the **grace** of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon.*

11: *For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

12: *Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble;*

13: *Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall **try every man's work** of what sort it is.*

14: *If any man's work abide which **he** hath built thereupon, **he shall receive a reward.***

15: *If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but **he himself shall be saved**; yet so as by fire. 16: Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?*

What a profound passage! We, who are the

temple of God's Holy Spirit, His very life power dwelling within us, are made fellow-laborers with Him. When we shun doing any works, we in effect make Him powerless to work His work in our lives!

But what is most revealing in this passage is the clear picture that a person who has performed appropriate 'works', if those works are usable, if they are of value to the returning Master, they will result in the doer being rewarded! When those works are found to be **not valuable**, proven in part by their endurance thru trials, the laborer may find himself deficient in reward, yet still in possession of the gift of salvation! This clearly makes distinction between the gift of salvation and the building thereupon of our reward in addition to it. Notice verse 15.

Crown Thieves?!

"Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown." (Revelation 3:11) We are admonished to take heed that no man take our crown. They can't do that by identity theft, they can't pose as a servant of God if they're not actually one. They'd never slip that one by God!


HOW then can someone steal our crown? They can do so by causing us to shrink back from or cause us to reject making the effort toward obtaining our Crowning achievement by dissuading us from performing appropriate 'God ordained **works**', not employing the Talents God gives us. Napkin people we could call them! (see Luke 19:20)

Whom Do We Disrespect?

"Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:12-13)

When we realize that it is God who **works** in us,¹⁵ that it is He that both **wills** (creates the desire) and **does** His Work in and thru us, that it's not we alone who effectively does it, then we can also see why a rejection of DOING Works is especially disrespectful of **His gracious partnership in our lives.**

Notice also, our Reward is to be **brought** to us with the return of Christ. If we **have** Salvation already, then Salvation itself isn't that Reward referred to, that will be brought **then!** *"...and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be."* (Rev. 22:12-13, see also Rev. 11:18) Reward is predicated upon Works! Salvation is the unmerited gift. It is the wise servant who recognizes the distinction.

There is the free unmerited gift of Grace unto Salvation, and there is an appropriate Reward awaiting those who employ their God Given Talents, awarded in addition to Salvation, in proportion to what they accomplish using those Talents. 

■ Recommended additional topics:

- "We are not UNDER the Law"* # 9
- "Growing in the Grace of our Lord"* #3
- "What's WORKS Got to Do With It?"* #151
- "What Do You Mean: FREE"* # 19
- "The OTHER Five Virgins"* # 21
- "Absent From the Body and Present with the Lord!"* # 59
- "Gnosticism and the New Testament Church"*
- "Considering Laodicea"* # 111
- "The Famine of the Word"* # 138

¹⁵ Ephesians 2:10 We are instruments in His hands.

◆ Chapter Ten ◆

WHAT Must I DO?

Is Any “PERFORMANCE” Required of the Christian?

The Typical Christian, Understanding that We are not Saved BY Works, is then Disinclined to Accept ANY Suggestion that Works are in any way Required under the New Covenant. A Number of Scriptures Address the Subject Directly. Many, it seems, Would Prefer they be Left Unmentioned. Failure on the part of Theologians to Comprehend the Full Auspices of Grace Can Confound the average Worshipper as to What Response is Appropriate on the part of Those who Truly Have Been Brought Under Grace.

An instinctive aversion exists among Christians of nearly every persuasion. To the suggestion of there being a need to perform certain ‘works’ pursuant to one’s salvation, it is met with near instant rejection. In regard to the matter of being ‘subject to’ the law, a separate article is available, titled, “*We Are Not Under the Law*”, which focuses more on the issue of Old Testament Law. It isn’t bypassed here with intent to minimize the relevance of the Law, as law is shown to be fundamental to the New Covenant in places such as Hebrews 8:10.¹⁶ This chapter instead, considers a more insidious component imbedded in the thought structure of religious people nearly everywhere: One that, if not well clarified, could ultimately threaten their salvation in this age.

Two friends lived across the street from each other, neither professing any religious inclination, and freely engaging in every form of ‘worldly conduct’ typical of modern society. Until one day, one of the two happened to attend

¹⁶ Hebrews 8:8-10 “‘Behold, the days are coming,’ says the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers...For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: After those days.’ Says the LORD. ‘I will put My law in their mind and write them on their hearts;...’”

a religious meeting. Becoming convicted, he responded to the well-known altar call. Having uttered the ‘believer’s prayer’ and ‘confessing Jesus as personal savior’, he left there confident that his eternal destiny was sure and secure from that day forward. After all, that’s what he was assured.

The interesting thing being, that neither of these two, afterward, lived any differently than before, except that one was certain of salvation, while the other never gave it a thought. Just for a moment of contrition, and uttering those particular phrases, one became heir of the most blessed eternity, while the other was consigned to an eternal torment, though both lived out their lives in generally the same life styles as ever!

This is how it works in the opinions of many. A momentary confession and profession makes all the difference. Any modification in their personal conduct thereafter being irrelevant! Irrelevant on account of ‘works’ being totally unnecessary! We are saved by Faith and Faith ALONE, as many are taught. Some even go so far as to suggest that doing any works is tantamount to disrespecting the efficacy of Christ’s Sacrifice on our behalf.

Few are aware that the Protestant, Martin Luther’s real intent, when promoting his “by

faith alone” premise, was primarily to ‘protest’ various church proscribed formulations, such as ‘absolutions, indulgences and other religious mis-creations, NOT the moral Laws of God. That application came to be in more recent times, due to its perfect adaptability to our basic human spiritual orientation. (Some enjoy reminding their counterparts on the broader pathway that the only place the word ‘*alone*’ is coupled to the word ‘*faith*’ in the Bible, it’s immediately prefixed by the words: ‘*not by*’!)

Our Natural Enmity

We have a natural disposition. We were born with it. It’s very natural for us to react negatively to being told, ‘*no*’! We first experienced the emotional responses to any prohibition (of what we wanted at the time to do), as infants, with disappointment, sadness and even rage, depending on how much we wanted to do what we were being told to *not do*! It’s the way we’re made. Only with loving discipline could we gain the ability to counter this natural state and function acceptably within society

Few, it seems, perceive the parallel! Because we never completely lose the characteristic! It is central to what we are, morally. God represents Himself as the loving parent in so many contexts. Also, the potter with clay; the good shepherd; but in other contexts, as a gate to the fold, (both an avenue and a barrier to entrance) and as ‘Lord and King’. These comparisons are not contradictory.

A Non-Negotiable Gospel?

But, to address the question of just what we are called upon to do in our Christian experience, we’ll examine a little booklet, put out by *The Berean Call*, Bend, Oregon, titled “*The Non-negotiable Gospel*”. This booklet offers some pertinent observations on this subject, their position being that ‘works’ pervert true Christian faith. They are not alone in this position.

It’s interesting that their very first comment, before the table of contents, is a quote from Romans 8:38-39. “*For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor*

principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NKJ) This passage, as my article on “*Gnosticism and the New Testament Church*” explains, is often used to dismiss ‘works’ as though it was referring to Jewish religious practices, when in fact, it’s referring to Gnostic ideas, which were even by then beginning to contaminate New Testament doctrines! Those ideas included a ‘licentious grace’ and disbelief in Christ having truly become flesh. (There is need to be careful in our selection of supporting scriptures.)

We need also to be reminded that the ‘love of God’ referred to by Paul, in this selected verse is defined in both the gospel and epistles of John as being ‘the keeping of the commandments’! (1st John 5:2-3, etc.)

Reviewing this booklet, we find a number of statements that illustrate the common understanding held by many, that grace supplants any requirement that we keep the moral laws of God. At the bottom of page 2 is the quote, “*Forgiveness of sins and eternal life would be theirs as a free gift of His grace.*” We need to consider what about the interval between the forgiveness of sins and the entrance into eternal life. That’s somewhat alluded to in the previous sentence. “*He would rise from the dead to live in those who would believe in and receive Him as their Lord and Savior.*” Many draw great comfort in the idea that both forgiveness and eternal life are granted together at once. This is the central premise of so many modern theologies. Whether or not eternal life is granted at the start with initial forgiveness of sins, there are many who once were forgiven, who don’t end up in receipt of eternal life. Those who repent and receive God’s Spirit, then later fade out. (1st Cor.9:27) “Backsliders” they’re called.

What most do not consider, and do not adequately understand, is the picture God gave His people thru the illustration of the days of unleavened bread. (As kept by the Gentile Corinthian Church.) Before the days of

Unleavened Bread can be celebrated, the true Paschal Sacrifice must have happened. That Sacrifice makes possible the forgiveness of sin. But that isn't all there is to it. Once forgiven, there is still a problem! We must **stay** forgiven. We must continually put sin out of our lives. When forgiven of past sins, we are still practical sinners, and remain so throughout our entire lives. Grace isn't permission to continue in sin. That is stated emphatically in a number of places. *"What, shall we sin that grace may abound? God forbid!"*¹⁷

This is the illustration of that observance: We become forgiven, we then put sin and sinfulness away, (thus becoming unleavened), but in that state, we are only forgiven. We must at the same time take in and put on the unleavenedness that is Jesus Christ. **Forgiveness by itself is not enough.** We can be as thoroughly forgiven as it's possible to be, but if we don't have within ourselves the unleavened sinless nature of Christ, we remain mere clean empty vessels. It isn't what God absolves us of only that matters, but what He puts into this earthen vessel after that!

Saved By His Life.

Thus the statement from the booklet: *"He would rise from the dead to live in those who would believe in and receive Him as their Lord and Savior."* He must live in us! Consider Paul's statement in Romans 5:10 *"For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."* Most rest easy with the conclusion that being forgiven is all there is to it. That salvation is the same thing as initial forgiveness. No, first our accumulated sin must be taken care of, then our habitual sinfulness, then the receipt of and the internalization of His sinless life. Here is where most religions miss the point. They might have a better chance of understanding the process if they observed a God given exercise that illustrates this. An annual practice that the gentile Corinthian Church observed. (1st Cor. 5:7&8) The Feast of Unleavened Bread: God's

¹⁷ Not the least of which is Romans 6:1 & 15

prime tool to illustrate this essential point of Truth. Paul there advocated these Gentiles continue keeping it!

None of us has the capability to **earn** forgiveness or salvation by any means. But even if it were possible, we would still be only clean empty vessels. That is all we could do for ourselves. We can't self-generate life. Not even physically, which is the easier dimension! If we don't possess and live His Life, we aren't saved, only forgiven. (Presuming we never sin again. Yeah right!)

That's the perfect illustration God gave us in the experience of the Feast of Unleavened Bread: We accept the only effective sacrifice, (Our Passover) then we with God's help remove the leaven, and we allow installation of His truly unleavened nature, which abhors and forbids sin. Forgiveness is only step one. Those who have gone only that far have two essential steps yet to go.

His Life Factors-In

Interesting comment in 1st Corinthians 15:17, where it says, *"And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!"* (NKJ) (It's rare that the scripture uses an exclamation point.) Note the extraordinary affirmation. If Christ was not raised, our faith is vain (KJV) and we are yet in our sins!!! How could that be? What this is saying is that Christ's Sacrificial act **alone** is insufficient to absolve our sinfulness. He must also be alive to make that sacrifice effective.

What are we missing here? Do we know this? It has to involve His constant intercession for us before the Throne of God because we remain sinners and our salvation has to involve His Life, being in us. That Spirit-bred Life cannot cohabit with God-Forbidden continual sin! This point is so well illustrated in the Days of Unleavened Bread.

At the top half of their page 3, it makes a point, that it was not a new gospel... That: *the Old Testament declares witness of His eternal plan of salvation.* Not only that, but the righteousness

which is by faith is also affirmed in the Old Testament!¹⁸

What the booklet could better do is to expand its numerous short quotes. There are many. One that always gets me is the old favorite: Ephesians 2:8-9. (The top of page 6.) They never seem to want to continue on into verse 10, the next verse. Let me expand verse 10 here for clarity: ***“For we are His workmanship, created in the character likeness of Christ Jesus unto those specific good works which God has before ordained in the Old Testament that we should walk in them.”*** This verse is rarely presented, but it is the concluding part of that sentence begun in verse 8. It is HE who creates in us His sinless character, we are His workmanship. It isn't what we do ourselves, but what He does in us. The problem is, those who are not yet being molded and shaped into His Righteous Character imagine or perceive that those who **are**, are doing it of and by themselves, only with intent of earning something. Granted there are fakers, some of whom do an excellent imitation job, but their 'product' is not that of God in us through His Spirit. *“...unto those good works which God has before ordained...”* we should walk in those before ordained good works!

This is a tough concept among those who've grown up in the environment which regards any 'performance' as being an attempt to EARN salvation, as opposed to it being the reasonable and appropriate **response** to having already been awarded it! There is the unattainable salvation BY works, and there is salvation UNTO good works. It can be rather hard to tell the difference from a distance. Ephesians 2:10 explains UNTO good works, and not just any newly-made-up actions, but those pre-ordained of God in the

¹⁸ Romans 3:19 thru 31 This essential passage establishes many important considerations: 1) Those 'under the law' are those guilty of having broken it, 2) Lawkeeping can't reverse the process of guilt, 3) That the righteousness of God which is by faith is attested to in the Old Testament (the law and the prophets) 4) That the Law applies to both Jew and Gentile alike, 5) Christ's blood is applicable to remission of sins that are past, 6) That He is our justifier (implying an ongoing process), and 7) That faith establishes the Law!

past! Not as the **means** of salvation, but the appropriate **response** to having been given it! This is what so many just don't get.

Upper middle of page 8: *“The gospel contains nothing about baptism, church...attendance, tithing...If we add anything to the gospel, we have perverted it...”* We need to realize, that to leave anything out, we also pervert it.¹⁹ But in fact, there is much said about **baptism**: It is an essential step in the salvational process. One that can not be omitted. ***“He who believes and is baptized will be saved..”*** (Mark 16:16) ***“Men and brethren, what shall we do?”*** (Acts 2:37) The answer: ***“Repent and be baptized, every one of you...”*** The 'every one of you' shows that it isn't optional in any case. ***“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”*** (Gal. 3:27) This one refers to that act of internalizing the sinless nature of Christ. He instructed His disciples to ***“Baptize them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”*** We should hope this isn't one of the points that's considered 'non-negotiable'. Baptism cannot be minimized. How anyone could suggest that to include the requirement for baptism is perverting the gospel is beyond belief!

Nor can **attendance**: ***“Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together...”*** (Heb. 10:25)

If **tithing** is irrelevant, then why did God devote an entire chapter to the reversion of tithing from the Levitical Order back to the Melchizedek Order (which He was and His New Testament ministry is of), **if** the practice was to be discontinued after the cross? Again, Hebrews 7 references the Old Testament to legitimize that reversion.²⁰

The top of page 9 gives another repetition of Ephesians 2: 8-9. (Again, they avoid verse 10.) Then, just below that, they say, *“Instead of works, the gospel requires faith.”* Yes, it requires faith, but a specific kind of faith, a living faith. A faith illustrated by evidence of

¹⁹ Revelation 22:18-19 pronounces a curse on anyone who adds to or takes away from the words written.

²⁰ See my article on *“Is TITHING Required Today?”*

works. **“Faith without works is dead.”** (Jas. 2:26) **“What does it profit...if some-one says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?”** (Jas. 2:14) The answer to this rhetorical question is no! It’s NOT a faith instead of works, it’s a faith that establishes works. Paul says that it is by faith that the Law is established!²¹ Do you believe this?

The Cross, Not the Throne?

The middle of page 9 is a sentence that bears close focus. It says, *“The gospel is all about what Christ has done. It says nothing about what Christ must yet do, because the work of our redemption is finished.”* **This is perhaps the most egregious error in all of Christendom!** As to His paying the penalty, that’s what’s ‘finished’, but as to the suggestion that the gospel says nothing about Christ doing anything further is incredibly deficient. What is ‘overcoming’ all about? If overcoming wasn’t an ongoing **doing** of God, then it would require that it be ‘of ourselves’ alone! Right? Much is made of the absolute need to overcome to the end. What is Christ’s ongoing representation on our behalf before the Throne of God in Heaven all about?²² It is because we continue to remain sinners needing intercessory representation to the ends of our lives. To disregard this incessant activity is to minimize His official “High Priest” function, which is **essential**. That is the primary consideration in the statement that *“...if Christ is not risen, our faith is vain and we are yet in our sins.”* (1st Cor. 15:17) Because, without a continuing application of His atoning act, we revert to the sinful state that we originally were in! What does it mean, *“We are His workmanship”*, if His work was ‘all finished’ at the cross? This is the major problem area. People are becoming forgiven, (they think), but aren’t

²¹ Romans 3:31 *“Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the Law.”*

²² Hebrews 4:14 thru 5:11. Here we are introduced to our Eternal High Priest, ever interceding on our behalf before the Throne of God in Heaven. If our redemption were “all finished”, as claimed, then what need would there be of this perpetual office? Much of what is called Christianity is totally unaware of this essential ongoing representation, made necessary by our recurring sins!

amenable to becoming converted!

What About the Resurrection?

Bottom of page 9 they allege. *“...the most difficult part of the gospel to accept...”* This admitted difficulty, of accepting the fact that those who are not saved now are hopelessly doomed, is because they don’t accept or understand the purposes of the Biblical resurrections from the dead. Non-believers are not all eternally lost, just because they are not called in this age. Those who truly are called and who reject their calling is another matter. (Several articles addressing the subject of the resurrections are available from this author.)

The middle of page 10 is interesting. He being: *“both just, and the justifier of him which believes...”* This takes us back to the illustration of unleavened bread. A ‘justifier’ is one who works to justify. It is His workmanship in us that creates the ‘justified’ state. Justification is a process, not just a one-time dispensation of forgiveness. It is His work to change our character. We are His workmanship, but, the product of His workmanship is not an attitude callous and indifferent to sin. Rather, it’s one that yields willing obedience.

On page 11 there are two “onlys”. *“Only accept ...only believe.”* And as was commented on above, on page 9, it suggests *only faith*, (not involving works). Page 12 has *‘only repentant’*. Watch out for the word ‘only’. (Too many ‘onlys’ isn’t only!) The fundamental steps toward conversion are faith, repentance and baptism. But even then, not those only, but also the receipt of God’s Spirit, (*which God gives to those who obey Him. (Acts 5:32)*), without which, we are not one of His. (Rom. 8:9-11) Obedience is essential also. (Heb. 5:9) It’s not by any one thing, certainly not ‘by faith only’ as Martin Luther and they allege.

The top of page 12 makes a point we should pause to consider: *“By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight.”* This is very correct, but it is apparent that the matter isn’t fully understood. The next sentence

says, *“Keeping the law perfectly from now on could never make up for having already broken it.”* This is a ‘bulls-eye’, but most blissfully overlook the obvious and go on to draw another conclusion. What those passages refer to is that our subsequent perfect compliance cannot absolve us of guilt of the past. A good deed done today cannot expunge a bad one of yesterday! No amount of law-keeping can accomplish the remission of sins that are past. There is nothing in the structure of the law that allows the reversal of accumulated guilt. That’s the point Paul makes. ‘Justification’ is the process of removing guilt. The law doesn’t facilitate removal of sin, only its prevention. What the law is for is to provide definition, and to set a true moral standard we are to use to overcome personal sin. (Not that that overcoming isn’t by the power of God working in us.) Disregarding the moral standard God ‘ordained before’ in a supposed Christian life is ludicrous! Yet, that is the thrust of many modern religions!

Then there are the advocates of the idea that it isn’t even possible to break the law, because the law was abolished, Christ nailing it to His cross!!²³ Another incursion into a twilight zone!

We need to consider that statement in the middle of page 12, *“...lest, in our zeal to get people to accept the gospel, we manufacture a gospel acceptable to people and produce ‘converts’ who aren’t saved.”* Do we recognize the danger of ‘playing loose’ with this truth? If a ‘saved’ person does that, and mis-leads an unsuspecting believer into an ‘inadequate’ or ineffectual salvation, do they jeopardize their own salvation? Page 13, *“[Some] preach a gospel that is so diluted or perverted that it deceives many into thinking they are saved. No fraud could be worse, for the consequences are eternal!”* (This is beautiful stuff!) *“Religion, not atheism, is Satan’s main weapon.”* It can be another of the tools he uses!

²³ My article *“Gnosticism and the New Testament Church”* addresses the mis-application of this statement to the Old Testament religion, when in fact, it’s referring to Gnostic elementals, as is clearly evident in the context.

Now, the next thought. *“To combat ‘the gospel of the grace of God’, the great deceiver has many false gospels, but they all have two subtle rejections of grace in common: ritual and/or self-effort.”* Now, there is further definition: *“Ritual makes redemption an ongoing process performed by a special priesthood; and self-effort gives man a part to play in earning his salvation.”* In this, the writers have exposed the essence of their condemnation of ‘works’! Let me counterbalance their potent suggestion with specific scriptures. *“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”* (Phil. 2:12) *“Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman not needing to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”* (2nd Tim. 2:15) *“They profess that they know God; but in works they deny Him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.”* (Titus 1:16) *“Go you therefore into all the world, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you.”* (Matt. 28:20) *You your-selves are a Royal Priesthood...* (1st Pet. 2:9), here officiating in our own lives. *“(for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified.)”*²⁴ (Romans 2: 13) *“If you were the sons of Abraham, you would do the works of Abraham... If ye be Christ’s, then are you Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise.”* (John 8:39 / Gal. 3:29) Then there’s the easy to understand scriptures: *“Faith without works is dead.”* and *“If you love me, keep my commandments...”* etc. Here, in this chapter, the booklet alleges that the suggestion that ‘works’ are an appropriate component of the Christian life is deceit. Deceit involving the rejection of grace: that performance of any ‘works’ at all represents only ‘ritualism’ and ‘salvation by works’.

A Redefined Grace

Now, the scriptures are not silent on the matter of a perverted grace. It explains HOW it is perverted. *“For certain men have crept in unaware, who were of old ordained to this*

²⁴ My article on *“We are Not Under the Law”* explains how we are not.

condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God unto lasciviousness..." (Jude 4)

When we seek to identify perverted grace, we ought to be looking for a grace that advocates **not** reigning-in our personal lusts, not one that suggests we keep His Commandments, and imitate Christ's sinless example. Eternal life and forgiveness remain gifts, pure and simple, but their receipt is not without appropriate personal response!

Low on page 17 and onto page 18, we see another amazing phenomenon expressed. "...*If man is to come to God, it must be solely by His grace and His provision, not by any human work. On the other hand, we see man's flagrant repudiation of God's prohibition against self-effort, and his arrogant attempt to build a tower that would enable him to climb by steps of his own making into heaven itself.... There must be no illusion that man could contribute anything by his own efforts to his salvation.*" Not only saying that certain activities are just 'unnecessary', but that obedience in any apparent form is wrong. Even a matter of defiance of God to consider doing anything in attempt to be reconciled to God, and that it is self-righteous to resolve to contribute anything toward salvation. (We need to consider that salvation is seen by some as a momentary event, by others as a life process.) This line of theology openly advocates disregard of the commands of Christ and God, forgetting God's invitation, "**Turn unto me and I will turn unto you...**" One thing we need to do in the process of reconciliation, is to 'turn' (repent)! There's a blindness to the obvious in this persuasion. What accounts for that?

Salvation is by grace, not by works, but salvation, once received, imposes its responsibility. Obedience is a clear pre-requisite to receipt of God's Spirit (also a gift of grace), without which we are none of His! Lascivious grace is more deeply rooted in religious consciousness than we think!

Keep this Temple Holy!

Top of page 21. OK, I guess this self-contradiction is inevitable. "*Your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit...which is therefore to*

be kept Holy." Isn't this the point made earlier? Here, the writer is advocating that we **keep** something! Keep the Temple of the Holy Spirit Holy. You don't do that by carelessly sinning! We're saved, not BY works, but UNTO them! This is our contribution to the process, and also our reasonable service. (Romans 12:1)

Page 22: "...*we are all Eve's children by nature and still prone to follow the ways of Cain and Babel.*" Think this one through. It admits to the point made earlier. That the application of forgiveness is not a one time thing, it's not all over up-front, but is needed through an ongoing process, a constantly officiating High Priest before God's Throne in Heaven. Otherwise, we are yet in our sins! "**And if Christ is not risen, to serve in this essential capacity, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!**" (NKJ) (1st Corinthians 15:17)

In the discourse on faith on page 24 etc., the issue of faith being the basis of our walk (the things we DO by faith) is bypassed. Faith that does not produce appropriate 'works' is dead!

Page 29: in concluding the second chapter, "*The faith for which we must earnestly contend has definite moral and doctrinal content and must be believed for salvation.*" We are at a loss to define the moral aspects without the Commandments. It isn't just 'belief!' "Earnestly contending" suggests a labor intensive activity! Notice that. We should be able to affirm, as did the Apostle Paul, that the 'labors' that he did were by means of the 'empowerment' of God's Grace! "**But by the grace of God I am what I am: and His grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.**" (1st Cor. 15:10)

Now, to their conclusion, on the bottom of page 31, "...*converts begin a new life as Christ's followers, eager to learn of Him and to obey the One to whom they now owe such an infinite debt of gratitude.*" Explain this without being in agreement with the 'appropriate response' comment made on page 3 mentioned at the start of this chapter. If we are to truly 'follow Christ',

wouldn't we do what He did? He obeyed the Father, not to earn anything, showing that there IS more reasons than that for DOING things!

As a side comment, these last couple of pages make reference to Jude 3, "*the faith once delivered*". We need to read on to realize that the threat to that faith Jude was referring to was a 'licentious grace' seen in verse 4. Here's a most amazing thing. The verse is pointedly specific, yet everybody wants to make it seem like it's talking about something else! Preachers keep acting as though this was talking about people attempting to bring in a 'works' theology. The opposite was true! It was a 'no works' drift, where the overwhelming majority is aligned today! Continuing that same sentence at the top of page 33, "*teaching them to observe all things*". So, observance is required, both of the hearer and teacher and that it was to be taught that way! There are things that Christ required His disciples teach all disciples to observe. Observe means **do**, not just think about it!

Coming Full Circle

So, even those who advocate what appears to be a non-performance Christianity inevitably come right back around to a contrary admission. There are things that must be done. We must 'put-in' the true 'unleavenedness' of Christ! The process of our conversion is incomplete without it!

On What Foundation?

Before we can correctly understand the matter of the appropriateness of 'works' in the Christian life, we need to understand that works are **not** a means of remission of sin, nor can we self-produce an acceptable righteousness by doing anything. That said, it is abundantly clear that once in receipt of God's Grace, continuing in sin is expressly forbidden of God! (Romans 6:1-2)

We are saved by grace through faith unto good works! That is the full contextual message of Ephesians 2:8-10. Those good works are the same actions exhibited in the life of the 'Author and Finisher' (the producer of) our Faith. (Hebrews 12:2)

We remain in constant need of a full-time 'justifier', an Advocate with the Father, making intercession on our behalf, for the infractions of God's moral Law that we commit continually. A 'no-works' advocate denies the full efficacy of Christ's ministry of grace. "*Who was delivered (to death) for our offences, and was raised again (to life) for our justification.*" (Romans 4: 25) Christianity, for the most part, fails to comprehend or acknowledge this **two-part ministration**.

If He was not raised from the dead to serve in the capacity of our True High Priest before the Throne of God, we could NOT become saved. The best we could hope for is to be forgiven (by His death). Forgiven is one thing, but becoming justified is another thing!

1st Corinthians 15:17 makes an interesting point: "*And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.*" Here, acknowledging His death, which supposedly paid the penalty for our sins in full, is ineffective unless He is also raised to officiate! You see, if He is not alive, continually interceding on our behalf, our faith is futile and our justification is totally unattainable!

Those who insist that our Christian calling involves 'grace only' are in danger of being unprofitable servants! Those who resist 'works' are likely to not have any. They risk a defiled consciousness. "*They profess that they know God; but in works they deny Him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.*" (Titus 1:16)

"*Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do His will, **working in you** that which is wellpleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ;*" (Heb.13:20-21) "*Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a **good work** in you will **perform** it until the day of Jesus Christ:*" (Philippians 1:6)

Who's the doer?

Does this answer the question?



◆ Chapter Eleven ◆

Modern Myths of Mithras

***Quite a Number of Accepted Religious Beliefs are of Extra-Biblical Origins.
It Would Shock the Average Worshipper to Learn the True Source of Many
Teachings and Practices held dear in this 'Modern' World.***

Those of us familiar with and accepting of the fact that the Early New Testament Church left its first love and drifted into apostasy may be able to name a number of beliefs held today that would qualify as apostate doctrine. (We know that Judaism, as was practiced in the first century, had by then also become apostate to a certain degree, being heavily contaminated with (Gnostic) Hellenistic philosophy and at least a measure of mysticism.)

But 'the reformation fixed all that', many think. When Protestantism severed itself from the establishment church, it overthrew certain corrupted practices of that embodiment of apostasy, and the religious world was then opened up to 'rational review'. Worshipers today take comfort in the thought that the protestant movement corrected much of what was wrong. Well, it's a nice thought.

In fact, IF the average worshipper were to find the **true** origins of many of his cherished beliefs and practices, he would be astounded. Many beliefs and customs rooted deeply in our religious culture have origins other than our Bibles.

Perhaps the most significant contributor to the great apostasy is one least reported in the main stream establishment. Exactly why this isn't discussed all that much should be readily apparent from the following:

Excerpts from: **"Mithraism"** (emphasis added)
by Mudarras Kadhira Gaznavi (From the Internet)

www.geocities.com/spenta_mainyu_2/mithras.htm

"...major and identifiable precursors of the 'celestial' faiths of our day...have in their own ways influenced the celestial belief systems of later periods. Nobody in his right mind could say that... primitive beliefs, primal religions, animism, and some others...ended their influence on humans abruptly. Traces of those beliefs are deep within the psychologies of the earthlings. Just make a search you'll find at least a few of them within yourself. In short, they are with us!

MITHRAS : THE GOD OF LIGHT

One of those belief systems which had a great influence

on the 'belief systems of the book' is the Mithraic cult. Basically it is the worship of the Indo-Iranian 'god of light' Mithra. It has spread from Persia to Asia Minor (today's Anatolia) and from there to the west. One of the last of the oriental mystery cults to reach the west, Mithraism, has emerged as the chief rival and opponent of Christianity as Paganism was dying. It came to Egypt two hundred years before Jesus; reached Rome around the turn of the millennium and soon became the Roman Empire's most important religion - the cult of Mithras, who was a superior entity from the pantheon of Indians and Persians.

MITANNIES & THE LAND OF KHURU (ASIA MINOR)

In order to understand what role Asia Minor (Anatolia) has played in the progress of Mithraism towards west we should stop for a brief period at the land of 'Khuru' where

Hurrian people lived. The Bible calls them the Horites and their land Khuru. The Horites mentioned in the Old Testament were not a Semitic people. Their home was among the mountains around Lake Van in Eastern Anatolia. They were prominent in northern Mesopotamia, Syria and eastern Asia Minor about 1500 B.C. The names on many Hurrian documents indicate that at least the princely caste must be reckoned as Indo-Aryan. In the north of Mesopotamia they established the powerful kingdom of Mitanni between the upper reaches of the Euphrates and Tigris. Their kings had collected around them an aristocracy of warlike charioteers and they bore Indo-Aryan names. The aristocracy of the country was called Marya (an old Indian word) which is the equivalent of 'young warriors'. Their temples were dedicated to old Indian gods. Magic incantations from Rigveda were intoned in front of the images of Mithras - the victorious champion of Light against Darkness, who ruled the storms, and of Varuna who governed the eternal order of the universe. With the arrival of this supreme being the old gods of the Semites crashed from their pedestals. In reality the Mithras which attracted the West was not this nationalist one, but an amalgam which **took its final shape in the eastern Asia Minor** (Anatolia) where the Persian traditions survived the longest.

MITHRA : THE CHIEF DEITY

It is possible that Mithra was subordinate both to the first principle Zurvan Akarana/Zeroana Akerne (infinite time) and to Ahura Mazda. Mithras as the creator, and also as **mediator** between man and the higher beings was clearly the chief deity of the cult as practiced. Ahriman-Angra Mainyu was the power of death and darkness, who was perhaps regarded as the prince of this world. Among the events that appear certain are;

- The birth of Mithras from a rock,
- His shooting an arrow at a cliff to bring forth water (Do you remember the similar stories about Moses...?),
- His adventures in pursuit of the sacred bull ending with his reluctant sacrifice of the animal,
- His alliance with the Sun-god, the banquet shared with him (Do you remember the 'last supper'?)
- Mithra became the creator of life, as by his other exploits he was its protector against evil.

Well, what about the organization of mysteries? It is known that there were seven degrees of initiation open to the adept, perhaps corresponding to the seven planetary spheres to be traversed by the soul in its upward progress. Those in the lowest ranks were called 'servants', those in the middle and above, the 'participants', perhaps with reference to the sacred meal of bread and water, which the Christian writers have likened to the eucharist. Initiation was open to males only, and women were excluded. Intensive cleansing, including perhaps a sort of baptism, were prerequisite to initiation. The initiated person was branded on the fore-head, to mark him henceforth as a recruit in the army of Mithra, sworn to combat all evil. At the head of each group was either a pater or a priest. There is no hint of the Persian magus or anything resembling a priestly caste. There was no ecumenical organization or hier-archy. At most, at each centre there was a pater patrum (father of fathers), who was an overseer or bishop.

THE FAITHFUL WOULD ENJOY IMMORTALITY

Mithraism professed to explain the origins of the universe and also its end; and Mithra who had created once and was now man's defender and helper, would in those final days inaugurate a new order in which the faithful would enjoy forever a blessed immortality. (Immortality! Mankind's basic wish is addressed again). Mithras like other oriental supreme beings has offered man deliverance, but unlike such others as Attis and Osiris he could also serve as an ideal, a heroic leader for man to follow and be more successful in the struggle against evil. Mithra is not mentioned in the Gathas. Which shows that he was deliberately ignored in the monotheistic reforms of Zoroaster-Zarathustra. Later Zoroastrianism found room for him but only as a subordinate to the supreme god Ohrmazd (Ormizd, Ahura Mazda, Hormuz). Avestan hymns - The scriptures of Zoroastrianism - depict him as;

- The god of the heavenly light
- All seeing
- The guardian of oaths
- The protector of the righteous in this world and the next
- The arch foe of the powers of evil and darkness
- The god of battles.

MITHRA - MAITREYA - MESHIA - MESSIAH

In Persia where he was the messenger of Ahura Mazda (god of light) he appeared in the sky at dawn and then crossed the firmament in a chariot drawn by four white horses (Sky has always been considered the right place for the 'supreme beings'). As a mediator between the worlds of light and darkness, as humanity's ally in the struggle against evil and as the soul's guide in its ascent to the eternal life, Mithras was soon identified as the redeemer prophesied by Zarathustra and also the Sun-god who would appear as a human being at the end of time. He finally became the supreme godhead and started his triumphal progress across the Greco-Roman world concurrently with the Buddhist saviour Maitreya in the East. The name Maitreya is related to the Aramaic meshia (Messiah) who is the one that Jews continue to hope for as their Saviour. Both Maitreya and meshia / messiah are expected to come in the future to save the mankind and establish the 'divine' rule. Both words - Maitreya and Mithra - are etymologically related, Maitreya means 'friendly, loving' and is derived from maitri the Sanskrit form of Mithras. But that is not all!

Used as a personal name Maitreya even means 'Son of Mithra.' Like Maitreya, Mithras is said to be waiting in heaven for the end of time, when he will descend to earth. According to legend, the redeemer will be born of a virgin, a goddess, thrusting through animal skin to the light of day. His birth will be watched by shepherds, who will worship the newly born (He will be born of a virgin.. His birth will be watched by the shepherds.. Shepherds will worship him. Have a guess as to where you could have read a similar story. Have you detected the parallels with the story of Jesus and some others?) His earthly mission culminates in his victory over the bull...

From the body of the dying bull grow corn (bread) and grapes (wine) until Mithras finally mounts to heaven in the Sun-chariot and is enthroned by the god of light as the ruler of the world who would return to earth to a-waken the dead and pass judgment. (Mounts to heaven. Enthroned as god. He will return to earth to awaken the dead and pass judgment. Parallels again?) The legend does not specify whether this birth is a past or future event. For those who believed in Mithras;

He was the 'coming one', whose arrival was celebrated every year on the night of 24-25 December (This is someone else's birthday. Does it ring a bell?), when the community had its important festivity.

Another big annual festival was held at the start of spring (Easter?).

The weekly divine service was held on Sunday - the day of the supreme being.

The most important cult activity was a meal of wine and bread - offered as consecrated wafers bearing the sign of a cross.

These similarities are too much [to summarily dismiss]!

'SOL INVICTUS MITHRA' (THE UNCONQUERABLE SUN MITHRA)

Institution of a **state cult** of the **sol invictus** ('unconquerable sun') in **Rome** by Aurelian [270-275] may have contributed to the prestige of Mithra who also bore this proud title. But Mithra has never achieved a place in the public cults of the state. It was the year 307 A.D. under Diocletian an imperial dedication was made to Sol Invictus Mithra, acclaiming him as the 'protector of the empire' is found. (Constantine came to power in 306 A.D. in the east.)

MITHRAISM & CHRISTIANITY

Christianity and Mithraism have much in common:

- A divine lord by whose deeds, performed once, man was assured of salvation,
- A sacramental meal,
- A ritual of baptism,
- A concept of religion, which turns the religious life to enlistment and service under a divine commander, like militia Christi or militia Mithrae,
- Their ideas of heaven and hell and of the Last Judgment were not dissimilar,
- A moral code considerably higher and more rigid than that found in a contemporary society or required by most other cults,

- The spiritual leader of the hierarchically organized Mithras religion was entitled Pater Patrum, 'Father of Fathers' - like the Roman Pope,
- Pope's church - Church of St. Peter - was built over a Mithraic cult site.
- The Mithras cult had six other sacraments which corresponded completely with those of the Catholic Church - including a slap during confirmation.

'A LITURGY PLEASE !' WE NEED IT FAST!

When in the beginning of the 4th century A.D. emperor Constantine declared the catholic Christianity as the state religion, he had **no alternative but to take over the liturgy of the popular Mithraic Church**. Let's remember: For those who believed in Mithras, he was the 'coming one' whose arrival was celebrated every year on the night of 24-25 December when the community had its important festivity (This is the day of the winter solstice; adopted by the early Christians as the birthday of Jesus). Another big annual festival was held at the start of the spring (Easter?). The weekly divine service was held on Sunday - the day of the supreme being. According to C.F. von Volney, "The mass is nothing other than the celebration of these [Mithraic] mysteries...The Dominus vobiscum is literally the utter-ance of the acceptance: chron-k-am, p-ak." The most important cult activity was a meal of wine and bread - offered as consecrated wafers bearing the sign of a cross. We have here more similarities. Let's list them:

- Mithra's birthday is taken over as Jesus' birthday.
- Divine Sunday service is taken over.
- Sunday became the day of the supreme being.
- Cult activity of eating bread and drinking wine is grafted on to Christianity.

WHOSE BIRTHDAY IS THIS?

But do you really remember Jesus' birthday? Well, naturally the birth date of Jesus is not known for sure. The organized religion - the Christian Church - has fixed it as December 25th (Wasn't it the date for the yearly celebration of the arrival of the 'coming one' - Mithras?). Luke and Matthew in relation to the birth of Jesus wrote that shepherds were out in the country keeping watch over

their flocks day and night. But it must be brought to your attention that in Palestine in the month of December nights are cold, neither the sheep nor the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks at night could be found, because there would be frost. Flocks are put out to grass between the months of March and November. So there is something amiss. And you know what it is: This birth date is not the real one. It is the birth date of Mithra taken over from the Romans who were celebrating this date as the 'birthday of Mithras'. Romans worshipped Mithras as the saviour of the mankind, and these celebrations were for Dies Natalis Invicti ('Birthdate of the Unconquered'). In short, when the Romans were converted to Christianity they have just converted the Mithra festival into a Christian festival. This date was arbitrarily fixed by a Scythian monk - Dionysius Exiguus in the year 533 A.D. Furthermore he moved 1 B.C to 1 A.D. Prior to Exiguus, Jesus' birthday was fixed as 6th January, which is still celebrated in the Orthodox church, in the Balkans and Mexico. So where did this birth day come from in the first place? The Christian **feast of the epiphany** has originated in the Eastern Church probably as early as 3rd century A.D., and came to be celebrated in the West in the 4th century A.D. The choice of date, January 6, is presumably an adaptation of rival pagan feasts. In Egypt, the waters of the Nile were reputed to acquire special powers during the night of January 5-6, the festival of the god Aeon, who was born of the virgin Kore (They all seem to be mothered exclusively by virgins).

The birthday on 6th January was celebrated in Egypt and Asia Minor. And Jesus' January birthday may have been taken over from Aeon's birthday. Chief among the makers of the Christian doctrines was apostle Paul who was a former Pharisee. Paul was a man of great intellectual vigour and was deeply and dispassionately interested in the religious movements of the time. He was well-versed in Judaism, and in Mithraism and the Alexandrian faiths of the day. He has carried over many of the ideas and terms of expression into Christianity. According to the Aquarian Gospel, the Jews of Palestine have never believed in human sacrifice, nor in the crucifixion of Messiah for the sins of the world. But the Pagans believed that their gods Adonis, Attis, Osiris and Mithra had died for the sins of mankind. It was Paul who borrowed the idea of a scapegoat and laid stress on the crucified Jesus.

CHRISTIANITY IS VICTORIOUS (!?)

Similarities were outweighed by the differences, but in similarities Christianity had the advantage in a period when popular and philosophic thought was increasingly

tending to monotheism. According to some, another reason for the ultimate triumph of the Christianity over its more respectable rivals was the fact that, being unfettered by fantastic myth and ritual of uncivilized origin, it dealt with the eschatological and other spiritual needs of the time in a more rational manner than did its rivals (in other words it addressed the basic needs of 'earthlings' like becoming immortal, not worrying about death, a clear promise about the afterlife etc., much better than the others). What was left of Greek rationality has contributed a logical and coherent theology to the new religion.²⁵ Mithraism for all its exaltation of Mithra was surely bound to its polytheistic traditions. Mithraism has suffered too in comparison, by having as its redeemer a mythical figure whose appeal could never match that of the historical Jesus worshipped by the Christians as the 'god incarnate'. Mithraism was fatally weak in its exclusion of women. It failed also to use the family as a source of religious strength and continuity. This failure may explain why Mithraism has collapsed so suddenly and disappeared with such surprising rapidity."

Well, another reason may also account for it. It never did fully collapse, but rather, experienced a series of 'name changes', blending right into and perpetuating the momentum the other! We need to understand the word 'disappeared' not as a termination, but rather as a submergence into the religious cultural flow long established by that date.

Another important mis-perception is that Constantine accepted and adopted Christianity as the **new** state religion. As should be

²⁵ What was left of Greek rationality was the usable elements of Gnosticism that permeated the Hellenistic world. This is dealt with more specifically in the article "Gnosticism and the New Testament Church". Gnosticism was not a religion of and by itself, rather, it's characteristic was to lend its philosophical views to other religions.

apparent, he further *adapted* Christianity, as it had by then developed, into the already established religious drift of the Empire! The ease of which he was able to do so speaks volumes regarding the religious mind set already extant in Asia Minor. Keep in mind, as stated on page 55, right column, about the same time that Constantine was 'accepting' Christianity, his counterpart in Rome, Diocletian, had 'declared' Mithraism's god as '*protector of the empire*', just one generation after his predecessor, Aurelian, had instituted 'the cult of Sol Invictus' as state religion.

A Pre-emptive Strike

Understanding the religious climate existing in the world before and in the early decades of the New Testament Church, John's vision in Revelation 12 becomes especially pertinent. It was intended all along, by sinister forces, to have a counterfeit belief system in place **before** Christianity came to be, with intent to devour it (by mis-representing the identity of its central figure) in the minds of potential believers.

We can see in this passage who is behind this subterfuge: *Satan*, thru the auspices of the fourth **Beast Empire**. "*And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.*" (Rev.12:3-4) Not only as a precursor, but also continuing after its establishment. "*And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child. And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent. And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood*

after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood.” (verses 13-15) Having been unsuccessful in devouring it’s central figure as He emerged onto the world scene, the Dragon then turned his wrath against the true Church, by issuing out of his mouth a great flood of mis-information (including false or contaminated doctrine): a doctrine tailored especially to a prepared world, which gave that false doctrine ready acceptance (swallowing it) on a major scale!

Apostate Christianity, falsely so called, was a ready environment for the infusion of Mithraic concepts and practices (tinged with vestigial ‘elements’ of Gnosticism) as the religious and political culture of the day was already primed with these beliefs.

Satan’s Seat

In the paragraph at the top left of page 54, the author states that Mithraism ‘endured the longest and developed its final shape in eastern Asia Minor’, the very area in which the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3 once existed, late in the apostolic age. In the message to one of these, (Pergamos) John twice mentions that its locale was where Satan’s seat was. In 2:13, it says *“I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.”* It was just north of there, two centuries later, where Emperor Constantine established **his** capitol, the second (eastern) ‘leg’ of the Roman Empire. (Daniel 2:33)


It’s interesting that the modern evangelical will often allude to the metaphor of ‘from Jerusalem to Antioch’ to somehow justify the trans-mergence from a more Judaic (Old Testament (Sabbatarian)) Church to a ‘Gentile (Sunday keeping) church’. It was in Antioch where the Saints were first called ‘Christians’.

Silisian Antioch is located in the southern border region of Asia Minor, while Pisidian Antioch is in the very heart of it. What few recognize in this attempt to assign the changes in the New Testament religion to apostolic sanction is the fact that Sabbathkeeping remained clear thru **to** the time of Constantine. It was his Council of Nicea in 325 that officially banned it, along with keeping the Passover! Any drift away from the doctrines and practices of the early Church, IF first detected in Antioch, were not of apostolic origin!

But that allegation isn’t without certain detriment to the evangelicals, because, to allege such a drift **away from** “Old Testament legalism”, they must admit to what the Church’s original position in fact had been!

But Antioch is credited with being the ‘first base’ toward so called ‘New Testament theology’,²⁶ which from the above we can see was no such thing. That theology which unsuspecting worshippers so fervently embrace is undisguised Mithraism in too many respects for comfort. Many doctrinal premises have been added, not having real Biblical basis.

Ironically, it is the idea of changing the worship day from Saturday (Sabbath) to Sunday that is the subliminal inference in giving Antioch credit. Where such change-over idea is entirely non-Biblical, it was the day of worship among the Mithraites! This was Mithraism’s most obvious contribution to apostate christianity!

It is our task to seek and hold to ‘the Faith once delivered’. What we have in the world today is **not** that faith. 

²⁶ The term “New Testament theology’ is the code words for the idea of distancing beliefs and practice from “Old Testament” observances, despite Christ’s specific admonition to not think His Laws are “done away”.

◆ Chapter Twelve ◆

Can We Escape the World of CULTS?

The Church of God has since its inception been regarded as just another Cult! Many smaller unaffiliated groups face this same accusation. Just what IS a CULT? What Would it Do to Your FAITH if You Were Found to be IN One?

It wasn't all that long before the emerging early New Testament Church began to be everywhere regarded in a profoundly negative way. Even within the first decade, followers of this 'Jesus' were labeled a 'sect' that was "everywhere spoken against"! ²⁷ The elements for that situation were present from the foundation of the Church era. ²⁸

Not a New Phenomenon

The Church originally was labeled as a "sect" of established Judaism. It wasn't the only one. There were many: the Sadducees (Acts 5:17), the Pharisees (Acts 15:5) and as attested to by Paul the Apostle, referring to his former persuasion in Acts 26:5. The Church was called 'the sect of the Nazarenes' (Acts 24:5). Each of these sects had variations in beliefs, but within an overall belief system and an accepted establishment. At first, the Church was regarded as just another Jewish sect. The change came later!

Where this is important is to consider what it'd do to your Faith should you be accused of 'being in a cult', without having a clear conception of just what that means or not knowing how to withstand or respond to the accusation.

I don't usually prefer to insert dry dictionary definitions, but in this case, it is essential we define just what a 'cult' is. Opinions can vary significantly, depending on what we perceive the term to mean.

²⁷ Acts 28:22 Addressing the chief of the Jews in Rome who said to Paul: "But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against."

²⁸ Matthew 10:22, Luke 21:17, John 7:7, 15:19, 17:14 etc.

Dictionary (Thorndike Barnhart, 1954)

Cult (kult), n. 1. a system of religious worship. 2. great admiration for a person, thing, idea, etc.; worship. 3. the group showing such admiration; worshippers. (*Expanded definitions: 1. those who separate themselves from orthodoxy to pursue a narrower definition of Truth, 2. those who align themselves with an elevated leadership, 3. an oppressive system of religious dictates and control.*)

Sect (sekt), n. 1. group of people having the same principles, beliefs or opinions. 2. a religious group separated from an established church.

Dictionary (American Heritage, 2000) ²⁹

cult (kŭlt) n.

- a.** A religion or religious sect generally considered to be extremist or false, with its followers often living in an unconventional manner under the guidance of an authoritarian, charismatic leader.
 - b.** The followers of such a religion or sect.
- A system or community of religious worship and ritual.
- The formal means of expressing religious reverence; religious ceremony and ritual.
- A usually nonscientific method or regimen claimed by its originator to have exclusive or exceptional power in curing a particular disease.
- Obsessive, especially faddish, devotion to or veneration for a person, principle, or thing.

²⁹ The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition copyright ©2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Updated in 2003. Published by Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

6. An exclusive group of persons sharing an esoteric, usually artistic or intellectual interest.

[Latin: *cultus*, *worship*, from past participle of *colere*, *to cultivate*; see *k^wel-* in Indo-European roots.]

cul-ture (kūl'chər) *n.*

1. a. The totality of **socially transmitted behavior patterns**, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.

b. These patterns, traits, and products considered as the expression of a particular period, class, community, or population:

d. The predominating attitudes and behavior that characterize the functioning of a group or organization.

Thesaurus

cult - a system of religious beliefs and rituals; (e.g. "devoted to the cultus of the Blessed Virgin")
cultus, religious cult, faith, religion, religious belief - a strong belief in a supernatural power or powers that control human destiny; "he lost his faith but not his morality"

cult - an interest followed with exaggerated zeal; "he always follows the latest fads"; "it was all the rage that season" craze, fad, furor, rage, fashion - the latest and most admired style in clothes and cosmetics and behavior.

From the above, we can understand that there's a rather wide range of definition of the term 'cult'. I include the definition for the term 'sect' also, as that's what the early Church was called. But, the term 'sect' identifies a somewhat distinct segment of a previously established religious persuasion. When we move on to the definition of 'cult', it is apparent that there's a perceptual shift from acceptability toward a tacit contempt.

Most of us regard the name 'cult' to have a very negative connotation. Few would feel complemented being called a 'cult member'! Calling any particular group a '*Cult*' casts a negative regard toward all of its beliefs and practices, justified or not. This is a result of how we, in this society, are programmed to think.

What Is a CULT?

From the above definitions, we can see that the term has a wide application. If we take it all at face value, it appears that few could escape being identified as a cult at least to some degree. Interesting that the thesaurus' definition gives an example of a 'sect' within the most populous Christian denomination as being a 'cult'! (*The cultus of the Blessed Virgin*) In their example, they don't necessarily intend a negative connotation, though our perceptions may inject one.

Refining-out the useable components from above, we see that a "Cult", as we need to define it, is and can include all or a number of basic elements:

- **A religious group which embraces non-traditional thinking or unique doctrine (unorthodoxy),**
- **That venerates unique teachings or personalities**
- **That takes its unique qualities to an extreme,**
- **That tends to be exclusivist,**
- **That in some cases practices ceremony or ritual.**

To these, modern definition has added:

- **Whose teachings are substantially false,**
- **Who employs abusive tactics, including various mind controlling methods.**
- **An interest followed with exaggerated zeal**

It is these latter factors that come to the fore in our thinking when we perceive of what a cult is.

The problem is, the more serious of these accusations, such as 'teaching things that are false' are highly subjective. Christ made it clear that the main stream (the broad way) would not be the most correct in its teachings. The 'true way' would be one that few would enter.³⁰ Truth isn't the exclusive domain of the impressive and popular organizations. Also, instances of 'abusive

³⁰ Matthew 7:13-14 "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leads to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leads unto life, and few there be that find it."

tactics' or 'mind controlling methods' are known in even the most respected organizations! Since they are by no means limited to just the 'cults', the presence of such tactics cannot be the definition of a cult, unless we accept a broader definition, one which could include major and accepted organizations.

That Natural Aversion

Where the term 'cult' is useful is in the negative impression it creates in the minds of the hearers, and the resultant desire to distance ones' self from it. But, we are always at risk of mis-identifying or mis-labeling a particular group. If we were to encounter a group that **accurately** represented the beliefs and practices of the Apostles and early New Testament Church, would christianity in general regard them fairly? Probably not! The accuser is prone to evaluate other groups based on the belief system to which he subscribes, not by the fundamental source of the Bible alone. This is a major part of the problem.

So to avoid the automatic negative impression that carries with the use of the label '**cult**', we need to consider a more neutral term. Not all cults are false in all of what they teach and practice. In fact, it's the smaller groups, independent of the constraints on beliefs imposed by rigidly established religion (orthodoxy = '*right thinking*'), that are often more free to embrace biblical truths that have become excluded from the main stream. Being a 'cult' or being 'cult-like' is not always the bad thing it is understood to be. It all depends on how close to the true religion of the New Testament that group remains. Though they are rarely evaluated on that basis.

To set aside the negative connotation inherent with the label, 'cult', I suggest we substitute the word, 'culture'. Sometimes the conformity that often forms among a group of believers is made out to be more than it really is. Culture is a word that can convey a meaning closer to the original meaning of the word 'cult' in our time. We understand cultures as being the life styles of groups of people, based on the standards of conduct accepted within their various societies. We accept the fact of different cultures without regarding them as 'false' or 'unacceptable'. In

fact, people generally venerate cultural diversity. It's called 'multiculturalism'. Without specific investigation into a group's beliefs and practices, we shouldn't automatically regard all cults negatively either, but typically, that's how it is!

Among any people of like mind, or like situation, a 'culture' of a sort develops. When among those of a certain denomination, certain tendencies and manners become evident. In religious cultures, these, often as not, are a product of their belief system, structured around their particular doctrines and 'cultured' by a certain community 'peer pressure' that interplays between individuals. This is not suggesting anything improper is at work, but merely to explain that people of similar beliefs and practice usually mutually coerce one another in subtle and not so subtle ways. To a degree, and within certain bounds, this is as it should be. We are each instructed to '*provoke one another to love and good works*'.³¹

Those who are Catholics understand what it means to be Catholic. Mormons understand their distinct Mormon beliefs and practices. What could better illustrate a cultural conformity than say the Amish community? If one were to become an Adventist, he or she would expect and be expected to make some dietary adjustments and observe certain things differently. A free-will Baptist would notice some differences if he were to mingle among Presbyterians. Some differences are political, some are doctrinal. There is a definable '**culture**' among each of these. Some more pronounced than others. The fact of there being a 'cultural difference' is not in itself indicative of right or wrong. In fact, God made clear from the beginning that man was free to live in whatever culture he preferred. (The essence of the statement: "*Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat*". (Gen.2:16-17) We are free to choose and live whatever **life style** we wish, except avoiding that central 'tree', the "*tree of the knowledge of good and evil*", which represents our deciding for ourselves what is right and what is wrong!). Truth is not exclusive to or determined by any single cultural expression, it is determined another way.

³¹ 1st Thess. 5:11, Heb. 3:13, **Heb. 10:24**

Each of these, whether Catholics, Jews, Quakers, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Amish, Evangelicals, and for that matter, the Masons, the Mafia, Evolutionists or the Greenpeace movement, each exhibits a certain degree of 'exclusivism', and could be construed to represent some aspects of 'cult-like' behavior. Each imposes a certain 'peer pressure' upon its members, to focus their loyalty to the interests and the cause of their particular organization. Again this, though each a visible 'culture', by itself is not the sole definition of what a Cult is. Maintaining a distinct culture alone isn't it.

When is a Cult Not a Cult?

David Covington, a long-time member of the Worldwide organization and a minister, in his May 11, 1996 letter of resignation, though professing **full agreement** with the doctrinal overthrow, observed and admitted that the administration "...shows no willingness to address the core, most damaging cultic aspects of the system." He, a favored 'insider', their 'spiritual abuse "guru"', went on in a lengthy letter to illustrate detailed specifics of what he meant. That Church had, in fact, NOT abandoned its cult-like ways.³²

This brings us to a significant consideration. Is a cult a set of beliefs, or is it a mode of operation? Here, one supposed "Cult" revised all of its unique doctrines to correspond more to main stream Christianity, yet it was seen as still being a 'cult' by an 'insider', someone in a position to know. In **this** case, we can conclude, doctrine really had nothing to do with it!!

But what the accusation of being a 'Cult' did for most people was to cast dispersions on the doctrine of the Church! It was that **doctrine** that the religious world despises. But instead, it was the political structure and its employed methods that defined the 'cultishness', not so much its doctrines. Though the 'culture' within that organization was derived in part from its'

³² Quoted from the "Servants' News" 6/96, Vol.2, No.5, Pg.4, copies of the entire resignation letter are available. Mr. Covington possesses a masters degree in counseling and served in important capacities in the WCG ministry with particular focus on matters of dealing with 'spiritual abuse'.

doctrinal positions, that apparently wasn't the component that made it a 'Cult' in the minds of many and in practical reality! But the accusation served its purpose. Most major doctrines were up-ended and repudiated by a self-conscious, closed, under-confident and uninspired regime. Their long-stated intent of gaining the embrace of main-stream evangelicals proves ever elusive, as those core components of a cult-like system remained intact. The problem really wasn't the doctrine, though doctrine took the fall!

A Highway of No Return

A former pastor general observed correctly. In the last line of his last letter to the general membership, just weeks before his unexpected and untimely death, he wrote, concerning the doctrinal changes he had imposed, "***There is no turning back.***" What he wrote proved prophetic!

We can conclude that same thing from what happened to the early New Testament Church when it drifted from the faith once delivered and embraced the doctrinal positions adapted from the world around them. Abandoning and repudiating the True Faith has no return access ramp! Truth and understanding is a Heavenly Gift, a natural by-product of the indwelling of God's Spirit. Letting go of it has its price. (Heb. 10:26-31)

But, let's consider those qualities that earn an organization the label: '**Cult**'. Let's consider these with the Early New Testament Church in mind.

■ **A religious group which embraces non-traditional thinking or unique doctrine (unorthodoxy)**, Did the early Church embrace a whole new way of thinking?³³ Did it possess and promote unique doctrine?

■ **That venerates unique teachings or personalities**, Did it venerate (hold in especially high regard) any unique teachings and prominent personalities, One in particular?³⁴

■ **That takes its unique qualities to an extreme**, Does the fact that many throughout history paid

³³ Philippians 2:5

³⁴ Eph. 4:15, Col. 2:19, Mk. 12:10

with their lives, choosing martyrdom at times, rather than renounce their beliefs, illustrate any degree of extremism? ³⁵

■ **That tends to be exclusivist,** Christ plainly described those religious types with whom His Saints should not fellowship. ³⁶ He listed those characteristics which made an individual ‘one of His’! ³⁷ Being exclusivist of certain elements in society is openly promoted in scripture, both Old and New Testament. The early Church was clearly exclusivist!

■ **That in some cases practices ceremony or ritual.** Christ and the Apostle Paul openly advocated certain specific observances, both weekly and annual. Most noteworthy: the Passover, with its renewed symbology. Christ instructed His disciples to continue to observe Passover, ³⁸ and the Apostle Paul later gave specific instructions to a Gentile congregation as to exactly when and how now to keep it! What about the ceremony of baptism? ³⁹

In each of these, the Early Church could be seen as exhibiting the prime characteristics of a Cult! For that matter, well respected religious groups today exhibit the same! Does that make them worthy of being labeled a ‘Cult’? But, it’s the other definitions that put any group over the top in this regard.

■ **Whose teachings are substantially false,** As stated above, this determination is highly subjective. Who has sufficient wherewithal to determine what is true and what is false? We can’t look to the main stream orthodox religions, as they all pose differing answers. Christ Himself explained that the ‘broad way’, the ‘accepted’ forms, would not preserve the components of His true ‘way of life’! It would be a small ‘minority’ who’d find and pursue that ‘narrow way’. ⁴⁰

■ **Who employs abusive tactics, including various mind controlling methods.** Here we have a key

³⁵ Rev. 12:11, Heb. 11:35-38

³⁶ Eph. 5:11 & 2:12, 2nd Cor. 6:17

³⁷ Rev. 14:12, Rom. 8:9 & 14 & 16, 1st Cor. 12:13, 1st Pet. 1:2-5

³⁸ Luke 22:19, 1st Cor. 11:24-29 & 5:7,

³⁹ Matt. 28:19-20

⁴⁰ Matt. 7:13-14

element, but one not absent from even the most highly respected organizations. Even secular ones have a problem with this item, as it is a component of our human natures. All those books written, dealing with ‘abusive groups’, are written about a number of organizations, of all persuasions, large to small, that have had to deal with this problem. It isn’t the Church of God only. In fact, it’s to much lesser extent there than in most ‘main stream’ churches. On this particular item, we have all the big pots attempting to over-blacken the kettle!

■ **An interest followed with exaggerated zeal.** In most situations, zeal is afforded a high regard. It seems that in pointedly promoting any doctrine not generally approved by the main stream, one risks being labeled ‘cult-like’ on the basis of personal conviction. Even more so when the organization evokes this exaggerated response!

The point of this is to illustrate that the early New Testament Church could be construed by some people as having been ‘Cult-like’. It’s modern counterpart, no less so!

Then, there’s the ‘eye-of-the-beholder’ component. An evangelical would define a cult differently than would an agnostic. The evangelical would base his verdict in reference to his personal accepted belief system, whether Biblically accurate or not. (Our modern religions have the added perspective of a ‘refined theology’, having been subjected to generations of ‘rational’ analysis, incorporating many extra-biblical ideas, such as those borrowed from Gnosticism.) ⁴¹ Then, the agnostic would use a much broader brush, even including, and especially including, the out-spoken evangelical!

It was asked above, that if the True Church were to be encountered today, wouldn’t it possess the same general characteristics as did the early Church? If that Church could have been construed as exhibiting ‘cult-like’ characteristics, then isn’t it likely its modern counterpart would be labeled

⁴¹ Request my article on “*Gnosticism and the New Testament Church*.”. Much of what is believed today is cross-pollinated with pagan concepts, more than most would like to admit!

the same? Does this suggest how we ought to regard being labeled a Cult?

So, Can We Escape?

The original question, posed at the beginning, Can the True Church escape being labeled a Cult? Well, if it IS labeled as such, it's in good company. The Early Church was regarded negatively as a 'Sect' by society in general, which in that day was much the same thing. But, so long as we firmly hold to the doctrines of the New Testament, and especially those rejected by the majority (many of which have an Old Testament origin, such as Holydays and the Sabbath), we are subject to that ever-present negative assessment. And, if we filter out those extra-Biblical contaminants, drawn from Gnostic philosophy, such as the immortal soul, we can't help but paint a target on ourselves. It comes with the territory!

The only hope a group could have of immunity, especially a small group, would be if it possessed no unique beliefs, exhibited no zeal, and went with the flow in every practice and doctrinal position. The more benign its conduct, the more innocuous its doctrine, the more likely it'll be able to escape being labeled. But does this condition remotely satisfy the unique requirements of our calling?

Ironically, it seems the standard of who is and who isn't is set by the most obvious Cult of all time and especially by her 'protesting' daughters, who came out of her! ⁴² **But none dare call her one!** Most who've been in the Church for a long period of time, at least, those who are fulfilling their 'Berean' obligation and thoroughly proving its doctrines, are relatively unfazed by our being called a cult. Our primary concern, then, in being labeled, must shift to how it would impact a new person. We need to become fully conversant in the Truth, to be able to support one another's faith and to face any presumptive questions.

Though some would prefer to allege so, with the Church of God, it isn't really about organizational structure, per se. That changes from place to place

⁴² Revelation 17:1-18 "*The Mother of Harlots*"! This Biblical epithet identifies a woman who has daughters in the same line of work as herself!

and from generation to generation. And, yes some of the negative political factors can affect us that affect nearly every other religious group from time to time. ⁴³

In that it's possible to make a good case for the most populous religious body on earth meeting all the definitions of a Cult, it seems no-one is fully immune from being labeled by someone somewhere. Our first obligation is to identify and follow the True Way, irrespective of the regard of others. It's one of those 'hanged-if-you-do / hanged-if-you-don't' situations. Paul illustrated the problem we face in his poignant observation in Romans 6:16-17. "*Know you not, that to whom you yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants you are to whom you obey;...But God be thanked, that you were the servants of sin, but you have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you.*" He continues the thought in the first chapter of Galatians: "*I marvel that you are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ...As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ.*"

Our problem is to decide which "master" it is we prefer or seek to please? The true Saints of the Most High are personally called to be the "Pillars and grounds of the Truth" ⁴⁴ If we seek to accommodate the doctrinal positions and opinions preferred by the majority, we risk losing our way in serving the Truth. We are the servants of whom we choose to obey! Keep in mind that averting Christ's proscribed service is bondage to another!

Whose embrace is it we seek? The answer to that question is greater than man's opinion of us! 📖

⁴³ 3rd John: 9-10 There is always that individual who seeks to be the pre-eminent 'leader'.

⁴⁴ 1st Timothy 3:15 Paul, the tentmaker, uses the basic tent structure to illustrate the Truth's doctrinal support elements.