

# ***Ecclesiology: God's Earthly Reign***

*A preliminary study of the doctrines on the church in response to the current context in dialogue with standard North American systematics. Based on material prepared for systematic theology classes at the Seminário Teológico Batista do Rio Grande do Sul.*

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# Ecclesiology

## God's Earthly Reign

### ***Scope of the Study:***

The purpose of this text is to introduce the theological issues of ecclesiology—doctrines concerning the church. Emphasis will be given to the nature and purpose of the church, their relationship with the reign of God, and basic principles of church growth. This is a preliminary study, for each item treated merits its own book. This text will not deal with the full range of ecclesiological study. The reading study of parallel texts and serious dialogue with normative church practice will be of the utmost importance in developing an appropriate understanding and application of ecclesiology within Biblical parameters. The reader should keep in mind that the essential text for ecclesiological study is the Bible itself. This and other referenced texts should merely serve as aids in the systematic study of the issues at hand.

As in all theological inquiry, it is essential that each individual invest energy into applying theology to their particular context of reality. It is not enough to amass answers generated in other times and places to the questions and doubts that arose in other contexts. One must seek to apply theological study in answer to the appropriate questions and issues facing the people of a particular society and age. In the study of ecclesiology, the emphasis on application is greater than in some other areas of theological inquiry, for one is dealing directly with the form, function, and purpose of the very church under study. These forms are tied to specific historical and societal contexts, including organizational structures and inquiry that have varied significantly over the course of centuries.

In each period of the history and development of the church, various needs for organizational changes have been necessary to enable the Church to carry out its purpose. Rick Warren's book, (*Purpose Driven Church*) is closely tied to theme of focusing the local church's attention upon the role that she is called to play. This perspective of assessing the established purpose of the Church must likewise direct theological inquiry into the topic. Dealing foremost with the mission and purpose of the church, we will offer a basis for inquiry into methods and structures that can facilitate the Church in fulfilling her role and designated mission.

This is, therefore, the goal of the present study: to discover the Biblical parameters for defining the nature and mission of the Church, in order that we might look more closely at the structures and strategies to be applied in fulfilling her mission. Once we are able to satisfactorily define the nature and mission of the Church, we can focus attention on questions of appropriate structure and methodology for carrying out that mission.

### ***Supporting Texts:***

This study will present a partial summary of the content developed by the following authors, along with critical analysis or supplementary comments on certain positions and issues taken or raised. It will be up to

the reader to analyze the furnished proposals and elaborate one's own conclusions with the aim of reconciling personal understanding and practice with the parameters of Biblical witness. Dialogue with differing proposals and perspectives can aid one in the process of developing a better appreciation of the nature and role of the church. This should facilitate one's application of Biblical teaching to the contextual realities of one's own communities of faith—the people of God joined together to fulfill her commission. The texts listed below will form the initial basis for this study, begun in the context of southernmost Brazil with resources there available. To that list, I would add Malcolm Tolbert's more recent book:

ERICKSON, Millard J. *Introdução à Teologia Sistemática*. traduzido por Lucy Yamakami. São Paulo: Vida Nova, 1997. (English original, 1992). [This is a simplified version of the more complete *Christian Theology*]. (pages 437-475).

GEORGE, Timothy. *Teologia dos Reformadores*. Traduzido por Gérson Dudus e Valéria Fontana. São Paulo: Edições Vida Nova, 1994. (English original, 1988). (pages 33-42, 87-98, 112-120, 133-158, 233-244, 257-274, 283-295, 300-303, 311-317).

GETZ, Gene. *Igreja: Forma e Essência, O Corpo de Cristo pelo Ângulos das Escrituras, da História e da Cultura*. Traduzido por Márcio Loureiro Redondo. São Paulo: Edições Vida Nova, 1994. (pages 53-61, 309-323, 347-357).

GRUDEM, Wayne. *Teologia Sistemática*. Traduzido por Norio Yamakami, Lucy Yamakami, Luiz A. T. Sayão, e Eduardo Perreira e Ferreira. São Paulo: Edições Vida Nova, 1999. (English original, 1994). (pages 715-728, 733-742, 744-755, 758-792, 801-812, 814-829, 834-844, 847-856, 859-886, 892-920).

HORRELL, Scott. Ed. *Ultrapassando Barreiras, volume 1*. São Paulo: Edições Vida Nova, 1998. (pages 29-41, 109-118, 137-154).

HORRELL, Scott. Ed. *Ultrapassando Barreiras, volume 2*. São Paulo: Edições Vida Nova, 1998. (pages 15-28, 71-86, 141-151).

TOLBERT, Malcolm O. *Shaping the Church: Adapting New Testament models for Today*. Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2003.

## ***General Introduction:***

It is necessary that, before beginning with the study of ecclesiology proper, we deal with some of the problems associated with the discipline. With these background issues laid out, the subsequent material can be discussed on more level footing. All theology is developed upon some kind of foundation. Clarifying that foundation will aid in better evaluating or understanding the conclusions formulated in the final stages of the study.

## ***Barriers to the Study of Ecclesiology:***

Definition of the Term: The form of the English term, church has a Germanic origin. The term has various uses and contexts, however, reaching back to various concepts and definitions of what church is all about. The term may designate a local congregation, a denomination, a cause, the universal or “invisible” character of believers, the meeting place used by a group of worshippers, or even the rituals of worship used by a congregation. In each context, one must be sure which way the term is being used. This study will focus essentially on the following practical definition: “*a body of believers who evidence a relationship of dependence (faith) on Christ Jesus, joining together to carry out their God-given mission.*”

Institutionalism: In the Bible, the church is not an institution, but a living organism which transforms itself in organizational terms. In one sense, the church is, according to Romans 9:25 and 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:9-10, the

people of God in development. Dealing with the concept of church, then, one must look at two aspects: the organism and its naturally developing organizational structure. This structure is necessary, but it should not be seen as the principle aspect of church. One must remember that specific forms and structures exist simply as means to achieve specified purposes.

Biblical Background for the Church Terminology: The English text of the Bible uses the term “church,” but the original connotations of the words are often lost in translation. The basic concept behind the Hebrew term *qahal* (קהל) and also of the Greek term *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) is that of a meeting, often dealt with in the sense of “community.” Normally the terms are associated with calling the assembly together in political contexts—meetings of the people to decide or to hear important matters of general interest.

The Old Testament does not use the current concept of “church,” since it deals with the nation as a whole belonging to *Yahweh* (יהוה). In this context, the Old Testament uses the Hebrew term *‘edah* (עדה), designating the people of God, whether or not they are gathered together. In the period of exile, the Hebrew term *qahal* (קהל) is used the same way, but never in reference to an institution.<sup>1</sup>

The Greek term (*ekklesia*) strictly speaking means “called out”, referring to convocation to a meeting. When the New Testament treats the church in a universal sense, even when limited to a local area, the terms normally used are on the lines of “saints” or “elect,” rather than church (*ekklesia*). The writers also use terms such as “bride,” “orchard,” or “people of God,” especially when dealing with the universal church. One must take care not to force one particular concept or aspect of the English term upon the range of Biblical terms and concepts.

Figurative Language: The Bible makes abundant use of figures of speech as aids to understanding and remembering spiritual concepts. As an example, John 3 registers a dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, who did not understand the meaning behind Jesus’ words. Jesus explained the same truth three different ways so that he might understand a single spiritual truth that was beyond his experience. He dealt with the necessity of being born again, specified a distinction between physical and spiritual life, and then used a known example of trusting God as the only solution for life.

Likewise, Biblical teaching regarding ecclesiology is expressed in various figures as teaching aids. The symbolic language of these expressions must not be forced to obey rigid rules of literal interpretation. When Jesus uses the term “kingdom,” he obviously does not refer to the establishment of an earthly theocratic political structure. When the Bible deals with the “gates of hell” not prevailing against the church’s offensive, we are not to conceive of hell as a defined geographical space enclosed by walls and gates. These are figures of speech that illustrate specific concepts, rather than being literal descriptions. In any Bible study, therefore, one must respect these forms of expression, not forcing each word to obey rules of literal interpretation.

Tradition and Theological Dissonance: In the study of psychology, there is discussion of what is termed “cognitive dissonance.” This refers to the dissonance between one’s acknowledgements of truth and one’s related practice. We may speak of the need to wash hands to avoid disease, but may not follow through with the appropriate action. Within ecclesiology, we find that there are also areas of dissonance that we might characterize as “theological dissonance.” This dissonance may be found as we seek to balance the institutional and administrative aspects of church life with the spiritual aspects of being the body of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> STAGG, 181-182.

Dissonance may also be found as we proclaim principles of faith that we discover, and yet fail to assess our traditional observances and procedures. Some of the most glaring examples may be seen in our failure to live up to the challenges in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, even as we might accept the validity of the teaching.

As the church, we are often inept at expressing the fullness of our ideal to present Christ to the world. As we recognize failures to express Biblical teaching effectively through our traditions and practices, we ought to remember that such failures do not completely invalidate our traditions. These traditions must simply be recognized as partial expressings of our frailty as human beings on a corporate level. It is when we do NOT find any discrepancies between our traditions and the Biblical witness to God's call and message that we are in dire need to take a closer look at both. If our expression of God's reign makes us comfortable, this should raise a "red flag" for us!

As individuals, we have not attained the full knowledge of God in Christ Jesus. As Paul states, we must "press on" toward the greater reality that is yet beyond our grasp.<sup>2</sup> As the corporate expression of the believing community, we must likewise "press on" toward becoming the communal body of Christ. When we become comfortable in our expression of doctrine and practice, we have simply become smug and arrogant, lacking in the humility necessary to fulfill our calling.

Overcoming theological dissonance may require a great deal of emotional energy and courage. It is no meager task to evaluate one's tradition seriously and retain the positive aspects of that tradition without discarding the tradition's usefulness and contribution toward forming the very individual or group offering an evaluation. One must bear in mind that the traditions we have received were once designed by others grappling with applying the gospel to their own context. While there may have been errors in either application or understanding, we may be certain that our own establishment of traditions will also present both misunderstanding and misapplication. Our challenge is to retain the good and strive toward continued maturity. Maturity comes as we recognize our theological dissonance and address it proactively.

**Forms and Purposes:** In some instances, studying ecclesiology will uncover certain organizational forms, structures, or offices that are different from those of current practice. In such cases, one should evaluate the purpose of the form, structure, office, or program described. It may be that alternate means are being applied to accomplish the purpose being addressed, in full agreement with Biblical teaching. In these cases, there is no overriding need to change the current structure, as long as it is fulfilling its objective in accordance with Biblical teaching.

In other cases, some organizational form, structure, or office may use methods that are very similar to the Biblical models. One should then look again at the purpose to be accomplished. A form or structure may capture the essence of its purpose, just as it may never come close to accomplishing its goal. One should define the goal behind a specific practice or structural form to determine whether or not it is accomplishing its purpose effectively, for the change in cultural context may cause a loss of effectiveness. In other cases, while a structure may not be prejudicial, it may not be contributing to the growth of the Reign of God. If this is the case, one should be sure that the structure has a definite purpose and that this purpose is consistent with the mission of the church, not bleeding off its energy and resources.

**Gospel and Moral Issues:** In the current age in which we live, "life as we have known it" is being shaken up in unexpected ways. There are many moral issues that are under current discussion in the United States

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<sup>2</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:11-12; Philippians 3:7-10.

that have never been seriously questioned before. For the majority of the church culture, the current discussion is very uncomfortable, and we are tempted to respond in retreat, claiming that such issues have never before been debated or deemed as acceptable. Rather than addressing the issues, our tendency is to throw up protectionistic barriers.

Most Baptists would agree that homosexuality is aberrant and sinful. We would also agree that God loves sinners. The more difficult part of the discussion is detailing how to receive one we deem as sinful and whose sin makes us uncomfortable. In another context, the discussion caused a rift in a church when seminary students witnessed to prostitutes and invited them to church. Certain personal histories make us uncomfortable, even while we recognize the grace and love of God. The challenge of the gospel on moral issues is for the church to address the issues of sin, and yet reach out in love to extend God's acceptance when we feel uncomfortable.

It is easy for the church to speak of God's love, grace, and faith. It is quite another thing to confront the world while accepting people into our fellowship who bring us discomfort. We can fellowship with people who gossip. We can share food with people who are not always truthful. We can forgive people who use harsh language or fail to share their material possessions with those in need. We are more uncomfortable in addressing issues that have simply been taboo in our midst. If we are serious about living up to Biblical standards for the Christian community, we will have to address some of these issues head on. If we simply condemn, we are not living in accord to the will of Christ Jesus.

## ***Special Concepts in Ecclesiology:***

In the study of ecclesiology, certain concepts need to be highlighted. Perhaps the most important concept is that of the "Reign of God". This concept is also central to eschatology, but must be dealt with in ecclesiology, for it is central to the purposes for the study. Its application in terms of the life of the church and the people of God on the earth is essential to defining purpose and mission. Subsequently, one should deal with the concept of purpose and mission, for Jesus did not leave behind an organization, but a mission for his disciples to accomplish. After dealing with these two primary concepts, a good look at the nature of the church is appropriate. We will also focus some attention on the structures and organizational issues of allowing God's reign to take full hold of our lives.

## **The Reign of God:**

The authentic church exists to be the concrete expression of God's Reign upon the earth. It is in the life of the church—the people of God—that the reign of Christ takes form and action. The concept of God's Reign is the central theme in the study of eschatology.<sup>3</sup> It is in the church, however, that this reign has its beginning and its initial fulfillment. This will therefore be a central theme in our study of the church, for to miss adequately understanding the reign of God in the life of the church is to lose sight of what the church is all about.

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<sup>3</sup> MILNE, 259. Eschatology: study of the final things (end times, death, resurrection, judgement, heaven, hell, etc.).  
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### **Active Reign:**

Throughout the Bible, the use of the concept of God's Kingdom is active in character. It is used primarily to stress God's rule as sovereign King. On speaking of God's kingdom, then, the Biblical writers emphasize the action of God's rule, rather than the geographical sphere over which God's sovereignty comes into play.<sup>4</sup>

"In the New Testament, the kingdom of God is principally His reign in the lives of those who submit themselves to His authority."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the phrase "kingdom of God" can be defined as God's "government *in action*,"<sup>6</sup> or the "reign of God."<sup>7</sup> Too often we have focused our attention of the kingdom of God as a future theocratic expression of God's reign along the patterns of political authority structures. This study will use the phrase "reign of God," in an attempt to redirect our focus onto God's activity in our daily lives, beyond and despite the categories of political power.

### **Definition:**

The phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" refer to precisely the same thing. "'Heaven,' in the first century, was a common synonym for 'God' among pious Jews, who considered that God's name was too holy to be pronounced."<sup>8</sup> They understood Leviticus 24:16 to prohibit them from pronouncing God's name to avoid judgement.<sup>9</sup> The terms for heaven in Hebrew and Greek, "צְמִימָה" and "οὐρανοσ" are used in basically three different ways in the Bible." They refer to the physical structure of the universe, to God as a synonym, and to the place of God's dwelling.<sup>10</sup> Looking at Luke 15:18, one can clearly see that reference is made specifically to God, not to the structural expanse above the clouds, for the son had sinned against the commandments of God.

### **Reality under Development:**

God's reign is not a reality that simply draws near during the context of Jesus' earthly ministry, for it has also become a concrete reality.<sup>11</sup> One would be hard pressed to define with precision the date of inauguration of God's reign, but the Feast of Pentecost—the feast of first fruits—can be pointed to as its inauguration. One should note that Luke never uses the term *ekklesia* in his gospel, but he uses the term throughout Acts. It is in the description of Pentecost that Luke apparently sees God's reign as being inaugurated in the lives of the disciples. It is here that he begins using the term *ekklesia* to designate those who accept God's rule in their lives, accepting Jesus as Christ (*xristos*—"anointed", "lord", or "king").<sup>12</sup> Here, the reign of God has a tool or concrete expression in the church that arises. This church is the tool of God's reign, taking the gospel of God's reign before all nations, in conformity with Acts 1:8.

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<sup>4</sup>NEWMAN, (Mt 3:2).

<sup>5</sup> Brooks in HEMPHILL, 21. See Matthew 6:10; Mark 10:21, 23, 26; and John 3:3.

<sup>6</sup> MILNE, 259

<sup>7</sup> MOODY, 516.

<sup>8</sup> MILNE, 260 and HAGNER, 48.

<sup>9</sup> BERKHOF, 48.

<sup>10</sup> ERICKSON, *CT*, 1226.

<sup>11</sup> Brooks in HEMPHILL, 26.

<sup>12</sup> This is the term of contention that arises between Christians and Rome, as they are accused of having a Christ other than Caesar. The Greek term for lord was used as a designation of loyal allegiance, except in phrases such as "my lord."

It is common for some confusion to exist with respect to God's rule, especially as regards time. In the gospels, the reign of God is dealt with simultaneously as present and future, even though it is mostly cast in the context of an expectant future:

*[Matthew 12:28 and Luke 11:20] apparently indicate that the kingdom is not only near, but has already arrived. ... The kingdom was near in the sense that it had not been consummated; it was present in that the power of God that characterizes it had begun to manifest itself in the words and deeds of Jesus and continues to do the same in the church.<sup>13</sup>*

When the Bible speaks of epochs after the earthly ministry of Jesus, there is much less futuristic thought attached to the concept of God's reign than during Jesus' life. While God's rule is understood as a present reality, there is still hope of a future complement to that reality. God's reign as experienced in the lives of believers became the basis for understanding the greater reality to come. God's grace poured out in the earthly existence of the believing community served as the foundation of future hope. Rather than relegating God's reign to a future time, the believers understood that they had already been ushered into the presence of God. This expression of hope arose from the reality Jesus had already brought about in their presence.

*"The Christian confession is not only that Jesus will come at the end of history, but that Christ has already come; not only that salvation awaits the believer in the eschatological future, but that salvation is already experienced, in an anticipated manner, but real, in the here and now, in the midst of problems and not only at their end. ... The present is molded not only by the past, but also by the future of God."<sup>14</sup>*

God's reign is not limited to eschatological concerns and the awaiting of a new day that is still to come. Per Jesus' declarations, His reign has already become a reality within the bounds of human history.<sup>15</sup> God already reigns among the people, even if not by the political or theocratic means akin to the Sinai covenant. The people of Israel greatly emphasized the question of living directly under *Yahweh's* rule, but one can easily see that such a reality never was completely accomplished.

### ***Political Concepts:***

When the multitudes wanted to make Jesus their king, He refused, since the idea was contrary to the purpose and direction of His ministry.<sup>16</sup> Jesus spoke to the disciples of the contrary definitions of greatness and power within the structures of His reign.<sup>17</sup> Before Pilate, Jesus denied again that His reign would be on the order of the kingdoms of this world.<sup>18</sup> Jesus' reign was and is an internal issue. It is not on the order of a national power structure.<sup>19</sup> John the Baptist called the Jewish people to become children of Abraham and to trust no longer in their external national heritage.<sup>20</sup> Jesus took the concept further, completely rejecting the identification of Messiah with political kingship.<sup>21</sup> He emphasized the acceptability of those rejected by the powers of society<sup>22</sup> and the transformation of the individual from the inside.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Brooks in HEMPHILL, 28-29.

<sup>14</sup> BORING, 33.

<sup>15</sup> MILNE, 260.

<sup>16</sup> John 6:5-15. The concept here is actually closer to one of the temptations he faced in the wilderness (Matthew 4:8-10).

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 9:33-37; John 13:12-20.

<sup>18</sup> John 18:30-38.

<sup>19</sup> Luke 17:20-21 and Romans 14.17.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 3:1-12.

<sup>21</sup> Luke 7:18-23.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 18:1-27.

In like manner, the body of the church must reflect the internal commitment of each individual to become and participate corporately in being the people within whose lives God reigns. This internal commitment is primary to applying the reign of God to one's life. The church subsequently becomes the corporate expression of the members or citizens of God's reign. ***The church is NOT the reign of God, nor does it encapsulate God's reign. It is the means or vehicle for extending God's reign.*** God's reign in human life creates the community of those in whose lives God's rule is becoming reality. This is the community that we call "church."

### ***Corporate Vehicle:***

Biblical faith is not inherently institutional,<sup>24</sup> but it is undoubtedly corporate<sup>25</sup> even while it is individual.<sup>26</sup> It is in this corporate context that the reign of God exists in the world. God's reign begins in one's private life, but it goes forward and grows in its context of community. "The relationship between the church and Christ is truly very intimate; it is a kind of organic unity, in which we all unite with Him in our lives and in our beings."<sup>27</sup> One can speak of this union in individual terms, but the Bible also speaks seriously of this union in relation to the entire body of the *ekklesia* of God.

The advent of secularism and the rugged individualism of American history have distanced the church from a good understanding of the social or corporate imperatives of the gospel. The distinction between clergy and laity in our underlying historical traditions has further severed the corporate bond so clearly visible in the New Testament witness. Per Paul's writings, we are all one body. In this vein, he calls upon the Corinthian fellowship to remember those in Palestine who were suffering from famine.<sup>28</sup> It is to this understanding that John points believers to become vehicles for the expression of God's love to those in need.<sup>29</sup>

This body of *ekklesia* transcends our denominational and local limitations of community. Even in Jesus' day, God's reign included many who were outside the official structures and communities of faith.<sup>30</sup> If Jesus' words of inclusion were difficult for his disciples and other Jews of the day to accept, we may find their application no easier in the context of our own definitions of corporate faith structures.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Jesus and God's Reign:***

Jesus preached continuously about the reign of God. Consequently, God's reign is a special theme of the synoptic gospels, but especially Matthew, which contains a third of the New Testament references to the reign of God/heaven.<sup>32</sup> The disciples continued the theme of God's reign, as can be seen by the preservation of the teaching in the synoptics. For Jesus, the issues were urgent. He wanted to prepare the

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew 5:1-7.29.

<sup>24</sup> See section ahead on Ecclesiastic Institutionalism, on page 33.

<sup>25</sup> MILNE, 216.

<sup>26</sup> See the Biblical examples of Abraham, Joseph, Joshua, Gideon, David, Elijah, and Elishah who stood out from the communities around them, living a personal religious reality in contrast with the normative cultic and corporate practices.

<sup>27</sup> MILNE, 218.

<sup>28</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 16:1-3.

<sup>29</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> John 3:16-24.

<sup>30</sup> John 10:14-16.

<sup>31</sup> The Corinthian (and apparently Gentile) church seems to have struggled with the same issues of inclusion, mainly along lines of social differences.

<sup>32</sup> Brooks in HEMPHILL, 23.

disciples for this life. “The reign of God was coming, and the only aspect that was specifically stressed was that of repentance.... In comparison with the kingdom [of God], nothing really has value.”<sup>33</sup>

Jesus’ emphasis on God’s reign sought to clarify and respond to two essential errors—the judicial sense of preoccupation with the world to come as divorced from living out the principles of God’s reign, and the politicized messianic expectations of the day. The emphasis of Jesus’ teaching does not fall upon rites of initiation into God’s reign, but on living the quality of life expressed in the phrase “life of the ages.”<sup>34</sup>

The essential element of this “life of the ages,” is its declared emphasis on dependence upon God to supply all the needs of those who give themselves in service to God’s reign. Entrance into this reign was very important in Jesus’ teaching, but mainly in the sense of alerting the individual to be sure of entering God’s reign. The bulk of Jesus’ teaching on God’s reign was on the quality or character of life under God’s rule. He spoke of the kind of life that will endure the ages to come.

First century Jews seeking a political expression of the Kingdom of God, found no solace in Jesus’ words. His characterization of life under God’s reign was diametrically opposed to the demands of political freedom and dominance over their Roman oppressors. Living a life given into God’s hands is the salvation that Jesus offers. The reign of God has begun, but it does not end on this side of the tomb. Salvation is not only futuristic—it offers the means to live in the present under the divine lordship, enjoying intimate fellowship with God. The life of the ages has already begun to be visible and witnessed in the life of the people who enter into God’s reign. On the other side of death it is simply more vivid and more direct.

In other parts of the New Testament, direct teaching regarding God’s reign is not as common. It is the application of living under God’s reign, however, that leads to teaching on the moral, ethical, and practical aspects of kingdom living. Living the life of God’s reign is the underpinning of the letters and teachings of Paul, Peter, John, and James.<sup>35</sup> In Revelation, one finds a message regarding the semi-visible reign of Christ, as being an even greater reality than the visible rule of the imperial government. The message of Revelation is a call to respect Christ’s reign with all sincerity, even though it may not seem as apparent and visible as the powers of earthly political structures.

### ***Response to Messianic Expectations:***

One should always bear in mind that Jesus’ teaching regarding the reign of God was a response to Jewish messianic concepts of an earthly political kingdom. The Sadducees of the day still held that there was no afterlife.<sup>36</sup> The desire of the disciples in Acts 1:6 was the cry of the Jew who awaited the independence of the nation from their Roman oppressors: “Lord (*xristos*, anointed), is this the time that you return sovereignty to Israel?” Even after the resurrection, it was difficult for the disciples to accept and understand the non-political character of the messianic reign of Christ. Jesus had taught extensively on the subject, but they still had not understood. Jesus had told Pilate that His kingdom was not earthly, but it was a difficult message for the disciples to grasp.

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<sup>33</sup> ERICKSON, *OCnE*, 22.

<sup>34</sup> “Life of the ages” is my translation of what is normally rendered as “eternal life.” The Greek phrase technically is best rendered as “life of the ages.” A specific term for “eternal” is not used, as that is not a Hebrew concept. The emphasis Jesus makes with the phrase seems to stress the quality of this life, rather than its quantity. It is the kind of life that endures the ages of time.

<sup>35</sup> In Greek, the name is Jacob ( ). Tradition renders it in English as James, in deference or tribute to King James of England, designating his a “Christian” name.

<sup>36</sup> Acts 23:6-8.

It is too easy to criticize the disciples, for we can easily see that there has been no inauguration of a theocratic nation with Jesus acting as political King. The Vatican has attempted to enact this reality through the pope, but it failed to gain the worldwide political power it sought in centuries past. Even so, it is difficult for us to comprehend this reign of God, for we are wont to insist on describing it in terms of human political history. Jesus taught of God's reign as an internal reality—a life given completely to the care and guidance of God. One enters this divine reign by accepting the pact, or covenant, offered by Christ Jesus. The demands of this reign are contrary to the values of the societies in which we live, for its values are relational and spiritual, not material, physical, or institutional.

### ***Relationship:***

God's reign hinges on a relationship of dependence upon God as a loving father. It depends upon obedience and the disposition to free one's life from bondage to ego, seeking to give greater importance to others. It is a relationship of confidence and release—release from bondage to self-service, granting the opportunity to serve one's neighbor in love and sincerity, trusting God to fulfill one's needs.

The faithful disciple can serve and give of self to others, for the disciple's life no longer belongs to self, but to God. If one's life belongs to God rather than self, one can more easily forgive an offense, for there is no more need to defend personal privileges or rights. All privilege belongs to God, and God needs no protecting. One whose life belongs fully to God can offer a cloak, walk an extra mile, turn the other cheek, and even heap burning coals to aid an enemy in the re-kindling of a needed fire. This is possible, for the effort is an extension of one's service to God, using God's own resources. The citizen of Christ's reign can offer life in service to others, for one has passed from owner to steward of God's blessings. As Christ's reign does not belong to this world, the citizen of Christ's reign accepts participation and belonging to another world and another level of life and values.

### ***Co-existent Reality:***

The reign of Christ is difficult to define, for it is like the true worship of Elijah, one of seven thousand who had not bowed a knee to Baal, even when the nation as a whole was idolatrous. The King of Israel did not live in faithfulness, but *Yahweh* still reigned in the lives of some. Two kingdoms existed side by side in Israel, but only some could enjoy the reality of God's reign. It is this quality of rule that Jesus inaugurated. He cared not for the external, but for the internal choice to follow God in faithfulness, confidence, and dependence.

The reign of God in Christ has been inaugurated. It is time to opt for heavenly or Godly citizenship. It is a citizenship to be prized and lived both now and forever more. We must look inside to find God's reign. It begins with the changing of our attitudes—the immeasurable internals of a life given to the Lordship of Christ.

This is the concept within the celebrated Sermon on the Mount—God's rule in our hearts such as to change our attitudes and actions in a radical manner. Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount set forth the identity and quality of life under God's direction. "The reign of God is like..." was Jesus' general pattern of introducing the shocking realities of God's will as contrasted to the standard concept of the day. The reality of God's reign is still shocking. God's way are not our ways, even though we tend to claim to live under God's rule and authority.

If the church is to be the vehicle for expressing God's reign upon the earth, we must recognize the distinctive quality of as expressed in Jesus' teaching on God's reign. These are not always comforting to religious society, for they are often at odds with our own desires, attitudes, morays, and routines. We are challenged by Christ to allow God's reign to break through into our lives.

## **Mission:**

If God's reign is an important concept in studying ecclesiology, "mission" is essential to applying God's reign to real life. God's reign necessarily involves allowing God to fulfill His mission among and through those who place themselves under God's lordship. It is the acceptance of the mission with its responsibilities that introduces an individual to God's reign. There is a dual focus of the mission as it relates to the reign of God: the internal aspect of the mission—personal application of instruction and life under God's reign, and its external aspect—taking the news of God's reign to those still living on the outside. Between these two foci lies the corporate mission to equip and strengthen the body to fulfill both the internal and external aspects of mission.

### ***Internal Mission:***

The internal aspect of the church's mission seeks to prepare the individual for its outward focus. This preparation is active, as can be seen in Jesus' model, sending out disciples on more than one occasion to fulfill the requirements of the external mission. It is worthwhile noting that these disciples were seemingly less than qualified, especially as after the resurrection they were still reluctant to accept the necessity of Jesus' death. In the midst of the process of discipleship, however, even with all of their failings, Jesus sent them out more than once to take the good news of God's reign ahead of Him. They went out announcing that God's reign was at hand for those who would trust God. Even the Gerasene demoniac was sent to preach throughout the whole region of Decapolis (a region of ten cities), with no special preparation.<sup>37</sup> We might consider that ludicrous, but Jesus apparently trusted God to work in spite of the failings of the envoys.

### ***External Mission:***

Dealing with the external aspect of the church's mission, Moody states that mission could be summarized in three special aspects: "as *martyria* (witness), *diakonia* (service), and *koinonia* (fellowship)."<sup>38</sup> These are the three essential elements that serve as the basis for understanding and fulfilling the church's mission. The first of these terms should be understood broadly enough as to include the process of discipleship, "teaching them all that I have commanded you."<sup>39</sup>

A note is in order to distinguish between the terms "mission" and "missions." "Mission" deals with the church's *raison d'être*, its purpose in the world. Mission is a concept of supreme importance to ecclesiology. As Moltmann observed, "it is not the church that has a mission, but the inverse: the mission of Christ created the church. It is not the mission of the church that needs to be understood, but the

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<sup>37</sup> Mark 3-6. The term used is "proclaim," the use of which is essentially the same as the English term "preach." The context determines the meaning of "witness," though it simultaneously implies a broader sense of announcing the good news in the region of the Decapolis.

<sup>38</sup> MOODY, 428.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew 28:20.

opposite.”<sup>40</sup> More than leaving behind a church, Jesus left a task to be fulfilled by the disciples. This mission generates structures to enable the disciples to fulfill their purpose. Without its mission, the church has no reason to exist.

### ***Mission and God's Reign:***

The church's God-given mission is to bring Christ's reign to bear within the parameters of history. Though the concept of missions is tied intimately to the church's mission, it is a different concept. "Missions" refers to the methods used to take the external mission of the church among all peoples of the world. The church's mission includes the maturing and discipling of the individual and of the local church as a body. Though the missionary task is to "disciple the nations," the concept of "missions" always reflects the sending of workers. The mission of the church, on the other hand, is more global, in that it includes the missionary task as a portion of its purpose or mission. The mission does not specifically demand the sending of workers, but fulfilling the purpose of discipling the nations by whatever means necessary.

### ***Centrality of Witness:***

Returning to Moody's comment regarding the three aspects of mission, the concept of witness should take center focus in one's application. "Witness is the primary mission of the church in all situations."<sup>41</sup> This witness includes testimony to the person and ministry of Christ, as well as the other aspects of the application of Christ's message in the entire context of His ministry. This witness is then applied partly through Christian service, as well as in the context of Christian fellowship. The triple focus of the mission is united around this primary aspect of witnessing to Christ, including under this witness the entire process of discipling the hearer.

The church's mission should be studied seriously, for it should be the compass and the measuring rod for every aspect of church life and structure. Jesus words as recorded in Matthew 28 and Acts 1 require the church to fulfill its mission to disciple the nations. This is the church's mission: to witness to Christ, discipling all nations. The role of the witness described in Acts 1:8 has the same force as the concept of making disciples in Matthew 28. In fact, the passages are two descriptions of the same words of Jesus on the same occasion. The witness and discipleship specified include all of Jesus' teaching being carried into every ethnic and geographic limit. The church's mission must guide every effort, directing every activity and structure as aids toward fulfilling the purpose Christ left the church.

### ***Missional Identity:***

As we focus on different aspects of the church, it is the church's mission to which we must constantly return. Looking at the nature of the church, one will see that it is the church's mission—its reason to exist—that explains its nature. The church exists to carry out its mission. Its mission gives the church its identity, its function. It provides the foundational direction the church needs in order to build a structure. As we turn our focus onto the nature of the church, it is the mission of embodying the reign of God that will undergird the direction of our focus and study. The nature of the church arises out of the mission Jesus left the disciples.

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<sup>40</sup> Moltmann in URETA, 189.

<sup>41</sup> MOODY, 429.

The life of the church must surrender to the fulfillment of its mission. It must not allow culture, society, comfort, media, politics, education, economics or other issues to sidetrack it from carrying out its purpose. The gospel of redemption in Christ requires that the church live out the life transformation of surrender to the lordship of Christ. The reign of God must rule every aspect of the life of the body, focusing its energy on fulfilling the mission left to the church. Fulfilling the mission requires the church to be prophetic rather than complacent. Mission requires living and speaking true to the purpose to which God has called the body. Loving the world requires being true to sharing the gospel of surrender—fulfilling the task of calling all nations into discipleship.<sup>42</sup>

## **Body of Christ:**

Before dealing with the category of the “Nature of the Church,” something needs to be said about the church as the body of Christ. The church exists as the “Body of Christ” halfway between the mission left by Christ and the nature of its very existence.

As the Body of Christ, the church is the corporal expression of God’s continuing presence upon the earth. We are called to herald God’s presence and incarnate God in many ways as Jesus did. This does not mean that we are God or emanations from God. It is the natural outcome of the fact that the Breath of the Holy One lives within those who accept God’s rule in their lives. This union with God is to play out into our daily existence, reflecting the fact of God’s presence and care in the world.

The church is corporately the body of Christ—both as mediator of God’s presence and as vehicle for God’s manifestation. In Paul’s words, we are the dwelling place of God, the temple through which God becomes visible and tangible. Likewise, it is through the church that God’s will is accomplished upon the earth. As Jesus promised to be with us,<sup>43</sup> so we are ever to be portraying the presence of God.

As we seek to embody Christ, we must look to Jesus ministry and teaching. Being Christ’s body is not simply defining ourselves as belonging to Christ and bound for heaven. The Great Commission makes clear that we are to be about the process of extending the ministry of Jesus in word and in deed. It is our challenge as the Body of Christ to represent our Lord through discipling the nations. In Matthew, these words are couched in terms of conversion and instruction.<sup>44</sup> The charge is to convert individuals to Christ as Lord, then to teach them to observe the whole of Christ’s teaching.

It is significant that Matthew turns this specifically to action—“teaching them to observe (obey/keep) all that I have commanded you.”<sup>45</sup> This is, by definition, not simply a mandate to transmit a cognitive body of knowledge about God. This is command is to observe Jesus’ teaching—to apply those teachings to one’s life. This being the case, it is imperative for us as the Body of Christ to determine what those life-application teachings are, in order to fulfill this part of the commandment.

As evangelical Christians, we have rather generally failed on this point. We have looked to general moral teachings, but have focused (at least in recent history) mainly upon conversion with little more than a

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<sup>42</sup> MYERS.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 28:20.

<sup>44</sup> For further explanation of baptism as conversion, see discussion on Baptism, page 39.

<sup>45</sup> Matthew 28:19.

general teaching on morality to go with that conversion message. A brief survey of the main character of Jesus' teaching ministry is, therefore, in order.

In Luke 7 (Matthew 11), Jesus characterizes his ministerial identity for John the Baptist in relation to the anticipation of the prophets who anticipated the coming Day of the Lord, but principally Isaiah 61.<sup>46</sup> For Jesus, this was the central concept of His identity and teaching. He had come to defend the poor and oppressed, show compassion to those in need, and generally declare God's love and acceptance for all. He preached to the poor and despised, healed those deemed to be under God's curse, and lived out the call to faithfulness proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' teaching ministry was consistent with his life of faithfulness to the ethic and dependence upon God that He proclaimed. He spoke of God's love and applied the same to people in need.

To be the presence of Christ, we must embody the full character and quality of Christ's teaching and example. We are to shine as lights in the darkness, proclaiming to the world that God is present in our midst. Our life of example should proclaim God's care for those who are oppressed, persecuted, empty, and lacking the power to fend for themselves. The Old Testament spoke of the widow, orphan, and foreigner as the quintessential powerless of society. Fighting for their protection and rights was emblematic of seeking justice for all. Jesus took this a step further by taking full acceptance to those outcasts or undesired by society. He preached to them the gospel of God's love and acceptance, granting them grace, forgiveness, and care for their needs.

Jesus charged the disciples to take up the same care for others that they had seen in Jesus. The essence of God's reign is to treat others with deference, taking care of their needs and valuing them over our own. That is the essence of Jesus' teaching on the greatest commandments, as well as His definition of greatness within the Reign of God.<sup>47</sup> If the greatest commandments are love, and greatness is serving others, this must also be the central motif in being the presence and Body of Christ. Such will require that we lay aside personal concerns in order to live for the benefit of others. As a parent sets aside personal desires to meet the needs of a child, so is the Body of Christ called to minister to others who are in need, even though it might cause personal discomfort.

One hallmark of the unity of the Body of Christ in the early church was the mixing of classes in a manner that was totally foreign to the Greco-Roman world. In the New Testament context, there was virtually no mixing among social classes. Luke, however, records a theme of wealthy individuals receiving and sharing their material blessing with the less-fortunate, including the warm hospitality of such as Lydia.<sup>48</sup> In Christ, these differences dissipated. Paul states this unequivocally, reminding the believers that there is no longer distinction between slave and free, Jew and Greek, male and female. His rationale is that in Christ we have become one body, and are, therefore, part of one another.<sup>49</sup> We have a new identity, and it is a communal identity.

With this in mind, we turn to discussion of the nature of the church. This nature arises out of the mission left by Jesus to all disciples. It also arises out of the church's identity as the body of Christ. If the church is to represent God's very presence and action in the world, we are to live according to the will, character, and purposes of God. Individually and corporately, we are the expression of God, God's image in

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<sup>46</sup> Isaiah 29, 35, 42, 61; Micah 4; Malachi 3-4.

<sup>47</sup> Matthew 22:34-40; 20:25-28.

<sup>48</sup> WILLIMON, 138.

<sup>49</sup> Galatians 3:28.

accordance with Genesis 1:26. In this passage, the context proclaims humanity as the image of God in relation to our function of being God's stand-in within creation. We are tasked with being fruitful, multiplying, filling the earth, and exercising dominion over creation as the expression of God's will. We are then stewards, mediators of God's presence, action, and will.

This is not a role to be taken lightly. This is not grounds for expressing our own desires as though they were the desires of Christ. This is not grounds for claiming Godly authority for our personal decisions. This is a charge to represent God to the best of our abilities, allowing God to live through us. In this, Jesus is the role model that we are to follow. As Jesus expressed corporally the will, character, and identity of God, so is our charge as the Body of Christ. We are called to be the corporal corporate expression of God in the world.

As the Body of Christ, we should remember that we are the singular Body of Christ, not one of many. This means that we are a body that transcends denominational and organizational barriers, practices, doctrines, and definitions. If we would accept that there are those outside of our own denominations who yet belong to Christ, we must likewise remember that they participate with us in being the corporate expression of Christ's presence in the world.

## Nature of the Church:

*Where, then, is the 'true' church amid the diversity of so many churches? The church is one because Christ is one. Those who are bound to Christ are bound to His church and to each other. The church is diverse because no one community of faith or communion of belief, no one congregation or denomination, can fulfill all the gospel, all at once.<sup>50</sup>*

There is a certain tension to be maintained between the church in the sense of its local expression and universal identity, for the local congregation is the corporate expression of the one church in a given locale. It is the expression of the one church wherever it may be found.<sup>51</sup> The local church is the expression of the whole—the universal church—and at the same time its partial expression.

*Diverse forms of the church exist, not because the gospel is relative or 'watered down' to fit every possible circumstance, but because it is relevant, responsive to the diverse needs of persons, cultures, and societies. ... What is the church? In brief, it is a historical community which begins its life in God and is founded on Jesus Christ. It witnesses to His gospel in its worship, and faith, work, and memory. Through its witness in word and servanthood it points beyond itself to Christ. ... The church is constantly in process. It is a bride being prepared for Christ (2 Cor. 11:2); it is a community of pilgrims, chosen, but not yet complete, ever moving toward the promise of the kingdom of God. ... To ask the question 'What is the church?' ... is to seek 'for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God' (Heb. 11:10, KJV).<sup>52</sup>*

Something was said about the nature of the church while defining the terms for church. This study will focus on the church in its universal sense, using the local congregation as a place to emphasize application and making concepts concrete. The church is a living organism, the gathering of saints, the people of God on the face of the earth. Not every member of a local church belongs, and not every one that does not

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<sup>50</sup> LEONARD, 11.

<sup>51</sup> STAGG, 184.

<sup>52</sup> LEONARD, 11, 14-15.

belong to a local church is outside the church universal. As a general definition, we will work with the following concept for church: *"a body of believers who evidence a relationship of dependence (faith) on Christ Jesus, joining together to carry out their God-given mission."*

### **Universal:**

The church is much more than a local congregation, and it is much more than a structure or an institution. We will use the picture of the local congregation as a concrete aid for visualizing the concept, remembering that one must look beyond the institutional, structural, and formal aspects of church. Every structure and organization developed can be beneficial, but it must always relate to the purpose of the church, the mission which gives rise to the church's true nature. The Bible does not establish an organizational system for the church, nor does it militate against elaborating one. What it does offer is a mission to be accomplished.

### **Unity:**

It is this mission that should unite the church more than any other aspect of its nature. It was for this reason, for example, that Baptist churches from their inception began to relate together in associations, societies, and convention. They recognized their need to join together for mutual cooperation in carrying out the tasks that a local church had difficulty fulfilling without external aid. It was also along these lines that cooperation becomes necessary among denominations to jointly fulfill certain aspects of the mission of the church.

The ideal of unity for the church will never be achieved completely on earth, due in part to the various theological and doctrinal positions taken by various component groups of the church. These differences initially arise as a result of human incapacity for fully comprehending the Bible as a whole, as well as human limitation for fully understanding the will of infinite God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus' words are not only poignant to the two disciples on the road to Emaus, but are equally appropriate for all believers in every age: "O stubborn and slow of heart to trust all that the prophets said!"<sup>53</sup>

It is this gathering of the slow to trust God that forms the community of faith we call church. We may need to remember that Christ did not leave behind a structured organization, but a loosely-knit community of disciples who acknowledged Jesus as the Christ. This community of faith grew into a body, but lived much more as a community than as an organization. Their faith reality was communal, but not organizational. While they came together on the basis of individual decision, their faith was corporate, not individualistic in nature. They lived together in interdependence and mutuality. It was this communal mutuality that gained the disciples the respect of Jewish society in their period of greatest growth.<sup>54</sup> From this communal understanding of the body of Christ, Paul deals with churches and individuals from the perspective that the members of Christ do not have "private business," for they belong to a greater reality that claims them.<sup>55</sup>

Striving toward the goal of unity, it is up to the local church and its individual members to define the point at which there may be cooperation and involvement with those whose who hold to different perspectives.<sup>56</sup> Within the local church, there is some of the same need, though one would hope that the individuals of a same congregation might more easily and readily cooperate among themselves. The unity hoped for is not

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<sup>53</sup> Luke 24:25

<sup>54</sup> Acts 2:43-47.

<sup>55</sup> TOLBERT, 25.

<sup>56</sup> ERICKSON, 439.

that all become equally intimate friends, but that all respect one another and seek to treat each other in love, working side-by-side as servants of Christ. Within these parameters, it is possible to live in harmony and unity in order that the church might fulfill its mission.

The unity of the church should also be seen in the context of the priesthood of every believer. As Luther affirmed, there is no room for distinctions to be made between clergy and laity.<sup>57</sup> Every member of the church must be taught to assume personal priestly responsibility before others. This responsibility includes ministering to others, even while being on the receiving end of ministry. Each one must intercede on the behalf of others and teach others, even offering correction as necessary. There is no convincing reason to limit these functions to an official clergy, for the responsibilities of discipleship are for all.<sup>58</sup> They are functions of the church. The underlying reason behind pastoral ordination should principally be the confirmation of confidence in one's ministerial vocation. No particular powers or privileges are conferred by ordination, just heightened responsibility.

Tolbert describes the gospel of grace in Christ as promoting unity within the body, whereas a gospel based on knowledge inherently creates division.<sup>59</sup> This might be seen in the Gnostic controversy within early Christianity, as well as in the current emphases within the Southern Baptist Convention, in which definitions of "spiritual knowledge," or doctrine, are the basis of defining cooperation and disfellowship on individuals and groups. Grace calls us to unity, joining beyond our understanding and comfort, whereas definitions of truth tend toward dissension, division, and what Paul would call "party spirit" (following good King James English). By contrast, 1<sup>st</sup> John calls the body to unity in love and the application of love toward others. John would define for us that it is specifically our expression of love and unity that proclaims to the world our participation in Christ Jesus.<sup>60</sup>

### ***Division of Labor:***

Pastoral responsibilities should not be seen as the exclusive privilege of the ordained. The mission of the church belongs to all the church. The church may call individuals to carry out specific functions, but this calling does not eliminate the responsibility of the rest. Ordination is a "public means by which one is commissioned on the basis of prayer, Scripture, and laying on of hands, in order to serve the congregation."<sup>61</sup> It is interesting to note that the New Testament describes only the ordination or commissioning of deacons and missionaries, but not of priests, pastors, or even apostles.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Figures:***

Something of the nature of the church is reflected in the following figures: people of God, body of Christ, bride of Christ, wife of God, temple of the Holy Spirit, saints, elect, children (sons) of God, branches of the vine (olive tree), field, garden, building, priesthood, holy nation, lights, column of truth, laborers of

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<sup>57</sup> GEORGE, 96-98.

<sup>58</sup> See John 15:1-6, where all are to bear fruit if they are to participate in Christ. Those excused from bearing fruit are likewise excluded from Christ. The picture of fruit here is spiritual reproduction, though character building is included. This requires ministry to others.

<sup>59</sup> TOLBERT, 39.

<sup>60</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:1-21.

<sup>61</sup> GEORGE, 98.

<sup>62</sup> See Acts 6:2-6 and 13:1-5, where individuals are set apart (ordained) for specific service. This is not consecration to a ministry or service limited to a class of clergy. In Acts, the laying on of hands is related to the ordination of deacons (servants of the church in administrative roles), missionaries (Saul and Barnabas), and the receiving of the Spirit of the Holy One. Conspicuously, the selection of Matthias as an apostle is done without the laying on of hands. This should have been a more distinguished position than that of pastor, yet Luke records less formality than that of current ordination practices. In 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 5:22, the usage is uncertain, but the immediate context of the passage deals with church elders. Timothy received the laying on of hands, but he was sent as a missionary and tasked with teaching.

God's field (vineyard), citizens of God's reign, and friends of Jesus. These descriptions and metaphors are used in different ways, referring to certain aspects of the nature, ideal, or harsh daily reality of the church.

### ***Participation:***

One of the first descriptions or metaphors applied to the church is that of God's people. With this phrase, the perspective aims to focus on the relationship of dependence upon God within the confines of the established covenant. Exodus 19 sets out essential elements of this covenant and for assuming the designation of people peculiar to *Yahweh* (יהוה). In the same basic sense, the Bible uses the terms royal priesthood, holy nation, purchased people, elect nation, and in part references to participation in God's reign. These terms speak to the reality that God's purpose was to create a community of faithful through Christ.<sup>63</sup>

### ***Corporate Identity:***

In the Old Testament, the concept of church is traced in terms of the entire nation or the faithful remnant, but this idea is modified in the New Testament. Here the concept of the remnant is taken and expanded to form the basis for the new concept. The basis of the Old Testament concept of Israel as the people of God is the starting point for New Testament teaching on the people of God in Christ Jesus. As the concept is fleshed out by Jesus, one must remember its moorings in the national identity and encompassing context of the whole beyond a visible corporate expression. The nation is always much more than a specific gathering of people. All are included in the corporate identification.

### ***Relational Purity:***

The Old Testament often uses the image of a wife, often couched in the context of infidelity or prostitution. Commonly, the message tied to the issue of prostitution or sexual infidelity has a double meaning, as the idol worship of the Ancient Near East was strongly associated with orgies and the utilization of prostitutes within the temples and at the pagan altars. This was part and parcel of fertility cult worship. When the Biblical text refers to self-prostitution with other gods, it is making literal reference to sexual immorality of Israel's unfaithfulness to *Yahweh*, using the picture of a wife violating a marital relationship. It deals with sexual immorality, therefore, but the issue is faithfulness to *Yahweh*. The ideal of the church's nature as presented here regards relational purity and faithfulness before God. It is this aspect of the church's identity that is normally being highlighted with terms like wife, bride, and Temple.<sup>64</sup>

### ***Mission:***

Another group of terms reflects the church's primary role or mission. These designations like body and members of Christ reflect the church as the visible and active presence of God on Earth. The mission to extend the ministry of Christ finds reflection in terms such as branches of the vine or olive tree, laborers in the vineyard, column of truth, lights, and royal priesthood. There are also similar expressions arising from agricultural images such as harvest, field, and garden, but these often reflect the work of Christ within the lives of the individuals, along with terms like building. They are connected to comments regarding the

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<sup>63</sup> TOLBERT, 24.

<sup>64</sup> Once in a while the term "edifice" or "building" is used in the same manner.

work of Christ within and among the church. This group of terms reflects the nature of the church as highlighted in the process of its development toward fulfilling God's purpose.

While dealing with the question of continuity between Israel and the church, one should remember Jesus' parable cast to the Pharisees, in which He equates them with evil laborers, whose position and responsibility are taken from them to be given to others.<sup>65</sup> One should note that the Pharisees did understand Jesus' parable that the kingdom would be ripped out of their hands, even while they did not accept the message. Beyond this passage, one would do well to remember the statements in Isaiah to the effect of their mission to bring all the nations to serve *Yahweh*.<sup>66</sup> While the Bible leaves room for Israel to return to *Yahweh* and once more find its place within God's purposes and plans, such a reintegration depends upon the repentance and decision of the people.

The missionary message set forth by Jesus had already been expressed in the Sinai covenant, which, in turn, had basis in the purposes of God expressed in Genesis 3<sup>67</sup>—to reconcile lost and alienated humanity to God.<sup>68</sup> The concept is also implicit in David's word to Goliath.<sup>69</sup> The reason for his expecting victory was that *Yahweh* might be shown as the true, living God. The missionary aspect of God's call to Israel is clearest in the prophets such as Isaiah. In the Sinai covenant, the missionary proposal was integral to the nation's identity as the people of *Yahweh*. This condition was broken by Israel innumerable times. The only reason the nation was able to remain under the covenant was God's outpouring of mercy and grace. They had broken the covenant while still in the desert, even before entering the Promised Land.

The covenant between the people and *Yahweh* was fragile in one sense, for it ever depended upon the faithfulness of the people to obey the pact. On the other hand, it was never fragile, for it was sustained by the grace of *Yahweh*, the One granting the covenant in grace. "The term covenant ... always meant a covenant of *grace*, and agreement in which God took the initiative and determined its conditions."<sup>70</sup> It was always divine grace that initiated the covenant and that restored it when the people broke their portion of the agreement. This concept shows up throughout the Old Testament, as the people repeatedly break away from serving *Yahweh* and come back when they find themselves up against the wall. Even so, there was never any reason to impede *Yahweh* from choosing another people to take the place of Israel,<sup>71</sup> aside from the promise to Abraham. *Yahweh's* right to give up on Israel is mainly ignored, due to the history of divine insistence on re-establishing the covenant promise. Even this promise, however, does not establish with finality that the nation would always remain the people of *Yahweh*. The promise to Abraham was that he would be a blessing to the nations and that his descendants would be multiplied. The assembly of the people at Sinai with the drafting of God's covenant was conditional. The promise secured only that Abraham's descendants would multiply and become the means for God to bless all nations—conditions fully met in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>65</sup> Matthew 21:33-46.

<sup>66</sup> Isaiah 42:6-7, 49:6-12, 56:3-8, 59:19, and 61:6.

<sup>67</sup> Messianic considerations in regard to Genesis 3 are unimportant to the concept (per Calvin, Messianic interpretation of the passage is an imposition on the text), since the text emphasizes God's will to rescue humanity from its error. Upon the advent of human sin, God comes to offer restoration and meet the demands of the crisis that has resulted due to human sin.

<sup>68</sup> MOODY, 39.

<sup>69</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 17:45-47.

<sup>70</sup> MILNE, 217.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew 21:41-43, Luke 20:9-19, and John 8.

### ***Non-political Character:***

The greater part of Jewish expectancy with regard to Messiah revolved around the establishing of a political, geographical kingdom. Jesus, however, clearly declared the non-political character of God's reign.<sup>72</sup> He preached the internal rule of God within the heart, emphasizing that even the yoke of Roman oppression over Israel in His day was an issue of little consequence.<sup>73</sup> Jesus had no political interest, neither to accept political power for Himself, nor for the liberation of Israel from Roman oppression. On the other hand, he taught in various contexts of the need for the people to be faithful in serving God committedly. The reign of God in Jesus' teaching was something internal, not a question of national sovereignty, institutional structure, or any other form external to the individual. His preaching was about the inner commitment with God. Therefore, questions regarding Israel as a sovereign nation were brushed off by Jesus as irrelevant.

### ***Worship:***

Many deal with worship as part of the mission or purpose of the church. There is a problem with such a designation, flowing out of a faulty understanding of the term "worship." The Biblical concept of worship is far broader than the manner in which the term is most often used in current Christian circles. The Greek term, λατρεία (*latreia*), means service, is better translated as "serve God" than as "worship God."<sup>74</sup> Currently, the term is used most often in relation to music or formal congregational services. Hebrews 9:14 clarifies the question in the context of dead works, being compared to offering true worship to God. Hebrews emphasizes service to God, not in songs and hymns, but in the practical application of the reign of God on the basis of the salvation offered and gained in Christ Jesus.

In Revelation 4:7-11, the perspective on worship of God compares with Isaiah 6, in which the focus is expressly on the greatness and incomparability of *Yahweh* (יהוה). In this context of worship, Isaiah places himself in readiness to serve by announcing the message. This presentation for service appears to be the very purpose of the of the event described. Isaiah was brought into God's presence to enable and encourage his willingness to serve God. Isaiah sees the greatness of *Yahweh* and his consequent need to bow before the Almighty in service. Every proceeding of the event is directed toward tracing the distinction between the Creator and the fragile and dependent creature. There is no expression here of Isaiah, nor on the part of the celestial beings in Revelation as participating in any kind of spiritual trance or emotional ecstasy, even though Isaiah describes the event as a vision. The participants are brought to contemplate their need, weakness, and inadequacy before the reality of God's identity, thereby giving true praise to God.

Praise is dealt with in Isaiah as a human duty, but it is also an expression of human need, not of any divine need. God takes pleasure in worthy expressions of worship, but this pleasure does not so much reflect a need on God's part as it reflects the human need to recognize God as Absolute and Sovereign Lord. There are passages that indicate the necessity of offering praise and adoration to God in recognition of God's greatness and identity.<sup>75</sup> Even when Jesus indicates that the rocks would cry out if the people were silent, there is yet no stipulation of need on God's part to receive praise. Jesus addresses the dignity of the proclamation and the event of His entry into Jerusalem. It is creation that must praise, not that God needs

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<sup>72</sup> John 18:33-38.

<sup>73</sup> Matthew 22:15-22 and John 6:15.

<sup>74</sup> See Romans 12:1-2, in which some translations read "spiritual worship," while others render the Greek as "spiritual service." This is the basic term behind our English term "worship", though its original meaning is somewhat different from the manner we have come to use the word.

<sup>75</sup> Luke 19:38-40.

applause, but creation has an inherent need to recognize God. The reason for the exclamation on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was the recognition and proclamation of Jesus' identity as God's anointed.

### ***Service:***

Worship, therefore, in terms of service to God, is part of the mission of the church. Worship in the sense of a congregational worship service is not an integral part of the mission of the church. This type of worship, or adoration, is more closely tied to the human need and duty to reverence God and to remember God's greatness, than to any divine need to receive such adulation. *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, is far beyond needing any type of human adoration. A quick comparison between the Genesis narratives in chapters one through eleven with the Babylonian mythologies makes this very clear.

In the Babylonian narratives, the gods arrive to the sacrifices as flies or famished birds, needing to feed off the food offered in sacrifice. The Bible presents God as having no need of food, requiring instead that the mortal recognize human dependence upon God and therefore obey God's instruction. As a result, the adoration offered in praise of God is necessary due to the human need to recognize and remember God's greatness in contrast with the frailty of the human creature. The instruction to offer adoration to God has its basis in human need, not divine. The very creation already offers praise to God, as do the celestial beings. Human adoration does not go too far beyond being an aid for the very individual to remember one's personal responsibility and station before *Yahweh*, Creator of the universe.

### ***Evaluation:***

Since the church is composed of failing human beings, there is a constant need to evaluate the practices and structures it uses. These must be evaluated not only in relation to their mission, but also in regard to the ideal nature of the church. The church is a living organism, and as such must adapt to new contexts in order to remain faithful to its nature and purpose. The inquiry and concerns of the Reformation under the likes of Luther and Calvin grew out of the historical and cultural context in which the Reformers lived. There were certain abuses and errors in the practice and thought of the church in their day that needed to be corrected. Likewise, there are other errors and abuses in the present age. The correction of some errors opens up the possibility of correcting others that were not as apparent in the beginning.

Luther recognized that the people needed to have access to the Bible in a language they could understand, so he translated it into the common German of his day. That is now a difficult dialect for many German speakers to understand. Simply to address this same issue that Luther addressed, new translations became necessary for German speakers of a different era. Luther raised issue with the Roman Catholic practice of selling indulgences (paying money for forgiveness). There are yet those in our day who try to sell God's gift of salvation for a profit—not indulgences, but this is no different, either. Reform is ever necessary, for it is the nature of the people to lose sight of their calling, mission, and purpose.

### ***Exodus 19 and 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:***

In Exodus 19, God sets forth some general guidelines prior to establishing the covenant with the nation at Mount Sinai. In these guidelines lie the very purpose of the covenant that God offers to this nation. While the text outlines a general theme, it is one of the clearest passages detailing God's special mission for the people's participation in the covenant agreement. God calls the nation to mediate between *Yahweh* (יהוה) and the neighboring peoples—they are to be a nation that serves as priest to the world. This is another

description of essentially the same mission that Jesus establishes for the people of the new covenant.<sup>76</sup> There is continuity, therefore, between God's mission for the people in the Old Testament and in the New.

Verse 4 recounts how *Yahweh* had redeemed this rag-tag band out of Egyptian slavery, following that retelling with a description of the purpose behind this salvation. This band was not simply rescued from a life of slavery and its related difficulties, suffering, and oppression. The people were rescued to live a new life. They were to become *Yahweh's* special possession among all the neighboring peoples. They were rescued in order that they might serve *Yahweh* as a nation of priests—mediators between *Yahweh* and the surrounding nations. God had redeemed them in order to make them holy—separate, different from all the other nations—that they might fulfill their call to reflect the greatness of God before others.

One should highlight the fact that though the people had been freed from Egypt, but they were still a band of escapes slaves, not an organized nation. They had accepted the leadership of Moses, but they did not yet have a structure, organization, nor adequate leadership to lead the band of fugitives and transform them into a nation. These organizational aspects of their life in the desert were still being defined. *Yahweh* was still making a nation out of them. One essential step of this transformation was the question of developing a legal code or covenant that would need to be defined and accepted.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:9-10, the question of forming the people is raised again. This time, God is forming a new people for Himself within the nations of the world. As that original band of Hebrew slaves in Egypt was not yet a nation,<sup>77</sup> so also the first century Christians were not a nation. Though they were not a people, they were called to become a people. With the new identification as the people of God, the Christians were commissioned in like manner as the Hebrew band of slaves. They were given the same mission and purpose that had been given before at Mount Sinai: to mediate the presence of God before all the nations of the world. Christ calls this new band of freed people to extend God's reign among all peoples. They are not to dominate the world, but to take freedom to all the nations. They were freed for a purpose.

### **Matthew 28:**

Matthew 28:19 uses the verb “disciple” (μαθητευω) in the plural imperative form (μαθητευσατε), which corresponds to a command for the entire group of disciples gathered on the mount. The imperative here is not to go, nor is it to evangelize according to common usage of the term. The command is to disciple all nations. This task includes baptism (initiation rite confessing a new religious life or conversion) and teaching (including the day-to-day application of the full teaching of Jesus to the life of the individual).

In Baptist circles we often speak of two ordinances—baptism and the Lord's Supper. There is, however, at least one other ordinance (command) that Jesus left the church: “Disciple all the nations.” This should actually be seen as the principal ordinance that Jesus gave the church. While it appears that we know this commandment, we do not often consider its implications to our daily living. On one hand, we often say that this is the task of missions and consider that we fulfill this task by making financial contribution to missionary enterprises. On the other hand, we often say that this is the task of professional ministry, again ignoring personal responsibility with regard to this ordinance.

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<sup>76</sup> Matthew 28, 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2.

<sup>77</sup> Apparently, an unknown number of slaves of non-Abrahamic origin left Egypt along with the descendents of Jacob. The principle of safety in numbers encouraged these to flee Egypt with the departing Hebrews.

We do well to remember that Jesus' commandment is not simply a missionary task to reach nations living far away from our own locality. Nor is this a task designated as the function of a professional clergy. It is the final ordinance left by Jesus to His disciples—not simply the eleven, but all of them. There were many gathered alongside the eleven on that hilltop listening to Jesus' words. All of them were commissioned with an immense task—discipling all nations.

On the other hand, we also know that the very Breath of the Holy One<sup>78</sup> now lives in our lives, equipping us to fulfill this immense task. Let us think of the missionary context in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, where my wife and I served as missionaries for seven years. How would we go about discipling Porto Alegre (population 3½ million) in fulfillment of Jesus' ordinance? How would we go about discipling the state of Rio Grande do Sul (population 10½ million)? We can't, but God is able. The Breath of the Holy One is ready to flow within our lives and bring this task to fruition.

If discipling Rio Grande do Sul depends upon the missionaries, it is not worth getting started. If discipling Rio Grande do Sul depends upon the pastors, there will never be enough of them to do the job. We need to remember that God's commission is for each one of us. We must accept a divine perspective of the task and place ourselves at God's disposal as the living body of Christ Jesus.

How will we disciple Rio Grande do Sul? We will do it by transforming the 5,000 Baptist believers in Rio Grande do Sul into 5,000 Baptist churches in Rio Grande do Sul. We will do it by depending fully on God and accepting our responsibility and commitment to become truly faithful servants. 5,000 Baptists in Rio Grande do Sul who would dare to cast their lives at the feet of the Master might see as fruit 5,000 victorious churches, establishing the Reign of Christ among the Gaúcho people.

We will never fulfill the task by adding a few Christians to the Baptist churches in the state. Nor will we see needed results by counting on the continued effort of other evangelical denominations. We will never achieve our goal through the effort of pastors and missionaries working among the Gaúchos. Neither will we attain our goal through the existing or devising of new programs within the walls of our church buildings. We have already been working for many years with no real growth of members within these same churches.

Adding members to our churches is a positive goal, but it does not come close to reaching the goal we are to strive to attain. We will need to modify some structures and traditions to adapt our efforts in accordance with the challenge before us. Ten million Gaúchos without Christ wander outside the walls of our Baptist churches throughout the state, but the vast majority would never walk through the gates edging our properties.

“Disciple the nations” means much more than continuing on the same trajectory we are following. To disciple the nations involves a transformation of life so that we might turn to those around us who are in need of a personal relationship of dependence and trust in Christ Jesus. We will need to give over every structure to bring it into conformity with the mission we have been tasked to fulfill. This is the ordinance to

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<sup>78</sup> I use the phrase “Breath of the Holy One” as translation of the Hebrew and Greek phrases that designated divine breath, a symbol of the semi-tangible presence of God. It is my understanding that the emphasis of the phrase generally translated as “Holy Spirit” emphasizes the recognition of the very presence of God more than what we might class as the “third person (*persona*)” of the trinity. Since the Greek term (πνευμα) as well as the Hebrew (רוח) have the same basic sense of “air in movement”, I prefer to translate them with the use of the English term “Breath.” In one context, this may indicate wind and in another context the infusion of God's presence within or upon an individual. I will, therefore, use the phrase “Breath of the Holy One” in an attempt to highlight the Biblical emphasis upon the semi-tangible activity and presence of the Holy One of Israel.

disciples all nations. We will need to pour our lives in surrender into the hands of our Lord in order to go from 5,000 Baptists to 5,000 Baptist churches.

The worldwide challenge of the mandate of our mission is the same. We must surrender all that we are and do under the priority of fulfilling the ordinance to disciple the nations. That is a broad task and a deep one as well. It will take more than ourselves and human effort. It begins, however, with our surrender to allow the Breath of the Holy One to flow through us and disciple the nations through us.

This process of discipling begins in the community of faith. It is not a process relegated to the programs and institutions of the organizational church structure, but in the life of the faith community. This is the reality of discipling another while walking down the road, rising, sitting, working, and otherwise living life in its daily expression and routine.<sup>79</sup> We are to disciple others to live a life of faithfulness to God, not a life of programmatic observance in organized religious structures. If this is to be reality, we must take discipleship beyond the walls of the church and into the world in which we live.

## Church Structure and Governance:

“The Church of Christ has no laws or commandments apart from the Word of God; therefore, no human tradition can subject us, unless it be based on or prescribed in the Word of God.”<sup>80</sup> On this basis the Reformers maintained that the church must reflect as strictly as possible the Biblical perspective of its nature and purpose. All her activity, structure, and organization should flow from a solid Biblical basis.

Baptists have historically affirmed the Bible as our sole rule of faith and practice, which would mean that only the Bible can or should be the basis for developing forms, structures, projects, and ministries. In certain cases, one must take a stance on an issue with which the Bible does not deal. Such a stance should be taken with care, remembering the principle of molding everything to conform with the Biblical message. It is not always possible to follow Alexander Campbell’s determination that “on what the Bible speaks, we speak; on what the Bible is quiet, we are quiet,”<sup>81</sup> but this should be in essence our basic intent whenever possible.

The church exists to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ.<sup>82</sup> Its structure, therefore, has meaning and reason for being only as it reflects this reality. The church’s structure depends upon its defined function,<sup>83</sup> which we have determined as a triple function, following Moody.<sup>84</sup> Erickson defines the function of the church in a four-fold manner, maintaining the aspect of witness as its central purpose, though he uses the term evangelize.

It is worth noting that the Bible does not use our current distinction between evangelize and disciple. The term “evangelize” in its New Testament sense is “to preach the good news of Jesus Christ.” This means to preach the whole of Jesus’ message from what we call “the plan of salvation” to those teachings which are more difficult for us to grasp. Current normative practice is to reserve the more polemical or difficult

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<sup>79</sup> Deuteronomy 6:7-9.

<sup>80</sup> Ten Theses of Berna cited in GEORGE, 131.

<sup>81</sup> GEORGE, 131.

<sup>82</sup> ERICKSON, 445.

<sup>83</sup> MOODY, 428. See page 33 of this text.

<sup>84</sup> See page 15 of this text.

teachings for the initiated, thereby softening our public presentation of the gospel. In Jesus' ministry, we do not find this softening of the message. The prevailing picture in the gospels is more in keeping with the difficulty of accepting Jesus' words. "This is hard teaching; who can listen to it?"<sup>85</sup>

If it were necessary to distinguish between the message regarding entering God's rule and the message of continuity in faith, this would be found in the passages that use the term "baptize". It is in passages on baptism that one finds the concept of entrance through individual conversion, using the picture of cleansing oneself from an old way of life, entering into a new dependence upon God.<sup>86</sup> Baptism was already being used among the Jews as an initiation rite to a new confession and religious life. They used Baptism for gentiles who sought initiation as proselytes to Judaism.<sup>87</sup>

The edification of believers is the second stage, so to speak, of the evangelizing or discipling process. One should note that Jesus invested His three years of ministry in twelve disciples. He also preached to the crowds, but He did not trust their responsiveness. He chose twelve to disciple. At the end of three years, these same disciples were not really mature, but God continued to polish them, as He did with Peter.<sup>88</sup> Even after Jesus' earthly ministry, the disciples were still in the process of being prepared for ministry.

The Bible does not establish a norm for church governance and leadership. It presents us with various organizational forms used in the course of the church's development during the first century. The church for a time was under the direct leadership of the apostles. In response to changing needs, it added servant ministry (deacons) to its administrative leadership and encountered needs in certain situations to establish councils of elders and bishops for the church supervision. None of these forms are set out as being the definitive organizational structure of the church. Each structural form grew as a response to specific needs that groups of Christians faced.

Currently, various forms of church organizational structure are used by different groups. We find those who deny a visible organizational structure, yet still have one. We find congregational, episcopal, and presbyterian systems of church organization. These means of organizing and structuring the church are not so important in themselves as is the question of the usefulness and appropriateness of the structure to fulfill its task or mission. When the structure creates conditions to foment and carry out the mission of the church, it is beneficial. When a structure distracts the church from its task, it should be changed. Structure is much more than the form of church governance. It applies to the programs of the church as well as all its activities.

### ***Leadership:***

Much has been debated with reference to the qualifications for church leadership. To begin with, one should remember that the supreme example of leadership in Jesus Christ focuses primarily on the character of the individual, expressed in wholehearted service to others at personal expense. As the life context of the first century is different from that of today, certain details need to be highlighted to help one understand the

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<sup>85</sup> John 6:60. These are the words of Jesus' disciples, though somewhat out of context. The passage reflects their difficulty in understanding issues of Jesus' death and sacrifice, especially in the terms of "eat my flesh" and "drink of my blood." Even so, one can find other passages that reflect the scandalous nature of Jesus' message among his hearers reflected in the attempts to stone Him in John 8.

<sup>86</sup> In the section on ordinances on page 38, the issue of baptism will be broached with more detail. For the moment the subject will simply be dealt with in terms of its use as an initiation rite of conversion.

<sup>87</sup> KITTEL et al.

<sup>88</sup> Acts 10:1-11:18.

Biblical teaching on the issue. Looking at the context from which the New Testament deals with leadership, the following details stand out:

- Paul normally began his work among Jews, among other things, to have a leadership that was already versed in the Scriptures and living a morality that served as the basis of Jesus' teaching. Such leaders could quickly and more easily aid in the preaching and teaching of God's Word (they already had a deep understanding of monotheism, morality, etc.). These Jews had the background to understand the gospel and could more readily communicate it to others;
- Paul gathers a group of leaders to act together with him and provide continuity to the work that he begins. From that standpoint, he puts into effect a system of shared ministry with the inclusion of various preachers and teachers. His ministry is part of a team process;<sup>89</sup>
- Paul's example of denying his rights as a Roman citizen in Philippi, though these would have protected him from being whipped, should be taken into consideration in relation to the character qualifications of an individual;<sup>90</sup>
- Paul breaks with established Jewish leadership norms, though he maintains a certain respect for them;
- To Paul, age did not have the same weight of importance that it was given among the Jews, for he allows Timothy to serve in a teaching capacity before arriving at the normative age of thirty;<sup>91</sup>
- In the first century context, there was essentially no opportunity for a woman to study, nor even learn to read. When Paul offers women the option of learning (even if at home), he distances himself greatly from the established acceptable norms of society, placing a woman on the same level as a man in terms of responsibility;<sup>92</sup>
- In the same cultural context as Paul, Jesus not only allows Mary to sit at His feet (taking up the position of a rabbi's disciple to learn from Jesus), but recommends that Martha do the same. In this manner, Jesus rejects the traditional limitation of barring women from learning, for these women are allowed and called to accept the role of disciple on equal footing with men;<sup>93</sup>
- Paul accepts and even recommends women for visible roles in the church<sup>94</sup> (He mentions Phoebe as a deacon of the church and recommends her in this position. Prisca and Aquila are mentioned, with prominence given to the woman according to the order in which they are listed<sup>95</sup>);
- 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:2-6 is often cited "to keep women in their place," yet the obvious statement in the text is that it is correct and in full accordance with the gospel that women participate fully in public prayer and preaching;
- While 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 14:33-36 might appear on first glance to condemn the participation of women by speaking in church, one must recognize that the term "church" (*ekklesia*) as used here much more likely refers to the public assembly (Greco-Roman meeting), than to a context of worship;<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:3-7; 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 4:9-12; Titus 1:5; 2:1-15; 3:12-13.

<sup>90</sup> Acts 16:19-40.

<sup>91</sup> A rabbi was expected to be thirty years old before assuming a teaching role. When Paul mentions that Timothy should not allow his youth to be looked down upon, it is apparently the question of his being younger than thirty that is being addressed.

<sup>92</sup> A Jew would assume that with study came the notion of responsibility. The male had to study Torah, since he was held responsible for knowing and applying it. If a woman were to study, she would be accepting the responsibilities associated with her learning.

<sup>93</sup> Luke 8:35; 10:38-42; Acts 22:3; Nolland, 603.

<sup>94</sup> Romans 16:1-3.

<sup>95</sup> Some would argue that there are cases in which it would have been appropriate to have mentioned a woman ahead of her husband, but there are instances in which the couple is recognized as a couple. The more established norm, the wife is not recognized as existing. The simple fact of including a woman's name with her husband's already draws attention to her. We know that Eli, Samuel, and Peter were married, but only because of the mention of children or a mother-in-law. When Luke mentions a woman's name in Acts, it is because of her importance to the missionary task or the specific narrative in question. Even if Paul were to mention a woman by name in a context in which her naming would normally be unnecessary, that itself would highlight her importance or active participation. The mention of Prisca by name would never have occurred if not to highlight her ministerial contribution to the gospel mission. Placing her first in the context of describing her ministerial effort gives her pre-eminence over her husband.

<sup>96</sup> See MAYS (1 Cor 14).

- Acts 21:8 mentions Philip's four daughters as having the gift of prophecy, this gift being described in other passages as the greatest gift,<sup>97</sup> with the Old Testament also including women in its list of prophets;<sup>98</sup>
- Jesus and Paul both greatly elevated the status conferred on women in relation to the societal context in which they lived;
- Connotations of morality and ethics in regard to leaders as found in the epistles should be read within the context of passages such as Matthew 18 and John 21, where there is ample room for repentance and return to service;
- In general, the New Testament churches have more than one person acting in formal leadership roles;
- As basis for shared leadership practice in the New Testament churches, Luke and others referred to Jeremiah 31:31 and Joel 2:28, passages which told of God's Spirit being poured out and available to all, without respect for gender, ages, or ordination standing. In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 14:5, Paul apparently expects all to be involved in ministry and the proclamation of God's Word;<sup>99</sup>
- Paul writes letters to churches where he is no longer serving, attempting to resolve problems in the churches without worrying about overly measuring the "interference" of his comments,<sup>100</sup> even though there are other local leaders whom he calls "true co-laborers";<sup>101</sup>
- The Biblical terms for "prophet" and "prophecy" come closer to the usage of the current terms for preacher and sermon than the common understanding of prophecy as being futuristic in character;
- In the Bible, the term "pastor" generally designates an educational function in the church, the term "bishop" refers more closely to the supervisory functions, the term "deacon" refers to the more administrative roles, and the term "prophet" refers more directly to the preaching of God's Word in terms of applying God's will to the life-context of the people.

Much can be extracted from the Bible to deal with questions of the qualification and equipping of church leaders. One essential point to remember, however, is the fact that there are many ministers fulfilling various ministry roles in a local church setting, not one individual acting alone. It is helpful to remember that deacons were initially chosen to fulfill administrative tasks specifically to enable the apostles to dedicate more time to prayer, study of God's Word, and teaching. The practice of many churches, however, it to force the pastor primarily to fulfill administrative and public tasks, allowing for preparation and teaching in otherwise undesignated times. This common model does not follow Biblical teaching very closely.

Biblical witness makes ample room for the exercise of public ministry by women. Even though a few passages appear to eliminate women from formal ministerial service, many other passages not only open up this option, but reflect positive attitudes and affirmation of the leadership and ministry of women in New Testament churches. The Biblical norm does expect to see men in church leadership roles, but it does not deny occasion for women to serve, even as prophets, preaching the Word of God.

One should bear in mind that if it is difficult for a woman to be accepted into leadership roles in twenty-first century churches the United States, it would have been much more difficult for them in the context of the first century Roman world. In that context, it was common for men to think of women as chattel to be used, traded, sold, and discarded. It was against such a background that Paul wrote "there is neither male,

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<sup>97</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 14:1.

<sup>98</sup> Exodus 15:20; Judges 4:4; 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 22:14 and Isaiah 8:3. In the Isaiah passage, the term is used to refer to the prophet's wife due to her participation in proclaiming of *Yahweh's* message, per WATTS, 8.3, footnotes.

<sup>99</sup> See TOLBERT, 35.

<sup>100</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:13; 3:1-4; 5:1-7; 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 1:23-2:4; 7:8-12; Galatians 1:6-9; 3:1-5; 4:8-20; Colossians 2:20-23, etc..

<sup>101</sup> Philippians 4:3.

nor female; for we all are one in Christ Jesus (οὐκ ἐνὶ ἀρσεν καὶ θήλυ πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἰς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ).”<sup>102</sup>

The message of the gospel regarding leadership roles is radically different from what we might expect. The twelve disciples were among those who abandoned Jesus, betraying loyalty to Him in the hour of His crucifixion. They were not well-educated men. They were not rich. They were not powerful. They were traitors and common folk who did not really understand that Jesus was not going to establish an earthly government in Israel. It seems that they only began to understand Jesus’ gospel on the other side of the resurrection.

To these whom we would most likely overlook, Jesus gave authority to be and to make disciples for Him. It is almost as if to be deemed worthy of service to God by religious society is to be deemed unfit by Jesus. Just as salvation was God’s unmerited gift, so the opportunity to lead was not based upon one’s abilities. Qualification for spiritual leadership seems to rest most heavily on the traits of humility, the desire to do what is right, and embodying love toward others. These are matters of the heart—the basic direction or orientation of life—not the external, measurable qualities we more readily seek out. Just as discipleship is a process, so Jesus qualified the disciples over time in the midst of ministry.

The standard call of discipleship was “Follow me.” The basic qualification for service was likewise the acceptance of that new orientation in life—not one’s accomplishments, but the direction of one’s life. Having accepted the call to follow Jesus, the disciples could be sent out in two’s, for they had the basic issue settled—the direction their lives would take. As long as they were following Jesus, they were qualified to lead others onto the same path.

Biblical leadership does not depend on having all the answers. It depends upon knowing and following God. We can never learn all the answers. We can learn to direct our lives to follow God’s direction and depend upon Jesus as Lord. After all, Christ is the head of the church. We are but servants, all.

### ***Ephesians 4:11-16:***

In this passage to the Ephesian church, we find a brief description of God’s provision to enable the church to fulfill its mandate and mission. To the church, various roles or positions were given to aid the growth of the body, so as to allow it to fulfill its task.

*And He gave on one hand the apostles, on another hand prophets, on another hand evangelists, on another hand shepherds and teachers<sup>103</sup>, for the equipping of the saints in the work of ministry, in the building of the body of Christ, until we achieve the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, the complete man, the measure of maturity of the fullness of Christ; to no longer be children, jostled and carried about by every spirit of teaching, in the dice throwing of men, in cunning for fooling the wayward; but speaking the truth in love, for us all to grow in Him who is the head, Christ, of whom the entire body, gathered and structured by every joint, the provision, according to power, in measure one for each part, the growth of the body is accomplished for the edification of each one in love.<sup>104</sup>*

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<sup>102</sup> Galatians 3:28b.

<sup>103</sup> There is continuity between the terms “pastors” and “teachers”, different from the continuity of the other terms listed, for the Greek form of the conjunction used leaves off the definite article with “teachers,” though it is used with each of the other terms in the list: του δε ποιμεινα και διδασκαλους.

<sup>104</sup> Ephesians 4:11-16, my translation in accordance with the Nestle-Aland 27<sup>th</sup> edition of the Greek text.

Also, according to Romans 12 and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12, both the roles in the sense of gifts for the church and the spiritual gifts have an internal purpose for the body. The positions and specified gifts are for the preparation of the church to enable her to fulfill her mission. The apostles, evangelists, preachers, and shepherd-teachers have specific roles in preparing the entire body to fulfill its missional task.

Referring to the body's missional task, does not limit one to the concept of transcultural missions. Rather, this emphasizes the question of taking the gospel out of the church structure. It is the church in the world that fulfills its role of discipling the nations—beyond its local meeting place. In the life of the local congregation, the emphasis is on preparing members for their duties in preaching God's word in their workplace, at school, in their commercial activities. Singing, celebrating the greatness of God, studying and hearing God's word preached—all should take the individual to be more prepared not simply to apply the gospel to life, but also to transmit the message to others.

The principle task of the church remains “out there.” The concept underlying common ecclesiastical practice, however, is focused almost exclusively inward. Some churches have services in which visitors from outside are the focal point, attempting to use the communal event to include the visitor in the local body of Christ. For many, this is the “avant garde” pattern of church life. Indeed, it comes closest to the Biblical model of any strategy that invites people into the church. Regardless, such a church structure is still focused inward. It still attempts to sell itself (organization, structure, personality) rather than Christ.

The Biblical concept could not be more different. In Acts 4:29-33, the disciples gathered to prepare themselves to bear their witness publicly before the people outside their enclave. This is the same idea found in Ephesians. The church gathers together to edify and prepare itself to take the message of Christ to the world around them. The Biblical focus is not to await for the world to come in, nor to invite the world in, nor to make our gatherings attractive to those on the outside. The focus is to prepare ourselves to take Christ into the world around us.

## **Ecclesiastical Institutionalism:**

It has been observed that the body of Christ is more of an organism than an organization. Unfortunately, ecclesiastical practice often counters this essential concept. Many Biblical passages reflect the same conflict between institutional modalities of faith in contrast with the realities and challenges of faith lived in one's day-to-day. A good beginning for our investigation of this concept would be Abraham and the other patriarchs.

In the book of Genesis, the patriarchs generally seem to worship God in a manner that is free from institutional forms. Wherever they happen to be, they build rustic altars to offer sacrifices in a seemingly spontaneous manner. On the whole, there does not seem to be any clerical or priestly official to direct or pronounce the acceptability of their offerings, prayers, or stances on issues they face. The only case that departs from this paradigm is the tithe that Abraham pays to Melquisedek. Such an event is the closest we find to a pattern of institutionalized worship of *Yahweh* among the patriarchs. This mode of worship has its high points as well as its low points in the examples lived by Isaac, Esau, and Jacob. Still, Abraham is esteemed to be the father of faith by the Jews in general (Muslims as well), and specifically by Jesus.

## **Abrahamic Faith.<sup>105</sup>**

God's call upon Abram demanded that he trust completely that Yahweh was different from the supposed gods of the neighboring peoples. Yahweh would take him through unknown lands, protecting him along the extensive journey, through places in which the peoples believed gods to be limited geographically in their sovereignty. God asked Abram to trust in a future, even though he had no son (nor did he have an afterlife concept—immortality beyond death). The Creator demanded that Abram trust Yahweh's authority over sterility, even though no demonstration of this capacity was in current evidence. Abram was to leave his comfort zone and enter into a relationship of personal trust beyond the scope of his vision. The request seems to find an echo in the words of Jesus to his disciples, "Follow me."

Abram had never heard of Jesus. Abram did not know of the cross of Christ. Abram did not understand concerns of heaven and hell. He was never baptized, nor did he participate in worship services on Sunday, or Saturday, neither in a church, synagogue, nor temple. Abram had no Bible, Baptist Hymnal, Hymnal for Worship and Celebration, nor overhead projector and transparencies with the words of choruses. He did not participate in Sunday school nor in church cell groups. We have no record of high examples of good works other than the rescue of his nephew (which could be disputed in terms of reflecting personal interests)<sup>106</sup> and the offering of Isaac. He did not have a comprehension of expiatory sacrifice for sin and did not lead a life of moral perfection. Even so, Abraham is called an example of faith—on what basis? How can this faith of Abraham be identified? How does it relate to or compare with our own faith?

Paul and the author of Hebrews treat Abraham as the father of faith. In Biblical patterns, faith is something of relational character. It is a relationship of trust, not simply of logical acceptance or "belief." The term "faith" denotes the adequate manner of relating to God and the consequent manner of living out that relationship.<sup>107</sup> According to Erickson, "Saving faith requires ... that one be actively committed to God."<sup>108</sup> Menno, one of the Anabaptist reformers, referred to the example of ten Biblical heroes that "had in common a living faith that took them to decisive action in service to God."<sup>109</sup> It is these aspects of Abraham's life that lead one to see him as an example of faith. He adopted a stance of dependence upon and confidence in Yahweh, following God's leading.

It is common to equate faith with the affirmation of theological truth. This does not do justice to the relational focus of the Hebrew and Greek terms for faith. The Hebrew concept requires a trust that implies confident resting in one's relationship with God.<sup>110</sup>

Faith is trusting Yahweh (יהוה), not simply knowing or believing things about God, for it is action.<sup>111</sup> In Heschel's words, one should not "equate the act of faith with its expression. The expression of faith is an affirmation of truth, a definite judgement, a conviction, while faith itself is an event, something that happens rather than something which is stored away; it is a moment in

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<sup>105</sup> This section is quoted from my text on *Narratological Theology and Homiletics*, pp. 117-119.

<sup>106</sup> At the very least, Abraham rescues Lot due to his being under his care and being family. He does not accept reward offered by the kings either for ethical reasons, or possibly for questions of personal pride.

<sup>107</sup> MOODY, 309 and 327.

<sup>108</sup> ERICKSON, *ITS*, 402.

<sup>109</sup> GEORGE, 265.

<sup>110</sup> ERICKSON, *ITS*, 397.

<sup>111</sup> MOODY, 309 and 327.

which the soul of man communes with the glory of God.”<sup>112</sup> One could and should go beyond Heschel, recognizing that faith is more than an event. Faith is a series of events in a relationship of dependence. This relationship contains many events that portray the faith of an individual. It is the relationship, however, the relational commitment, that maintains the individual on the trajectory of faith. This walk with God is what one most clearly sees in the example of Abraham.

For Abraham, the gospel message had a different format. The structures for his faith were different, the formulation of the call was different, but the inspired New Testament writers (and Jesus himself) seem to indicate that Abraham was a participant of the Reign of God in equal if not superior position to the disciples of the first century. One should make sure that one’s presentation of the gospel does justice to the essence of the message understood by Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Matthew, Peter, John, and Paul, for the writer of Hebrews says that faith was ever the same.

This message of good news was greatly clarified in Christ Jesus. Yahweh, Creator of the Universe, created flesh and pitched his tent in our midst.<sup>113</sup> God took the initiative to offer fellowship to sinful humanity. On the cross God filled the role of the one to bring the offering. At the same time God took the role of priest. Likewise God was the very sacrifice. This same divine sacrifice was offered to God, communicating incontrovertible acceptance before the Creator and Sovereign King.

The author of Hebrews can then say that rather than gall, we have confidence to approach the throne of God.<sup>114</sup> Jesus opened the way—the only way—of direct access to God, the way of faith—trust.

Faith is this relationship of confidence that God has done all that could be necessary for sinful humanity to enjoy fellowship with the Lord. Whoever would seek a different way will be disappointed. What good deeds might compare to the life and offering of Christ Jesus? What sacrifice might compare with the divine sacrifice that God offered to Himself on our behalf? What gift will I bring to the One who gave all for me? The only coherent response is that of accepting the grace of God in Jesus Christ and giving myself for service in gratitude.

Might not this have been the answer of Abraham to the call of God? Was this not the demonstration of faith found in Moses? Was this not the manner of Paul, who defined that all other attempts of works were banal, putrid rags, and comparable to raw sewage?

In Luke 18:1-30, Jesus teaches about three classes of people that have no means to demand any rights in society (the widow, the publican, the child). Yet the widow insists and is heard, the publican accepts his error in humility, and the child comes in simplicity and complete dependence. By contrast, the Pharisee and the young ruler had every reason in the thought of religious society to expect God’s acceptance. God accepts the humble who throws himself in dependence upon God’s grace alone.

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<sup>112</sup> HESCHEL, 138.

<sup>113</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>114</sup> Hebrew 4:16.

At times we have allowed mystical elements to infiltrate our concepts of the gospel. Many have learned that only a consecrated, ordained, trained pastor is capable of leading someone to Christ. Some have related salvation with the repetition of a sacred ritual formula that effects acceptance by God. It would appear that we need to study better the kernel of the message of relational faith in Christ—trust and commitment to dependence upon the Creator.

Jesus called God Father—“Daddy.” This is a message that believers must take to the world. God is a loving Father who calls His children to return in dependence. God is the Father of the parable of the lost son, awaiting eagerly the return of the errant child. There is nothing that the son could do to merit acceptance. It is also unnecessary, for the Father already desires reconciliation.

Abraham trusted God, and this faith was considered right-ness. He trusted in the manner of the disciples’ response to Jesus’ words, “Follow me.” This faith cannot be defined in a strict limitation of propositional terms, but must be lived out. Abraham was called to embark on a journey of faith. He was to trust God into the unknown and depend on God’s love and protection. Such is faith. This is the faith of Abraham, a model for our own.

### ***People in Formation:***

In the period of the Exodus, the non-institutional or programmatic form of faith suffered certain changes in the context of a normatizing cult and *Yahweh*’s alliance before a numerous band of people. Even this structure, however, did not obey the rigid institutionalization of neighboring peoples. The book of Leviticus is one supreme example of this distinction. In this book, all the minimal rules for officiating the offerings and sacrifices are placed openly before the mass of the people. There is no hidden information that is reserved for a religious elite, and any one of the people could fulfill the rituals and officiate their own service of worship to *Yahweh*.

As a body, the people were a priestly nation, even though there were official priests to act in the Tabernacle and afterwards in the Temple. In reality, the practice of maintaining personal altars used by individuals to offer their own sacrifices and offerings can be seen even in the days of the Judges and in 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 3. Until the construction of Solomon’s Temple, any place was good enough to worship *Yahweh* and to build an altar for personal sacrifices to God.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 3, Eli is judging Israel, acting as the preeminent priest of the nation, concentrating political power along with his clerical office. The institutionalization of the cult under Eli, however, did not find complete acceptance before God. The text says that the voice of *Yahweh* was rare in those days. Instead of using the official institutionalized religious structure, God calls young Samuel. Eli was apparently attempting to invoke a divine word and God’s presence by sleeping near the altar. God chooses to ignore his attempts at incubation,<sup>115</sup> calling upon one who was willing and open to listen, even though he was not of age, nor official clergy. The external religious structure is not eliminated, but behind the scenes lies a movement of real faith that walks parallel to the official formalized structures of worship.

This same thematic appears further on in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 17, where God now calls on Samuel to forget about Saul, who is in full control of the throne, and go ahead to anoint the new liberator that *Yahweh* is ready to

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<sup>115</sup> Incubation is the practice of sleeping at a holy place in the hopes of receiving divine communication through a dream. The practice was often associated with sacrifice or fasting and was common throughout the Ancient Near East. See also 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 3, where Solomon makes a multitude of sacrifices and sleeps at a holy place to receive a word from *Yahweh*.

use. Saul officially remains the King of Israel, but it is through David that God begins acting to free the people from the oppression and threat of the Philistines. David is the vehicle of God's liberation in the model of the judges of old, now in opposition to the official political and religious structures of the nation.

Beginning with 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 3, at the start of Solomon's reign, we find a new phase of union between the political and religious structures of the nation, beginning with a centralization of the cult. Worship of *Yahweh* begins to be centered now around Jerusalem at the Temple that Solomon intends to build. In this period, the Temple takes over the place of the private altars and centralizes worship according to official institutionalized patterns. As time goes by through the reigns of Solomon's successors, there is a growing distance between the official structures of worship and the true worship of *Yahweh*. The kings begin little by little to deviate from *Yahweh*, following and encouraging the worship of the idols of the neighboring peoples. At the height of this departure from Yahwism, we find Ahab building a temple to Baal and Elijah calling the people back to *Yahweh*.

In the days of Elijah, especially as described in 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 17-19, the official religious and political structure in Israel is far from attending to *Yahweh*, while there are yet 7,000 men who remain faithful in their service to God. Elijah faces severe depression as a result of the utter lack of purity and faithfulness of service to *Yahweh* in the official structures. He is alerted by God, however, not to worry with human institutions. God is concerned with individuals among the people who remain in faithful and true service and worship. God might not be found in the expected places, nor even appear in the expected manner. Even so, God is present, encouraging the faithful remnant, without abandoning them.

Elisha, Jeremiah, and the Minor Prophets follow the same theme, calling the people back to a truer worship of *Yahweh*, based on sincerity. They show themselves often caring little for the institutionalized religious structures of official religion. In the time of Elisha, it would seem that no organized form of *Yahweh* worship even exists. The king is surrounded by priests and prophets, but they all seem to be false, except for Elisha, who remains outside of the official institutional structure of faith.

In Matthew 5-7, Jesus touched on the same theme, following on the teaching to John the Baptist. The external religious structures were not serving much purpose at all. What really mattered to Jesus was the individual's internal commitment before God. The external structures of God's reign were not nearly as important as one's internal disposition to trust God. In chapter 28, Jesus' words reveal the same underlying concept. In Acts, Luke describes Jesus' concern in other words. He still reflects with even greater intensity Jesus' lack of concern with the visible reign of God (political earthly reign), emphasizing witness to the identity and redeeming message of God, not the building or maintaining of official structures.

On closer look, Jesus has some severe criticisms for the religious leaders of His day. The problem was not inherent to the structures themselves, nor to the existence of a specific or qualified leadership. The reason for His criticism was based on the distancing the institutionalism had created between the official religious structures and the individual's relationship with God.

Organizational structures will always exist and will ever be necessary, but they should never become ends in themselves. One should never allow a person's relationship with God to be transformed into a relationship with a religious structure, organization, institution, or with an external pattern of conduct (legalism). Thus, one's structures must ever be under reformation and re-adaptation, always seeking the most appropriate means to encourage the individual in relationship of dependence upon God and in the fulfillment of a God-given mission. One should never allow a religious structure to take the place of one's internal commitment to God.

In the first few centuries AD, the gospel grew very rapidly throughout the Greco-Roman world. The church did not have rigid organizational forms and specific structures, but had various organizational styles. Each group of Christians sought out the most appropriate method of conducting their corporate meetings and carrying out the mission that God had given the disciples—“Disciple the nations.”

When Constantine institutionalized the church, making Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire, there was a sudden shift in the concern for the expansion of the gospel. To be sure, changes had begun before the officialization of Christianity in an institutionalizing movement that was already beginning to hold sway within the church. With the officialization, there was also a politicizing of Christianity. Within this political setting, the church lost its impetus and missionary zeal, beginning to worry more with concerns over power and controlling its gains. Christianity lost its mission with an internal emphasis on maintaining itself.

The great danger of the institutions, organizations, and structures related to the gospel is that of losing a focus on mission and beginning to overvalue the structures above dependence upon God. At times it is difficult to remember that certain structures and programs are not the gospel and that God is not prisoner to using the institutions and structures that mean much to us.

Institutions and organizations are not the reign of God. God’s reign is on the inside of the individual and works itself out into one’s life and action. God’s internal reign seeks to find expression through one’s life. The problem arises when we confuse the internal reality with its external expression. When this happens, life under God’s reign is transformed into an activism and the maintenance of religious structures created by frail human beings. We begin to transform the image of God, serving the work of our own hands.<sup>116</sup>

## **Church Ordinances:**

In dealing with the ordinances and sacraments of the church, it is first necessary to distinguish between the two terms, for the concepts underlying them are rather different. The term “sacrament” denotes a ritual that transmits a measure of God’s saving grace, not simply as a symbolic ritual.<sup>117</sup> Grace in this sense can be defined almost as a substance to be measured or parceled. The term “ordinance,” on the other hand, communicates that grace is not a substance, but God’s relational disposition to save those without merit. As Barth used the term, “Grace is the relationship of God with man that does not admit concession.”<sup>118</sup> The ordinance, then, is not deemed to be salvific in nature, while the sacrament is considered a ritual that contributes to or confers salvation.

Continuing with the distinction between sacrament and ordinance, the sacrament depends much more on the character and authority of the one officiating the ceremony. Only the legitimate priest was able to offer the acceptable sacrifice and only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies. With regard to the ordinance, however, the specification and qualification of the officiant is set aside. Per Paul’s comments in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:14-17, the identity of the individual officiating baptism is not of great importance, not being part of his own mission or commission.<sup>119</sup> The same applies to concerns over the Lord’s Supper, especially

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<sup>116</sup> Romans 1:22-25.

<sup>117</sup> BERKHOF, 563, 569-570.

<sup>118</sup> BARTH, 229.

<sup>119</sup> BRUCE, 128.

when we remember that the origin of the celebration was a family event, administered by the head of the household to family and friends.<sup>120</sup> The institution of the Passover never had a priestly specification in terms of being officiated or administered by a clerical class. The priests were only involved in overseeing the sacrifice of the animal, and this only in certain periods of Jewish history.

In Baptist circles, we deal with two ordinances of the church, mainly for their character as rituals or special rites with religious significance. They are based on Jesus' instructions that these two rituals be used by the disciples. On the other hand, we deal with these ordinances mainly in response to a listing of sacraments by Roman Catholic tradition. We immediately trace a distinction between the items in that list that were specifically "approved" by Jesus and those that we do not find to have origin with Jesus. We then add to this reaction the above distinction between a sacrament and an ordinance.

As Baptists, we use the term "ordinance" to avoid the theological connotations of the term "sacrament," as we have understood that the rituals of worship are not vehicles for communicating grace (as though grace were a measurable quantity). The ordinances that we maintain in the list, therefore, are rituals more so than orders given by Jesus to the church. In this light, this text will deal with the symbolic rituals of baptism and the Lord's supper.

We will turn our attention to the primary passages dealing with these rituals. One should bear in mind, however, a joint appreciation of the other ordinances of Christ Jesus that are not symbolic or ritualistic in character: disciple the nations, love one another (even our enemies), return unto Caesar what comes from Caesar, return to God what comes from God, etc..

### ***Baptism—Romans 6:1-11:***

The central biblical passage for dealing with the essence of baptism is Romans 6:1-11. Normally, we attend to the definition of the underlying Greek term (βαπτίζω) as "immerse," "submerge," "dip," or even "soak."<sup>121</sup> One should remember that the term can likewise denote aspects of "washing," not only being necessary to limit the term strictly to the sense of denoting submersion in a fluid.<sup>122</sup> At the same time, this is a stricter usage of the term, not expressing the meaning behind its normative use.

In the Romans passage, the text could be better translated and understood in the sense of "participate in" or "be joined to," thus reflecting something of the symbolic nature of being surrounded by a fluid. The following translation highlights this relational or participatorial connotation of the term:

*What, then, shall we say? Shall we remain in sin in order for grace to overflow? <sup>2</sup>Never! We who have died to sin, how shall we in some way still live in it? <sup>3</sup>Or are you ignorant that we who have been joined (εβαπτισθημεν) into Christ Jesus, join in his death (εβαπτισθημεν)? <sup>4</sup>Therefore, buried with him through joining (βαπτισματος) in his death so that as Christ was raised from death through the revealing of the Father, so we also live in newness of life. <sup>5</sup>For if we were united in the likeness of His death, how much more we will be in the resurrection. <sup>6</sup>Knowing this, that our old self was crucified together, to abolish the body of the sin, no longer does sin enslave us, <sup>7</sup>for the dead was declared just in relation to sin. <sup>8</sup>But if we*

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<sup>120</sup> In the context of celebrating the Pêssach, the meal in question was for the entire family, not limited to those who were already "sons of the covenant" (bar-mitzvah). The Passover feast was specifically designed to teach the children about the events of the Exodus and how to appropriate those events for their own lives. The meal, therefore, had a role in teaching and "evangelism," so to speak. In these terms, there would be no question of impeding that anyone participate in the meal and celebration. The entire family was not only encouraged, but commanded to participate, even opening their doors to invite others to join their celebration.

<sup>121</sup> BAUER, 131.

<sup>122</sup> BERKHOF, 581-583.

*died with Christ, we trust that we will also live with Him. <sup>9</sup>Perceiving that Christ was raised from the dead, He no longer dies. Death no longer dominates Him. <sup>10</sup>Those, therefore, who died, died to sin once for all, but each who lives, lives for God. <sup>11</sup>So also you, consider yourselves on one hand dead to sin, but living for God in Christ Jesus.<sup>123</sup>*

Why deal with this whole passage that only uses the term at hand three times in the first four verses? First of all, one can see that there are other terms that Paul parallels with βαπτίζω, also with the sense of “participate in” of “join with.” The passage as a whole reflects the concept of being united with Christ, living in unity with Him. The specific use of the term, then, reflects the context and meaning of this union with Christ. Generally, a discussion of Jesus’ death focuses on Jesus death as equating with or substituting for the individual’s death to sin, but the theme here goes beyond such a limited understanding. The emphasis is that the individual participates fully in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, just as one lives in complete union with the risen Lord.

Paul uses two forms of the term baptize (βαπτίζω) without adding the meaning of union, but tracing the connection with a meaning that was already established for the use of the term and the practice to which it points. The normative meaning of “place into the midst of” is already linked to the sense of unity, as was the original baptismal practice.

We have already dealt with the sense of the term “baptizing” in the passage on the Great Commission as referring to an individual’s conversion. We should note that the act of baptism reflected the concept of washing oneself from a previous religious life and entrance into a new life (both in terms of religious concept and implications of moral practice). While we would generally focus on washing off the old, baptism also reflects putting on the new. The individual uses baptism as a symbolic cleansing of the old and adopting a new life. The Jewish proselyte that accepted baptism was rejecting his past on one hand, while accepting union to a new life of participating in God’s alliance on the other.<sup>124</sup>

This participation in the covenant reflects the Old Testament concerns of circumcision, being an external rite linked to concepts of morality and ritual purity. There is also a reflection in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper of participation in the New alliance through the blood of Jesus’ sacrifice. Baptism was thus a link or external expression of accepting the covenant offered by God—an external manner to visualize and publicly proclaim one’s conversion.

John the Baptist preached to the Jews of the necessity for repentance and participating in the covenant as though becoming proselytes. Such repentance included both the concept of cleansing from dependence upon genealogy, customs, and traditions, as well as the idea of entrance into the covenant with God in a committed manner.

In this light, baptism is much more than a temporary dunking in water and much more than casting off a past uncommitted life that was void of trust in God. It is also symbolic of participation in the new life of union with and dependence upon Christ Jesus. It is a picture of the life lived for God—directed toward God and no longer toward sin. It includes cleansing as well as being clothed with Christ.

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<sup>123</sup> Romans 6:1-11. I have tried here to be more faithful to the Greek text than to focus on an easy reading of the English text.

<sup>124</sup> Something of the same was included among those converted to certain mystical religions of the Greco-Roman world. Even though there is not absolute certainty that this practice had any direct relationship with these pagan practices, one notes a certain similarity in the meaning and the messaged that was communicated in the event’s practice.

From another angle, one should distinguish between baptism as a religious rite and its practical usage in the institutional context, linked to legal questions of membership in a local congregation. Some of the concerns with baptism have much more to do with legal ramifications of membership in a legally recognized corporate structure than doctrinal issues. A clear distinction between the issues should then be made.

It is common practice among various denominational groups to relate baptism or confirmation to a decision to accept or include the individual as a voting member of a local body. In part, this form of associating or linking the spiritual aspect of baptism with the legal question of membership hinders one's understanding of baptism. In Baptist circles, this is due in part to waiting until the body can confirm that an individual has professed faith in Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior. *In the Bible, baptism itself functions as one's profession of faith in Christ!* In fact, the New Testament uses baptism in the same way that current evangelical practice uses the so-called "sinner's prayer." *Baptism was the new believer's rite of initiation!*<sup>125</sup>

We lose the significance of the fact that under John and Jesus, "Jews came to submit themselves to a rite that for them had the association of the initiation of gentile proselytes into Judaism. But the announcement of the imminent end of the age no doubt seemed to justify confession of sins and the cleansing symbolism of the baptism."<sup>126</sup> They were stating through their baptism that they were washing themselves of their old ways of life and beginning life anew with a different commitment to God. They were stating conversion to God in repentance!

The believer should be immersed into the person of Jesus<sup>127</sup>—to put it differently, the believer should be joined with Christ or united completely to Him.<sup>128</sup> The exact phraseology we associate with baptism is not important in itself, but the reality of the life commitment and the vital union with Christ that baptism represents are of extreme importance. Taking advantage of the event that symbolizes this union with Christ to determine membership in a local institutional body generates its own problems, regardless of how good and sincere the motivation behind the practice.

Looking back at Romans 6, it is worthwhile to note that Paul uses past tense as well as future tense verbs in talking about baptism. The question of reflecting and uniting in the death of Jesus are dealt with in past tense. The question of uniting with Christ in resurrection is yet future.<sup>129</sup> One could deal with the symbol of baptism in the sense that we are yet buried with Christ in the hope of our resurrection, for the fullness of being joined in life with Christ Jesus is yet to come.

As regards common baptist practice of baptism, one might should look afresh at passages such as Acts 16:25-34, in which the Philippian jailer is baptised along with his entire household. As leader of the household, it is he who makes the decision for the family to convert, accepting Christ as Lord. He accepts, therefore, the responsibility for bringing the family into faith. While this is not the normative passage and practice of the New Testament, it strikes a chord which as Baptists we have often ignored. Baptism is a rite of conversion, and normally associated with an individual's personal choice to accept the lordship of Christ. As this passage records, however, faith may also be viewed as a process of development in bringing a household to Christ.

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<sup>125</sup> ELWELL, v1, 148; HALLEY, 499; TOLBERT, 47, 51-52.

<sup>126</sup> HAGNER, 49.

<sup>127</sup> BERKHOF, 577. Berkhof's interpretation coincides well with Paul's treatment of the concept in Romans 6, relating the idea of being immersed in the person of Jesus in the sense of participating in His life, death, and resurrection.

<sup>128</sup> Matthew 28:19 reflects the fact of the believer being baptized in the triune person of God, yet the New Testament practice is to baptize in the name of Jesus, thereby indicating that the trinitarian aspect of the declaration in Matthew 28 may well have been a later addition to the original text (MOODY, 119).

<sup>129</sup> ACHTMEIER, 104-105.

One should not cast out the concept of believer's baptism, but we must take into account the fact that believer's baptism in the New Testament is not quite as individualistic as we would like to believe. Some discussion of the Jewish Seder meal will add light to this discussion. This meal was the basis for the development of the Lord's Supper, a meal that originally was designed to teach one's children the faith to which one held.

We would do well to remember that our historical aversion to infant baptism was due in great part to the fact that all children were baptised, regardless of the faith of their parents. This is still practice in many parts of the world. In Brazil, children are often baptised by Afro-Brazilian spiritist parents so that they may marry a Catholic if they desire. Such a practice has no relation whatsoever to the baptism of believers. Constantine's marching his army into the river to proclaim them baptised Christians has likewise no relationship to any faith commitment or conversion of heart.

There is, however, some basis in New Testament practice and its Jewish roots for reflecting a parent's faith through baptism or circumcision of a child. Such was always followed-up with a secondary practice to confirm the child's acceptance of parental faith (bar mitzvah), in a process akin to the confirmation of Presbyterian tradition. What we often overlook in dealing with confirmation and baptism is that in reality our current tradition as Baptists tends to appropriate the baptism ritual for the means associated with confirmation. We do not use it as a ritual of conversion. We use baptism as a ritual of confirmation.

### ***Lord's Supper—Exodus 12:***

This is the primary passage to aid in understanding the Hebraic Pêssach (פסח—Passover), which is the celebration that includes the Seder meal, upon which the Lord's Supper was based. The celebration is a commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt, which can be seen as reflecting the freedom and new life that we experience in Christ. Along with this passage, there are other supplemental texts that should be taken into consideration. These include Exodus 34:25, Numbers 9, Deuteronomy 16, Joshua 5, 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 23, 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 30, 35, and Ezra 6, as well as the more familiar New Testament readings which reference Jesus' participation in the meal with the disciples.

Passover was a special celebration feast for the Jews, for it retraced *Yahweh's* (יהוה) salvation of the people, bringing them out of Egyptian captivity. The feast was to be celebrated so that the people would not forget what *Yahweh* had done for them. The Exodus was the pivotal event in the story of how *Yahweh* had dealt with the nation. It had the same role for the nation as the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus has for the Christian. The original Pêssach (פסח), Passover, was celebrated in anticipation of the freedom that *Yahweh* was about to enact. So also, Jesus celebrated the feast with his disciples in anticipation of His death and the freedom He was about to enact on their behalf.

### ***Pêssach Seder:***

The Jewish Pêssach (פסח—Passover) is an annual celebration of the Exodus event. It is the primary celebration on the Jewish calendar from before the time of Jesus. The principle part of the week of celebration is the Seder meal. The Pêssach's importance is due to the fact that it celebrates the Exodus, the focal point of redemption and the formation of Israel as a nation and a people holy to *Yahweh* (יהוה). The Exodus became central to the whole faith formulation of the people, and this feast is its celebration. Passover was intended to be a teaching tool, designed specifically to teach children the importance and

meaning of the Exodus. As a result, the structure of the Seder meal was designed to encourage and aid families in their task of teaching.<sup>130</sup>

The Pêssach celebrates the beginning of the people's walk with their God, *Yahweh*. It recalls how God took a rag-tag band of slaves suffering under Pharaoh and fashioned them into a people, taking them into a new land and making them a nation. "We were slaves to Pharaoh, but God took us out of Egypt with a strong and mighty hand, and led us into the Promised Land." This is a recurrent phrase in the celebration. The Seder is a memorial of salvation and new life that God effected for the people that He was calling.

In the Jesus' meal with the disciples, it was this Seder that they were anticipating. Looking back, remembering the salvation that God had enacted in their lives upon being rescued from Egypt. Even the preparations for the feast were engineered to help the participants to free their own lives of pride and sin, thus to be ready to celebrate freedom from their personal enslavement. They expected to look back and accept as their own what God had done for the people more than one thousand years before.

Upon beginning the celebration, however, Jesus changed the feast. Yes, Jesus had the disciples remember the Exodus from Egypt, but He took them to celebrate the original Passover, not simply the memorial. On the night of the people's flight from Egypt, they ate the first Seder in anticipation of the Pêssach. The animal sacrificed was eaten hurriedly, in hopes that on that very night they would flee from the land of Egypt by the hand of *Yahweh*. Thus, Jesus took two special elements of that evening's celebration, transforming them into new memorial symbols.

Instead of retaining the matsah's symbolism as the bread of affliction and slavery, Jesus transformed it into a symbol of the new future covenant. Jesus gave the matsah as representing His own body which would be broken as the ratifying sacrifice of the new covenant. He also took one of the cups (symbols of the joy of the feast), transforming its meaning to represent his own life poured out to seal the new covenant with God.

The Seder feast, then, becomes a reflection of much more than the long past flight from Egypt. Even though the Jews already appropriate the Exodus for their own lives in particular and traced the link between the past and the present, this was not enough. A new covenant was about to be instituted by God. This new covenant would also need to be accepted and appropriated by the individual. It would be worthy of a joyful feast to remember the redemption wrought by God. It was also needful that there be an anticipatory celebration. There was need for a link of faith, hoping that God would fulfill His promise to give new life so that one might belong to His peculiar people.

The Seder already mirrored much of the basic meaning behind the salvation that Jesus was offering. The celebration now has a fuller meaning, with the complement of the new covenant ratified in Christ. The Psalms sung in the old celebration<sup>131</sup> already announced the death and sacrifice of Jesus, beginning with the Seder in this same feast. The only aspect of participation in the new covenant, however, is that of faith and commitment to live one's new lease on life under the sovereignty of God.

The disciples, however, took the symbols of the old covenant founded on the Exodus from Egypt, clothing them with new meaning given by Christ. The elements that has reminded them of the affliction and the resultant joy of the Exodus came to recall the suffering of Christ Jesus to bring us life and joy through giving His own life, ratifying the new covenant with God for us in His own blood. They no longer

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<sup>130</sup> See the Appendix A—Haggadah for Passover Seder:, on page 54 for further discussion on the Passover Seder.

<sup>131</sup> Psalms 113-118 and 136.

remembered only the Exodus and flight from Egypt. They now recalled entrance into the new covenant with God, attained on the cross.

If the Passover Seder is truly the basis for the Lord’s Supper, we would do well to recall that this was a family event. The Seder was designed to teach one’s children the basic tenets of faith. All were to bring themselves in line with what *Yahweh* had done to rescue the people and fashion them into a nation. It spoke of freedom from slavery, a new life, and God’s amazing provision. This joyous celebration had the specific purpose of teaching the children and reminding the adults of their dependence upon God and what God had done to rescue them. Our celebration should follow the same purposes.

Jesus is our lamb, our Passover. Through Him the destroyer passed over our lives and we were expelled from our Egypt to a new life under the reign of God.

**1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:17-34:**

Several points in Paul’s Corinthian letter point to the theme of participation at the Lord’s table. Some of these points are not as clear without an understanding of the Passover celebration. Many have argued for understanding the letter as a call to unity. I would have been remiss in not acknowledging the truth of this claim. At the same time, however, it would appear that the call to unity is invoked around the picture of Christ’s Passover table that we have come to call “The Lord’s Supper.” To establish well the context of the passage at hand, the following points of the epistle as a whole are highlighted:<sup>132</sup>

1:30	<i>“I belong to Christ”</i>
5:6-13	<i>Chamêtz and Sêder (In the preparations for the Jewish Seder, one would seek out any leavening in all of the house on the days leading up to the Passover celebration. This passage relates to just such a search to eliminate all leavening from our lives.)</i>
6:11-20	<i>Members of Christ, united, bought: the individual bought and join to God is the theme of the Pêssach, for in the event, the nation was rescued from Egypt, bought for union with Yahweh (יְהוָה), becoming God’s people.</i>
7:23	<i>Bought out of slavery: reflects the rescue from Egypt</i>
7:1-40	<i>Marriage according to relationship with God: as the peculiar people of Yahweh, Israel was held to be the wife or bride of God</i>
8:1-13	<i>Eating to idols versus eating to Christ: eating from the sacrificial table indicated a cultic relationship, the Seder being related to this concept of a cultic festival and participation in the covenant with God</i>
10:6-10	<i>No idolatry/prostitution: trace the distinction between belonging to God of serving the Egyptian gods</i>
10:14-22	<i>Drink to idols/Christ: participation in the cultic festivals, essentially the Passover Seder</i>
10:23-33	<i>Idol nothing/I of Christ: essential to the Pêssach was the identification of belonging to the people rescued by Yahweh</i>
11:17-34	<i>Jointly we are the bride of Christ/there is no place for chamêtz: purity in the matrimonial relationship, as also reflected in the worship of a jealous God</i>

In current evangelical churches, it is a habit or established tradition to read 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:23-34 during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The immediate context of the passage, however, begins with verse 17 within the larger context of chapters 10 to 14.<sup>133</sup> There is some debate with regard to the best division of the sections of the letter, but the role of chapter eleven at least serves as a bridge between chapters 12 and 14.<sup>134</sup> To understand the passage of 11:23-24, it is necessary to at least from 11:17, thus respecting the

<sup>132</sup> See also the passages of Hosea 4:12-13; 9:1; and Ephesians 5:1-21, 28-33.

<sup>133</sup> One should note that the figure of the Passover Seder permeates the entire epistle in the development of the theme of unity, for it is in a sense the supreme example in the Corinthian church of the lack of unity and spiritual discernment.

<sup>134</sup> MAYS, 1182-1183. There is a certain discussion as to whether 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians may include parts of three letters that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. We know by Paul’s mention that he wrote at least three letters to the church, but there is uncertainty as to whether we have at least part of a third letter included within the text of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. Regardless of the accuracy of the debate and uncertainty, chapters 10 to 14 function to indicate the need for order and unity within the church.

immediate context. A better reading would include chapters 10 to 14, as always, the ideal being to read a letter as a whole.

Throughout the letter, Paul is responding to certain questions and practices of the church in Corinth, evaluating and orienting the church with reference to his own positions. This is really Paul's overall purpose in the letter. This detail must be remembered upon interpreting any one specific passage. Beginning with verse 17 of chapter 11, Paul begins dealing with one specific problem as regards the celebration of Christ, specifically in reference to the Lord's Supper. At issue is not the Lord's Supper, but a problem that surfaces poignantly in its celebration. Paul seeks to deal with the issue of unity in the church, or rather the lack of it,<sup>135</sup> a second abuse in the Christian worship in Corinth.<sup>136</sup> A look at the Corinthian context helps to clarify the issue.

In verses 18-19, Paul raises the issue of factions within the church. These believers were acting along rivalries, as he had already been pointing out from the beginning of the letter.<sup>137</sup> The problem with these divisions was a repeated theme of Paul's, the basic problem that seems to have occasioned the letter.<sup>138</sup> In verse 20, the subject of dissension, rivalries, or factions is directed to the practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper. Paul explicitly says in this verse that the problem is that they are gathering together with a purpose that is not what it should be. Whereas they should be gathering to celebrate the Lord's Supper, they seem to have abandoned their purpose. In the following three verses, this problem becomes more explicit. Paul illustrates the issue by pointing to the fact that the Corinthians are not displaying any measure of unity and fellowship on eating together, as the Lord's Supper should have been.

To begin with, there was great material inequality among the Corinthian believers. They were allowing their social distinctions to weave themselves into their celebration, even taking over.<sup>139</sup> Those who had more financial means were bringing social customs learned from their Roman context into their gatherings to supposedly celebrate the Seder of Christ. It is interesting to note that Paul specifically mentions as problematic that the Corinthian believers were not waiting for all to arrive so that they might participate together in the celebration. Some had little to eat, while others gorged themselves on food, ignoring the needs of their brethren to the point of humiliating them.<sup>140</sup>

Among certain pagan religious groups, there was a kind of meal eaten in common among rich and poor, but the Corinthian believers were not attaining the standards of fellowship of these groups.<sup>141</sup> They were not even waiting for the poor and slaves to arrive for the feast, nor did they share from their abundance with the poor. It is likely that they were following the pattern of the Roman elite in eating until it became necessary to purge one's stomach in order to eat more—this while others remained hungry. Their actions have been described as "Hungry poor meeting intoxicated rich in what was supposed to be a supper of the Lord."<sup>142</sup> In such a context, Paul responds, saying that their gathering has nothing at all to do with celebrating Christ Jesus.

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 1184.

<sup>136</sup> FEE, 531.

<sup>137</sup> See 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:10-13.

<sup>138</sup> HAYS, 193.

<sup>139</sup> MAYS, 1183.

<sup>140</sup> FEE, 532.

<sup>141</sup> MORRIS, 127.

<sup>142</sup> ROBERTSON, 163-164.

The celebratory format of the epoch would have been much closer to the Jewish norm for celebrating the Passover Seder than current Christian practice restricted to the two elements that Paul mentions here.<sup>143</sup> The context was the celebration of a feast—a full meal. It was customary for believers of that time to celebrate what some call a “love feast.” They brought their food and shared among each other in a spirit of celebration and unity, a meal or banquet, which was their manner of celebrating the Lord’s Supper.<sup>144</sup> This feast had at its base the Jewish Passover Seder, being a Christian extension or adaptation of the same.

It is worth the effort to research a little of the historical format of social banquets typical in the Roman villas in Corinth of the period to help us to understand the issues among the Corinthian believers. Archaeological research demonstrates that a typical Roman villa would accommodate nine to twelve persons reclined around the table of its banquet room,<sup>145</sup> the other thirty to forty guests being relegated to eat standing in the anteroom. It was common to serve different qualities of food for the different classes of guests, according to their social classes.<sup>146</sup> One Roman governor, writing about fifty years after Paul’s letter, describes the “hospitality” of a man he knew:

The best dishes were set in front of himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put the wine into tiny little flasks, divided into three categories, not with the idea of giving his guests the opportunity of choosing, but to make it impossible for them to refuse what they were given. One lot was intended for himself and for us, another for his lesser friends (all his friends are graded), and the third for his and our freedmen.<sup>147</sup>

Apparently, this was the standard of “hospitality” and “fellowship” that the Corinthian believers were experiencing. They were maintaining and enforcing the social and financial distinctions among themselves. The particular problem among the Corinthian believers was that some of them were celebrating gluttony and inequality instead of Christ. These individuals considered themselves important and privileged, while others at the same feast suffered from want and hunger. In this celebration (which was a meal) the Corinthian believers were ignoring the purpose behind their gathering together, “partaking of one single bread.” They no longer remembered the reason for their essential unity and their dependence upon Christ.<sup>148</sup> Their celebration divided the body of Christ, in accordance with their distinctions of class.<sup>149</sup>

It is into this background that Paul presents his teaching in verses 23 to 34. His focus in these verses centers on the question of the body and blood (life) of Christ poured out for our salvation. In verse 26, he summarizes the essence of the reason for the feast in the same terms he uses to respond to and critique the actions of the Corinthian believers. The feast is an announcement of Christ’s death. It is also much more than that when one considers its entire context in the model of the Seder meal that Jesus celebrated with the disciples. That was a feast in which the use of the bread and the wine were merely ingredients within a much larger celebration.<sup>150</sup> Paul’s comments here are limited to answering the problems with the Corinthian celebration.

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<sup>143</sup> ALLEN, 357.

<sup>144</sup> BITTENCOURT, 69. The term “love feast” reflects a certain ignorance among Christians regarding the Seder meal and Passover celebration of the Jews, which Jesus took and modified in His celebration with the disciples. The New Testament does not give details of the practice of this feast, and in general Christians have lost a good understanding of the feast in light of Christianity having grown rapidly among gentile peoples, losing its identification with and understanding of its Jewish roots.

<sup>145</sup> FEE, 533 footnote.

<sup>146</sup> FEE, 533-534 and HAYS, 196.

<sup>147</sup> PLINY The YOUNGER, Letters 2.6, quoted in HAYS, 196.

<sup>148</sup> MAYS, 1183-1184.

<sup>149</sup> FEE, 534.

<sup>150</sup> HAYS, 193. See also material on the Jewish *Péssach* (Passover Celebration) on page 54.

In the context of their practice, some of the Corinthians were condemning themselves by participating in an unworthy manner of what they called the “Lord’s feast.” Instead of celebrating and affirming their unity in Christ, their practice was destroying that community by failing to demonstrate love and acceptance of one another.<sup>151</sup> In verse 27, we often stumble a little over the term “indignantly,” which has the specific meaning of “in an unworthy manner.”<sup>152</sup>

This term is an adverb, which can only qualify the manner or attitude in one’s participation. It cannot describe the participant—only the manner of participation.<sup>153</sup> The term does not refer to one’s moral condition, but to one’s readiness to respect the occasion and purpose of the feast—“do this ... in memory of me.” The participant in the feast who does not respect the occasion is participating in self-condemnation for announcing the death of Jesus. By disrespecting the occasion, one disrespects the very Christ that one announces. Such a manner of participation is unworthy, and *yet no one should feel unworthy to participate. The most unworthy individual who celebrates with humility fulfills Paul’s commandment.*

Paul follows this teaching with a continuation of the theme in the next few verses. He encourages the individual to perform a self-evaluation of one’s motivation to be present and then participate in a worthy manner. “Examine yourselves and so eat.”<sup>154</sup> This phrase recalls the Seder meal celebration and its preparatory stage with the search for chamêtz, or leavening. Such a search functions to help the participant to eliminate pride and its corresponding sinful attitudes. The effort should prepare one to participate in the feast of freedom from sin. The search for the chamêtz was the responsibility of all of those who were to eat the Passover Seder.<sup>155</sup>

Paul wants all of the Corinthians to participate in the feast, but that they participate in the feast, not in a show of Roman glutinous extravagance. Paul wants the church to celebrate Christ as a body, celebrating the freedom and new life that Jesus has brought. Such a life makes no distinction between social class and personal privilege.

*One eats in an unworthy manner when he does not act out of love for the fellowship of the church, also when he is insensitive to the presence of Christ, ungrateful for his sacrificial death, and irresponsible to the meaning of his redemption. ... Examining oneself in the light of the meaning of Christian faith and Christian love will make impossible the kind of action of which the Corinthians were guilty.*<sup>156</sup>

There is, therefore, no reason for the worry of many that they might unknowingly fall into condemnation for not being worthy enough to participate in the feast.

Upon mentioning the individual’s need for self-examination, Paul emphasizes the ignorance of the meaning behind the preparations for the Passover Seder and the search for the chamêtz. The pride of social status on the part of some was distorting the meaning of the feast and the celebration of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Looking back to verse 29, the one who discerns the body refers not simply to the physical body of Jesus on the cross, but the very body of Christ present at the feast—the church gathered together—in the sense of the

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<sup>151</sup> BROWN in ALLEN, 356.

<sup>152</sup> RIENECKER, 316. See also Friberg et al, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000.

<sup>153</sup> BERQUIST, 88.

<sup>154</sup> This verse contains a parallel with the search for the chamêtz leading up to the Passover Seder. In that search, the individual looks not only to rid the house of yeast in all its forms, but seeks to rid one’s inner life of pride—the evil inclination (to sin). It is in this self-examination that the celebration of the Passover has its beginning. Paul raised the theme of chamêtz initially in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5:6-13.

<sup>155</sup> See appendix on Passover Seder.

<sup>156</sup> BROWN in ALLEN, 359.

phrase that Paul had already used in 10:16-17<sup>157</sup>. He calls believers to examine the manner in which they participate of the feast, so that the meal might truly celebrate Christ instead of the social distinctions among the participants. Those who do not celebrate in a worthy manner are celebrating direct offense to Christ. They are not execrating nor profaning the elements of the bread and wine. The offense is a direct offense to Christ and Jesus' clear message of equality and the supremacy of serving one another.<sup>158</sup>

In verses 33 to 34, then, Paul once again refers to the reason for the church to gather together. The believers should come together in unity, not to call attention to themselves individually. In the interlude from 31 to 32, Paul reminds the Corinthian believers that they should stop to think before doing things, so as not to fall under condemnation. He emphasizes that they need to judge their own motives on coming together, in order that they might fully enjoy their celebration of Christ and have no need to suffer correction.

Looking at this whole context, one can easily see that Paul's purpose is not to exclude anyone from participating in the Lord's Supper. His aim is to remind the believers of the reason for their celebration—Christ. In Christ Jesus, the church should relish its unity and not promote its factions. The reason for raising the question of the Lord's Supper was to call the church to unity, not to teach about the celebration of the Christian Seder. Instead of acting in unity as the body of Christ, celebrating the Lord's Supper, they were divided and this dissension was damaging the entire body.<sup>159</sup> The issue of the meal as dealt with here by Paul is accidental to his objective. His objective is to foster unity among the believers. The celebration was just an example cited to deal with the factions or divisions that had arisen among them.

The following chapters of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians do not mention the celebration of the Lord's Supper, but they continue with Paul's same message—the need for unity within the body. It is but one Spirit that bestows gifts upon believers, one Lord, one God, one faith, one love and one body—the body of Christ, which is the church! One must discern this body, for how can we celebrate Christ in any other way if not united as members of Christ's body? "Therefore, eat of the bread and drink of the cup," announcing the death of Jesus who made us one body through which Jesus is present. Yes, Jesus died for us on the cross, but rose again, lives in us, and is yet to come!

It would seem that the Passover celebration, and the Christian Seder in particular, are community-building exercises. This fellowship finds its symbolism in the one table, the partaking of the one body, and the corporate joining to the body of Christ. Even as the Passover festival was a communal celebration of participating in the corporate expression of being the people of *Yahweh*, so also in the Seder is the individual joined with others in celebrating one's participation in the people of God through Christ Jesus. It is a celebration of freedom, not as individuals, but as the faith community, gathering together to celebrate union in Christ Jesus.

In this call to unity, Paul refocuses on our identification with belonging to Christ, even as the Hebrew people became the people of *Yahweh* in the process of being rescued out of Egypt. In this context, "I belong to Christ," is not merely an indication of loyalty, but equally of ownership—possession. This is a major aspect of the celebration and its overall meaning. We are not our own, and our individual differences must pale in the context of our allegiance to Christ Jesus who has redeemed us and called us to be His body and representation in the world.

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<sup>157</sup> HAYS, 200.

<sup>158</sup> Mark 9-10.

<sup>159</sup> HAYS, 195 and 204.

## Church Discipline:

The topic of church discipline should be dealt with carefully, firmly respecting a solid exposition of the Biblical teaching on the topic. It is all too common to emphasize the punishment of local church members on the lines of Catholic traditions of penitence and excommunication. These practices do not have much Biblical support, for the weight of Biblical witness falls upon grace, reconciliation, and God's incomprehensible forgiveness. Biblical themes of grace, reconciliation, forgiveness, and God's love should be reflected in treating the issue of church discipline. It is healthy to recall that there is much less Biblical discussion of church discipline than there is for each of these other topics.

One's emphasis must coincide with the weight of the content and clarity of Biblical teaching. Other texts attempt to placate the vehemence of discipline.<sup>160</sup> In general, the emphasis is on reconciliation and the restoration of the individual. One could also mention the multiple instances in which Paul offers severe criticism to believers, his words being the full scope of discipline. This is his normal tactic—warn an individual or group that is in error—nothing more.

### **Matthew 18:**

This passage contains the clearest and most specific Biblical teaching regarding church discipline. At the same time, the topic under discussion in verses 10-35 is not discipline, but reconciliation and the offering of unwarranted forgiveness.

At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus deals with the need to downplay personal importance, placing one's life in utter dependence upon God.<sup>161</sup> In such a context, Jesus begins teaching about the serious nature of sin, giving answer to the disciples' concerns in defending their own positions of importance in God's reign. Having answered their concerns with greatness in God's reign, Jesus relates this concern to the Jewish effort to maintain one's body intact in order to enter the apocalyptic kingdom (in their understanding of resurrection) with a whole body. Jesus' critical answer is that their worry is focused on the wrong issue, if not the most insignificant issue of all. Anxiety over having a complete body was generating negligence with regard to their even entering the apocalyptic reign. Jesus maintains, however, that the Jews as well as the disciples were emphasizing unimportant details, thus being the cause for others to stumble. It is in this context that he cautions them regarding the serious nature of being the cause for another to stumble.

In continuation of teaching about the importance of the apparently insignificant individual (paralytic, lame, or deformed), Jesus refers the parable of the lost sheep. The insignificant individual must be sought out and restored to the fold, even at the expense of threat to the vast majority. Returning to the previous question, the insignificant or even despicable before society seems to have even greater importance to God. One might go so far as to answer the question, "Who is the most important in God's reign?" in terms of the individual with the greatest need for attention and restoration to the fold.

Jesus continues teaching, defining the gospel demand to actively seek restoration and fellowship with one another. If a believer errs against another believer, this one is charged with restoring the broken

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<sup>160</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 2:5-11; then 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 13:1-7, where Paul asks the individual to discipline oneself; in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:19, "deliver to the accuser" has the specific function to remediate or redeem the disciplined.

<sup>161</sup> Note the correlation with Mark 9:33-37; 10:13-16; Luke 9:46-48; and 18:1-30, where Jesus places a child in the midst of adults, in a condition of insignificance and submission. In Mark 10 and Luke 18, this is part of a general teaching regarding the importance to God of those whom society has cast aside or ignored. God's definitions of importance are not those of the world.

relationship.<sup>162</sup> One must deal first of all with the offending believer. Only when reconciliation efforts have failed should one bring witnesses to aid in reconciliation. If this intervention does not have effect, then the case may be brought to the assembly for a public stance. Only after all means to attain unity and reconciliation have been exhausted, should believers give up on seeking reconciliation. Jesus vows that His own presence and mediation will guide this reconciliation, highlighting its importance. “Where two or three are reconciled in my name, I am there between them.”<sup>163</sup>

Somewhat uncomfortable with the need to seek out reconciliation, but going beyond the norm of the day in forgiving, Peter raises the issue of how many times one should forgive a brother for the same offense. When he cites the number seven, he exceeds the teaching of the Pharisees of the day, for they taught that it was sufficient to forgive the same offense three times. Jesus’ answer, however, is much more significant, since he not only extends the Pharisaic norm, but counters the very question of a limit.

Some still raise the question, “should one forgive when the offending one does not repent?” Can one be truly repentant and still commit the same offense against the same individual seventy-seven times? Jesus does not measure the repentance of the offending party, but the responsibility of the offended disciple to reconcile an erring, lost brother.

In order to better illustrate, Jesus tells the parable of a slave who wanted to be forgiven without forgiving others in return. One should note that this servant’s debt was much greater than the amount that he was owed in return, and much more than it would ever be possible for him to repay. A talent had an approximate value of fifteen years of work by a day-laborer. Such a job paid one denarius per day. As the slave owed more than ten thousand talents,<sup>164</sup> that would be the equivalent of at least \$100,000,000. Whatever the “true value” of the debt, it is an amount that no slave could ever hope to pay. Such are the conditions of Divine pardon received by a believer—a complete forgiveness that is fully without merit and beyond any hope of being fulfilled. Jesus taught that a believer should treat an erring brother with the very same quality of forgiveness.

This is the context in which Jesus places this teaching on “discipline” and forgiveness. Jesus’ emphasis is on the need to reconcile others, even when it calls for an abuse of one’s resources to bring about this reconciliation.

Questions have been raised on the lines of “Should we still forgive if...?” From the passage of Matthew 18, there are no limitations on forgiveness. One forgives out of grace—the grace of God. If Jesus’ words in verse 22 are to be understood as 490 or “only” as 77, what type of conditional forgiveness would open itself for such repetitive abuse against the same person? Apparently it is sufficient that one desire reconciliation, even if there is great weakness in allowing good intentions to bear fruit.

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<sup>162</sup> There is some question regarding whether the phrase “against you” (εις σε) is original to the text of Matthew. This could be an addition as an aid to understanding the intent of the passage, just as it may have been omitted deliberately. The revised UBS 4<sup>th</sup> edition Greek text and the Nestle-Aland XXVII maintain the phrase in brackets (METZGER, 36). MORRIS (466) defends that it is impossible to determine here which would have been the original reading.

<sup>163</sup> It is common to take this passage and divorce it from its context to affirm that if two Christians ask anything of God, God will do it. The issue at hand, however, is if two or three come to be in agreement: “if two come to agreement, among you here on earth, over every thing that you request, it will be done for you before my Father in the heavenlies, for where two or three are reconciled in My name, I am there in your midst.” (εαν δυο συμφωνησωσιν εξ υμων επι της γης περι παντος πραγματος ου εαν αιτησωνται γεινησεται αυτοις παρα του πατρος μου του εν ουρανοις. ου γαρ εισιν δυο η τρεις συνηγμενοι εις το εμον ονομα, εκει εμμι εν μεσω αυτων). Note that beyond the beyond the context defining that the subject at hand is the reconciliation of fellow Christians, the agreement is to be completely agreed on the issue—regarding everything that is asked. It refers, therefore, to a complete reconciliation—the kind that only God can effect! This is Jesus’ claim to be the bond between believers.

<sup>164</sup> The Greek text is really “talents without number”, since μυριαδων (myriad) is in the plural form. The sense is that of “multiples of ten thousand” or “without number,” since there was no larger numeral available in the Greek. One might specify a quantity of myriads (μυριαδων), but it is the largest simple numeral in the common Greek of the day.

When Jesus expresses these comments on reconciliation, one should remember that the question is about conflict between believers, not in relation to sin against God. In such cases calling for church discipline, one should read alongside this text the passage of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5:1-5 and Titus 3:1-11, keeping in mind the imperative to seek for reconciliation at all costs, directed by the quality of grace and forgiveness that God freely offers.

At every point, one should keep in tension the serious nature of sin and the unmerited aspect of forgiveness. Common practices of church discipline tend to concentrate on a specific list of public sins, ignoring more private offenses. The rule of this passage is to seek reconciliation between believers, not to punish sin. Where there is no repentance, one should take pains to analyze the motivation behind church discipline, as well as the means applied to help an erring believer to desire reconciliation.

### ***1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5:1-5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 3:14-15:***

In this first passage, Paul deals in great seriousness with a question of immorality that begins with a very bad misconception of freedom in Christ. There was a Jewish concept that one's conversion and new life in Christ annulled previous social relationships. As a result of this concept, it appears that some believers in Corinth were considering that definitions of incest and marriage as annulled.<sup>165</sup> Thus, some apparently thought they had complete liberty to ignore social and legal norms that defined the propriety of behaviors.

Remembering the sense of the Biblical term "Satan" (שָׂטָן), it is conceivable that Paul was referencing the adversary (the equivalent to "district attorney") in the government structure of the period, since the individual in question was acting against the laws of Roman society. Regardless, the tone of the qualifier is to demonstrate the complete distortion of this brother's lifestyle from that of the gospel. Paul wanted an immediate resolution to the public problem.

Along with this passage which is difficult to interpret in its details, one should bear in mind 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 3:14-15. Here, certain other topics are better clarified. Paul makes a similar injunction, but specifies certain limits in applying his teaching. These limits are more in accord with the teaching of Matthew 18, where the central theme is reconciliation.

### ***Titus 3:1-11:***

In his letter to Titus, Paul expresses concerns with division and dissension in the churches. He has had to deal with this at length in letters to Corinth. He has also had to deal with the lack of unity in the Philippian church. There are overtones of the same issue in Ephesians, Colossians, and Romans. As this is a pressing issue in the churches, he brings up the topic here in terms of practical advice for Titus to deal with the potential problem.

In this respect, Paul emphasizes the importance of living out faith in regard to good works. On the specific topic of dissension, he deals directly in terms of discipline. He is very candid about dealing directly and openly with those who stir division. They are to be reprovved once. If they persist in generating dissension, they are to be reprovved again. If the problem continues, they are to be shunned.

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<sup>165</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza em MAYS, James Luther, Ph.D., Editor. *Harper's Bible Commentary*. "1 Corinthians" New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1988, [Online] Available: Logos Library System.

It may seem odd that Paul apparently deems moral behavior problems as not being as serious as creating division within the body. For Paul, controversies are to be avoided, and those who create them are to be dismissed from the gatherings of believers. Discipline here focuses on retaining unity in the body of Christ and a reminder that the body exists to serve Him, not our own interests.

If we look back to Jesus' words in Matthew 18, the emphasis was on reconciliation and unity among the believing community. The steps of "discipline" were steps that should be taken to restore unity and fellowship among believers. The goal of this practice was to reconcile the believer who was avoiding the call for reconciliation. In Paul's words here in Titus 3, we have essentially the very same process, albeit framed in the negative perspective. Paul challenges those working against unity, calling them to account for their actions twice before being formally recognized as working against the reconciliation process. It is on this basis that they are to be excluded—they are working against the unity of the body, purposefully creating division. By their refusal to seek or accept reconciliation, they have excluded themselves from the body of Christ. Their being shunned, therefore, is a recognition that they do not desire reconciliation and so have cut themselves off from the Body of Christ.

Church discipline here in Titus, then, does not seek division or excommunication. It recognizes that those who work against the unity of the body of Christ exclude themselves. John phrases this concept a little differently, but speaks to the same issue. If we cannot love and unite with our brothers who we can see, how can we claim to love the invisible God?<sup>166</sup> We are called to be the body of Christ and allow God to rule our lives. We must therefore love others even as God loves them, working to unite all under the love of God as expressed in Christ. If we are not working toward that end, we have no valid claim to belong to the Body of Christ, for we have excluded God's rule from our lives.

## ***Conclusion:***

This study was developed as a preliminary discussion of various issues associated with applying the study of ecclesiology to traditional practices in Baptist church life. Many of these topics have only been touched on superficially, while some issues related to ecclesiology have not been dealt with at all. These comments are offered as discussion starters and a call to look at these issues and apply them to one's local context.

Being the church is to be the body of Christ—Christ's physical presence upon the earth through the fellowship of believers. It is to incorporate the Reign of God within the corporate and individual life of believers. It is so much more than holding regularly scheduled gatherings at sacred places. It is so much more than administering a religious organizational structure. It is indeed far more than hiring professional ministers to proclaim God's Word publicly. It is far richer than involvement in Bible study activities.

The mission of the church is to reflect Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior. He is the first fruits into whom we are to grow. In another picture, He is the vine which we are to extend and express as fruitful branches. As we grow in Him, we are to reflect His identity, character, and presence. As branches on the vine, we are to become part of the vine that gives us life, sustenance, support, and meaning. We are no longer ourselves, but part of another.

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<sup>166</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:20.

As partners in a marriage, we are to give ourselves to Christ Jesus in love, trust, and abandonment of selfish desire. As a couple that has children, we are to embrace others in our care, bringing them into the marriage covenant, offering support, love, protection, and grace. As a family's children marry, we are to welcome the extended members of family into the reaches of love and acceptance. Just as they increase the scope of their own families, so we are in Christ to continue to reach out further and further to bring others within the body—our family of faith.

If families are difficult to manage, so the body of Christ presents its own challenges. Yet it is to Christ Jesus that we owe our highest allegiance. We embrace with Him all whom He embraces, accepting them into our family, inviting them to our table, sharing with them our bread, our hearth, our shelter, our love, and our provision. Together, we are His body, His presence, the corporate expression of very God. He is incarnate in and through us. What a blessing, and what a challenge to be the body of Christ!

As the body of Christ, we are on a journey of faith. We are in the process of becoming the corporate expression of Christ's very presence. We are too limited and fickle ever to arrive and fully incorporate that to which we are called. Faith is the challenge to trust God completely and to allow God's will and presence to flow through us to the degree that God is expressed in Christ Jesus. We cannot hope to attain such a calling, but it is to this end we are to strive.

Being the church is to allow Jesus Christ to “dwell in [our] hearts through faith, as [we] are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that [we] may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>167</sup>NRSV. 1996, c1989 (Eph 3:17-21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

## ***Appendix A—Haggadah for Passover Seder:***

### **Pessach: Passover Seder**

That Jesus and the disciples celebrated the Passover can be affirmed, though their celebration may have been a day early and/or different from what the disciples expected it to be. The Gospel of John would indicate that Jesus did not celebrate in accordance with the norm of the day, though the synoptic gospels cast the celebration as following the standard format. One cannot reconstruct exactly how their celebration went. We shall attempt, however, to approximate in this study the Jewish practice of Jesus' day in accordance with what the disciples would have expected and later transformed into what we call the Lord's Supper. Many aspects of the current Jewish celebration were added or changed after the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in AD 70, but the basic practice of the celebration can be reconstructed.

In this text you will find our elaboration of the Jewish Passover Seder, seeking to reconstruct the celebration of Jesus. We began with the 15 steps in the current Jewish celebration, seeking to eliminate additions in the development of the celebration through history. Certain changes were made specifically due to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. A few additions in the current celebration have been left in due to their significance to the Christian who finds in the celebration a proclamation of Jesus Christ, our Paschal Lamb.

What follows, therefore, is an approximation of what Jesus would have celebrated with the disciples. We cannot verify with precision every detail, but we can come close enough to understand better the meaning which Jesus gave to the celebration in terms of his own ministry and sacrifice, related to the event of the Exodus, which is so central in the theology of the Jewish people.

Note: We have added a female reader for the sake of breaking monotony, and have instituted responsive readings in place of singing the Psalms. Originally there would have been female involvement in the candle-lighting as well as certain points in the search for the *chamets*. In Jesus' day, the reading would have alternated between father and son in multi-generational celebrations of extended family. We use here some more current ways of telling the narratives, but the essential content is a close approximation to what Jesus' disciples may have known.

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## Preparations for Passover:

### ***The Search for and Burning of the Chamets<sup>168</sup> (leavening/yeast):***

**Male Leader:** On the evening before the celebration of the Seder in a Jewish home, the woman of the house presents her home cleaned of every type of fermented food and drink.

**Female Leader:** The man of the house then inspects it by candlelight with the rest of the family, confirming that the house is really clean of Chamets, just as the Torah says, "...leavening shall not be found in your homes... nothing leavened will you eat..."

*Observation– It is customary to hide a few pieces of bread (normally ten) throughout the house to be found during the search so the blessing will not be pronounced in vain.*

**Male Leader:** The concept of eliminating the Chamets is to "mark off the matsah as something special... [and] to emphasize the importance of the matsah and its symbolism. Furthermore, we need to refrain from eating Chamets as part of the process of personal liberation. In rabbinical interpretation, the Chamets is seen as symbolizing the evil inclination. The removal of all Chamets is a metaphor for an internal process of cleansing and freeing ourselves of impurity—the chamets within us. It is because of this that we seek to remove even the most insignificant piece of material Chamets; signifying the difficulty and the effort required to remove these negative aspects within ourselves."<sup>169</sup>

The celebration of the Passover should not only begin with a search for the chamets within our houses but with this internal search to eliminate the Chamets in our lives. Only when we recognize our own slavery to sin and our tendency to trust in ourselves instead of trusting God, can we truly begin our celebration of the Passover.

**Female Leader:** Our \_\_\_\_\_ (yard, patio, fellowship hall, dining room, house, etc.) is clean and prepared for our celebration of the Pesach (Passover).

**Male Leader:** It is time to inspect our \_\_\_\_\_, and verify that everything is really in order so that we might proceed with the festivities.

**Female Leader:** During the search for the Chamets (leavening), we ask that you remain silent, as we search not only for the physical chamets, but for the chamets within ourselves.

**Male Leader (Blessing):** "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with your commandments and ordered us to eliminate all Chamets."

**Female Leader:** Let us now seek the chamets.

**Male Leader:** Now we will burn the Chamets we have found and annul all Chamets that remains, wherever it may be, with the following proclamation:

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<sup>168</sup> Matthew 26:17-19; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7-13; 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5:6-8; 11:28-29.

<sup>169</sup> STRASSFELD, 9.

**Participants:** “May all remaining Chamets in my possession, both the seen and the unseen, the eliminated and the non-eliminated, be annulled and considered as the dust of the earth.”<sup>170</sup>

[**Male Leader:** Burn the Chamets found during the search.]

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<sup>170</sup> FRIEDLIN, 1.

## Celebrating the Passover Seder:

*Observation – “The preparation for the Passover should involve the whole group or family, if possible. Children can help set the table, color place cards, make matsah covers with napkins and fix the salt water. The more people who participate, the greater the sense of involvement.”<sup>171</sup>*

**Female Leader:** Light is a symbol of the happiness of our celebration, and the moment of lighting candles is also a time of personal prayer of thanksgiving and petition.<sup>172</sup>

[**Female Leader:** Light the Candles. Wait a few moments for silent prayer.]

**Female Leader (Blessing):** [Raise the candle with the dominant hand.] Lord of Light and Love, we praise you. On this night, you led us out of Egypt, out of slavery and bondage.

**Participants:** You are worthy of our praise.

**Female Leader:** On this night, you placed your light before us, to lead us the way that you wanted us to go.

**Participants:** Lord, help us to see your Light today.

**Female Leader:** Help us to personally know the Light that you sent to lead us to our salvation: freedom from the slavery and bondage that we are in without your Light.

**Participants:** For all You have done, are doing, and will do for us, Lord, You alone are worthy of our praise.

**Participants:** (Hymn of Worship and Praise – Tune of Hymn #3 – *Worthy of Worship*)

*“Worthy of worship, worthy of praise,  
worthy of honor and glory;  
Worthy of all the glad songs we can sing,  
worthy of all of the off’rings we bring.  
You are worthy, Father, Creator.  
You are worthy, Lord God, Sustainer.  
You are worthy,  
worthy and wonderful;  
Worthy of worship and praise.”<sup>173</sup>*

[Amen.]

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<sup>171</sup> *ibid.*, 17.

<sup>172</sup> WOLFSON, 66.

<sup>173</sup> Original words, ©1988, Van Ness Press, Inc., adapted here from 1991 Baptist Hymnal, Broadman, Nashville.  
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## 1. ***Kadesh: Sanctifying the Day***

**[Participants:** Fill the individual chalices. Preferably each participant serves another as a symbol of freedom.<sup>174</sup>]

**Male Leader:** In Egypt, the Hebrews were forced to build. It was laborious, for they built a city in the swamp, and each level would sink into the soil, forcing them to build another on top. Slavery is a life without purpose or realization.

**Female Leader:** But on this night, we sanctify the memory and the celebration of the freedom granted by God to the people.

**[Male Leader:** Lift chalice.]

**Male Leader:** The wine is a symbol of redemption, as is written in Psalm 116:13, “I will lift up the chalice of salvation; I will call upon the Name of the Lord.” [Lower chalice.]

**Male Leader:** In this celebration, there are four principal cups. “The four cups are linked to the four expressions of redemption in Exodus 6:6-7. ‘I am YHWH. I will *free* you from the burdens of the Egyptians, and *rescue* you from your enslavement. I will *redeem* you with outstretched hand... and *take* you to be My people....’ ”<sup>175</sup>

**Female Leader:** Praise the name of the Lord, and proclaim His greatness to all generations, for He has freed His people from their oppression.

**Male Leader:** [Raise the chalice for the blessing] “Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.... Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who has chosen us and distinguished us, sanctifying us through your commandments.... Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, for giving us life, sustaining us, and preparing us to celebrate this feast.”<sup>176</sup>

[Drink the wine.]

## 3. ***Karpas: Greens – Parsley in salt water***

*Observation – This part of the Pessach came to be included after the time of Jesus and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple<sup>177</sup>, but is retained here for its symbolic value.*

**Male Leader:** [Dip parsley in salt water.] We dip the parsley in salt water, which represents the tears of the enslaved people.

**Participants:** [Dip parsley in salt water.]

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<sup>174</sup> WOLFSON, 81.

<sup>175</sup> STRASSFELD, 19.

<sup>176</sup> FRIEDLIN, 4-6 and WOLFSON, 84-86.

<sup>177</sup> WOLFSON, 99. In the days of Jesus, one would have marked the door posts with blood, using hyssop.

**Male Leader:** We eat parsley, symbolizing the hyssop<sup>178</sup> that was dipped in the blood of the Paschal Lamb and used to anoint the doors of the houses of the Hebrews.<sup>179</sup>

**Participants:** [Eat the parsley.]

**Male Leader (Blessing):** “Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who have freed us through the blood of the lamb. Help us always to thank you in whatever circumstance, just as your Son, our Paschal Lamb, thanked you while looking forward to the cross.”

## 4. *Yachatz: Breaking the Matsah*

**Male Leader:** [Uncover and lift the three matzoth.] This bread, the matsah, is the bread of affliction, of slavery, of bitterness, of hurry, of humility. It is the bread our forefathers ate in the land of Mitzraim. It is also the symbol of our participation in the Exodus event. [Return matzoth to table.]

The three stacked matzoth can symbolize the free who do not value their freedom, the captives, and the free who prize their liberty. The apathetic are on the bottom, the unfree in the middle, and the free on top.<sup>180</sup>

Yachatz, the title of this part of the Seder, means to break or divide. We will break the middle matsah in two unequal parts. When we break the middle matsah, we hope for the breaking of the chains of the captives. The smaller portion we return to the pile of matzoth as a symbol of the “bread of affliction.” The larger part, the afikommen, or dessert,<sup>181</sup> will be wrapped in linen and hidden to be found later at the end of the celebration.<sup>182</sup> The rescue of the broken matsah, the afikommen, can symbolize the future redemption of the captives through the action of the free on the top of the pile, unbound and enabled to act.<sup>183</sup>

**Female Leader:** [Open the door.] Our door is open. All who are hungry come in and eat; all who are suffering need, come and partake of our Pessach.<sup>184</sup>

**Male Leader:** We take this bread; [Lift matzoth]

We break this bread [Break the middle matsah in unequal halves];

and now we anticipate being freed from affliction. [Replace the smaller portion of the broken matsah back in the middle of the matzoth. Wrap the larger portion in a linen cloth to hide it for the afikommen search.]

## 5. *Maguid: Narrative of the Exodus*

**[Participants:** Serve the second chalice. Preferably each participant serves another as a symbol of freedom.<sup>185</sup>]

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<sup>178</sup> A spongy plant, used for painting a surface.

<sup>179</sup> FRIEDLIN, 7 and WOLFSON, 97-98.

<sup>180</sup> STRASSFELD, 18

<sup>181</sup> SCHEINERMANN, 3.

<sup>182</sup> WOLFSON, 103-104.

<sup>183</sup> STRASSFELD, 18.

<sup>184</sup> FRIEDLIN, 8, STRASSFELD, 21 and WOLFSON, 112.

**[The Four Questions:]**

**Female Leader:** How different this night is from all other nights!

**Male Leader:** Pessach is a very special celebration. We do many different things during Pessach.

- On all other nights we eat *Chamets* or *matsah*, but on this night we eat only *matsah* (unleavened food).
- On all other nights we eat every type of vegetable, but on this night we must eat bitter herbs.
- On all other nights we do not dip our food, but on this night we dip our bitter herbs in the *charosset*<sup>186</sup>.
- On all other nights we eat meat that has been roasted, grilled, broiled, fried, boiled, or baked, but on this night we eat only meat that has been roasted<sup>187</sup>.

**Young child or female leader:** “Why is this night different from all other nights?”

**Male Leader:** More than anything, because it makes us ask questions.”<sup>188</sup>

Questions are central to the Pessach experience, as they are to the entire Jewish religious concept. It is in asking and reflecting that new understanding emerges. This point is supremely important. The Jewish Seder ritual must teach. Instead of following the ritual for its own merits, we must concentrate on understanding the meaning of the ritual, the truth it represents. It is for this reason that the question is so important, for without the question we would reduce our behavior to a prescribed religiosity, absent of significant substance and faith,<sup>189</sup> becoming enslaved to a sterile religiosity.

**Young child or female leader:** But *why* do we do things that are so different on this particular night?

**[The Four Children:]**

**Male Leader:** On four distinct occasions, the Torah instructs parents to teach their children the Pessach narrative. The wise inferred, therefore, that there were four types of children.<sup>190</sup>

**Female Leader:** Wise children ask: “What do the responsibilities, laws, and regulations that God ordered us mean?”

**Male Leader:** Such children should be taught everything, for their minds are open to learning and appreciating our heritage.

**Female Leader:** Wicked children ask: “Why do you do these things? What does this service mean to you?”

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<sup>185</sup> WOLFSON, 81.

<sup>186</sup> WOLFSON, 124. In Jesus’ day, this response would have been formulated differently.

<sup>187</sup> KOLATCH, 222.

<sup>188</sup> STRASSFELD, 43.

<sup>189</sup> WOLFSON, 122.

<sup>190</sup> FRIEDLIN, 12-13, SCHNEINERMANN, 4 and WOLFSON 138-140.

**Male Leader:** To you, and not to us. Such children cut themselves off from the community of Israel, and we answer: “I do this because of what God did for me when I left Egypt.” For me, and not for them, for if they had been in Egypt, they would not have left with us.

**Female Leader:** Simple children ask: “What does this mean?”

**Male Leader:** To them we say: “With His mighty hand God brought us out of Egypt, the house of slavery.”

**Female Leader:** And there are children who do not know how to ask.

**Male Leader:** To these children, we begin explaining that Torah commands: “You will tell your child in that day....”

**Female Leader:** And so begins our narrative:

*[Narrative:]*

**Male Leader:** We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord, our God, brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. And if God had not taken us out of Egypt, we and our children and our grandchildren would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt.<sup>191</sup>

**Female Leader:** About 4000 years ago, there was a famine in Israel. Our ancestor, Jacob, took his family and settled in Egypt where there was plenty of food. The children of Israel lived well in Egypt and became a great nation.

Soon a new Pharaoh arose in Egypt who feared our people for there were so many of us.

**Male Leader:** “If there is a war,” Pharaoh said, “they may join with our enemies and fight against us.”

**Female Leader:** So Pharaoh forced us to become his slaves. He ordered that we make bricks and buildings for him. Captains were placed over us, and we were placed into hard labor and built the cities of Python and Ramses.

**Male Leader:** We cried out to God for help, and God heard us, saw our suffering and responded to our oppression. God remembered his pact with our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

**Female Leader:** Pharaoh refused to free us, so God sent ten plagues upon the land of Egypt.

*[Plagues:]*

**Male Leader:** As we remember each of the ten plagues, we will remove from our cups a drop of wine—our symbol of joy—for our joy is diminished as we remember the suffering of the Egyptians. We do not lick our fingers, for that would be gloating in the suffering of our enemies.

Together, let us remember the ten plagues upon Egypt.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> WOLFSON, 128.

<sup>192</sup> FRIEDLIN, 21, SCHEINERMANN, 5 and STRASSFELD, 22-23.

**Female Leader:** Think about where we find water: in oceans, lakes, and rivers; the water that we drink and in which we bathe. Now imagine if all our water should turn into blood. That's what happened in Egypt. The Nile turned into blood. It was all ruined and the people panicked. Pharaoh seemed ready to let the people go, but when the plague ended,

**Participants:** he changed his mind.

**Male Leader:** The first plague

**Participants:** blood

**Female Leader:** Imagine if frogs covered all of the earth. They weren't just near the water. They were jumping around everywhere. They probably were in houses, on people's clothes, and in their hair, even! Once again, Pharaoh seemed ready to let the people go, but when the plague ended,

**Participants:** he changed his mind.

**Male Leader:** The second plague

**Participants:** frogs

**Female Leader:** Imagine the itching and scratching, the feeling of bugs crawling all in your hair. That's how the Egyptians must have felt when God sent lice as the third plague. And, have you ever watched your pet scratching himself in desperation, biting and clawing at some unseen pest in his fur? Have you ever gotten flea bites on yourself? What must the animals and the Egyptians have felt like when God sent the next plague, the plague of fleas? Pharaoh seemed ready to let the people go, but, again, when each plague ended,

**Participants:** he changed his mind.

**Male Leader:** The third plague

**Participants:** lice

**Male Leader:** The fourth plague

**Participants:** fleas

**Female leader:** Those plagues were terrible, but they get worse. The next plagues caused the animals to die and the people to get horrible, hurting, sores on them. Pharaoh seemed ready to let us go, but, once again, when the plagues ended,

**Participants:** he changed his mind.

**Male leader:** The fifth plague

**Participants:** a sickness on the animals

**Male leader:** The sixth plague

**Participants:** boils on the people

**Female leader:** The next plague must have really hurt as hail pounded down from the sky. Pharaoh said he'd let us go, but when the plague ended,

**Participants:** he changed his mind.

**Male leader:** The seventh plague:

**Participants:** hail

**Female leader:** Locusts are insects that fly in swarms, eating the crops wherever they land. Imagine swarms and swarms of them flying around, eating everything that you had planted. Most of your meat stock died in the fifth plague, and now your grain is being consumed. Whatever are you going to eat? Pharaoh promised to let us go, but when the plague ended,

**Participants:** he changed his mind.

**Male leader:** The eighth plague:

**Participants:** locusts

**Female leader:** Imagine a day without light, no sun shining, not even the least bit through the clouds as it does on a dark, rainy day. THIS was THREE days with absolutely NO light. No sun, no moon, no stars, no anything to give relief to the incredible darkness. Pharaoh, known to his people as the child of the sun god, had no control over his parent. Surely he would keep his promise this time! But, no, just as before, when the plague ended,

**Participants:** he changed his mind.

**Male leader:** The ninth plague:

**Participants:** darkness

**Female leader:** The Hebrews still suffered their slavery, even though God demanded their freedom from Egypt. Imagine the pain and tragedy when the angel of death passed through Egypt leaving only sorrow in its wake. All of the firstborn children of Egypt, wealthy or poor, no exceptions made, died on this night. Even the firstborn son of Pharaoh died. Finally, Pharaoh was defeated and he let us go.

**Male leader:** The tenth plague:

**Participants:** death of the firstborn of the Egyptians.

**Female leader:** To tell the rest of the story, we are going to divide into four groups. Each group will add a sound effect to the story when their character is mentioned.

[**Male leader:** Divide participants into four groups]

**Male leader:** [Indicate appropriate group.]

Group #1 is Moses. Your sound is “Yea!”

Group #2 is the Wicked Pharaoh. Your sound is “Boo!”

Group #3 is the Chariots and Horses. Your group will make sounds of chariots and horses. (Rub hands together to make whirring noise, clack tongue, make a neighing noise.)

Group #4 is the Sea of Reeds. Your sound is “Whoosh!”

**Female leader:** Let’s practice our sounds.

[Give time for the groups to respond with the appropriate sound.]

Moses

Wicked Pharaoh

Chariots and Horses

Sea of Reeds

**Male leader:** Are we ready for our story?

**Female leader:** When Wicked Pharaoh decided to let us go, we left hurriedly. We left Egypt at midnight in such a hurry that there was no time for our bread dough to rise. We flattened it immediately and it came out of the oven hard and thin—the first matsah.

Wicked Pharaoh began to think after we left. “Who’s going to do all the work around here?” So he called together his army, with all of their chariots and horses, and set off after us. We escaped to the Sea of Reeds with the Wicked Pharaoh and the Egyptians in hot pursuit. There we cried out to Moses, “Why did God bring us out here to die? The Sea of Reeds is in front of us and Wicked Pharaoh and his army are right behind us with chariots and horses.”

The Lord heard us and ordered Moses to lift his rod over the waters and have us march. The waters parted and we crossed the sea on dry ground. Reaching the other side, we saw Wicked Pharaoh’s army in pursuit, but Moses lowered his staff and Wicked Pharaoh’s army was swallowed in the Sea of Reeds.

**Male leader:** When the sea closed behind us, swallowing the army, we sang a song of victory. This is an echo song. I’ll sing the first line, you be my echo:

[**Participants:** sing “**Let us sing, for the victory’s won!**”

**Male leader:** *Let us sing, for the victory’s won, our enemy is lost in the sea!*

**Participants:** *Let us sing, for the victory’s won, our enemy is lost in the sea!*

**Male leader:** *Let us sing, for the victory’s won, our plight of old has now ceased to be!*

**Participants:** *Let us sing, for the victory’s won, our plight of old has now ceased to be!*

**Male leader:** *Freed from the shackles that once did impede us, onward, enter Canaan’s land!*

**Participants:** *Freed from the shackles that once did impede us, onward, enter Canaan’s land!*

*Male leader: Allelu, alleluia, alleluia!*

*Participants: Allelu, alleluia, alleluia!*

**REPEAT ALL**

**Female leader:** Stop singing like that!<sup>193</sup> [Give time for reaction]

**Female leader:** I know you must wonder why I insisted on your stopping singing. Listen and we will tell you the reason.

**[Midrash:]**

**Female leader:** It is told in a Midrash<sup>194</sup> that, when the Egyptians were drowning in the sea, the angels wanted to join in the songs of victory, but God reprimanded them, saying, “My creatures, these people that I made and love, are drowning in the sea, and you want to sing?”

**Female leader:** Our joy cannot be complete when we contemplate the suffering of others, even that of our own enemies.<sup>195</sup>

**[Narrative:]**

**Male leader:**

“In each generation, each individual must feel personally redeemed from Egypt, as it is written: ‘You will speak to your children in that day, saying, “It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I left free from Egypt.”’ The Lord, blessed be He, did not only free our ancestors. He also redeemed us with them, as it is written: “He brought us out, to bring us to the land that He had promised to our forefathers.”<sup>196</sup>

We were slaves to Pharaoh... “The Egyptian experience is our own, and therefore the narrative must be retold and expanded, for we are still fighting to become free. Each year we try to expand the borders of our freedom a little further, for we understand that if we simply recite the narrative as a story about others, we will easily slide into a slavery to the Pharaohs of our own creation.”<sup>197</sup>

**Praise:**

And we sing a new song before Him: Alleluia!

*Allelu, allelu, allelu, alleluia!  
Praise ye the Lord!  
Allelu, allelu, allelu, alleluia!  
Praise ye the Lord!  
Praise ye the Lord! Alleluia!  
Praise ye the Lord! Alleluia!  
Praise ye the Lord! Alleluia!  
Praise ye the Lord!*

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<sup>193</sup> This midrash is an addition to the celebration, but originates from a time prior to Jesus.

<sup>194</sup> A midrash is a commentary on a Biblical text.

<sup>195</sup> FRIEDLIN, 21 and SCHEINERMANN, 7.

<sup>196</sup> STRASSFELD, 23 and WOLFSON, 170.

<sup>197</sup> STRASSFELD, 22.

## 6. ***Halel: Psalms of Praise***

*Observation—The Psalms are divided here to be read as a choral reading by two people (**bold and underlined**), at times reading together. In Jesus' day, the Psalms would have been sung.*

[Read by the **Male** and Female leaders]

### ***Psalm 113:***

***Praise the Lord! Praise, servants of the Lord; praise the name of the Lord.***

*Blessed be the name of the Lord, from this time forth.*

***From the rising of the sun until its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised.***

*The Lord is exalted above all nations, and His glory is above the heavens.*

***Who like the Lord our God, who takes His seat in the heights, and inclines to see what is in heaven and on earth?***

*He raises the poor from the dust, and from the ash heap lifts up the needy,*

*To make him sit with the princes, yes, the princes of his people.*

***He makes the sterile woman a family, and be the joyful mother of children.***

***Praise the Lord!***

### ***Psalm 114:***

***When Israel left Egypt, and the house of Jacob from among a people of a strange tongue, Judah became His sanctuary, and Israel His dominion.***

***The sea saw it and fled; the Jordan turned back.***

***The mountains jumped like rams, and the hills as lambs of the flock.***

*What ails you, o sea, that you flee? And you, O Jordan, that you turn back?*

*O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills, like lambs?*

***Tremble, o earth, before the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob,***

***Who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water.***

[**Male leader:** Lift the chalice.]

**Male leader:** This chalice is a reminder of the second promise of redemption: “I will rescue you” – Exodus 6:6.<sup>198</sup>

**Male Leader (Blessing):** “Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.”<sup>199</sup>

[**Participants:** Drink the wine.]

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<sup>198</sup> WOLFSON, 175.

<sup>199</sup> *ibid.*, 174.

## 7. *Motsi: Blessing over the Matsah*

[**Male leader:** Raise the three matzoth and offer the blessing.<sup>200</sup>]

**Male Leader (Blessing):** “Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who takes bread from the land.”

## 8. *Matsah: Sharing the Matsah*

[**Male leader:** Return the bottom matsah to its place, lifting up the matsah from the middle and top as the blessing is offered.<sup>201</sup>]

**Male Leader (Blessing):** “Blessed are you, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who sanctify our lives with your commandments and prescribe that we eat matsah.”<sup>202</sup>

[**Male leader:** Break the matsah you are left holding into pieces and distribute small portions of these two matzoth so that all might eat from them]

[Participants: **Eat the shared matsah.**]

## 9. *Maror: Bitter Herbs with Charosset*

[**Male leader:** Wet the bitter herb in the charosset, letting the excess drip off so that the bitterness of the herb can be appreciated.<sup>203</sup>]

**Male leader:** The bitterness of this herb reminds us of the bitterness of cruelty and oppression. The charosset, in which we dip the maror, reminds us of the mortar that the Hebrew slaves had to make in Egypt to build Pharaoh’s cities.

**Female leader:** The elements of the charosset represent the various aspects of the lives of the Hebrews in Egypt.

- The wine, or grape juice, represents the blood of the Hebrews, shed in slavery.
- The cinnamon represents the straw used to make bricks.
- The apples represent the orchards, in which it is said the Hebrew women hid to bear their sons when Pharaoh wanted to kill them.
- The nuts represent the hard work of redemption, for the Hebrew term is similar to the term for “hard work,” for it is a tradition that true redemption will come about only through our diligent work to better the world.

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<sup>200</sup> *ibid.*, 185.

<sup>201</sup> STRASSFELD, 23 and WOLFSON, 185.

<sup>202</sup> WOLFSON, 184.

<sup>203</sup> STRASSFELD, 23 and WOLFSON, 188.

**Male leader:** As we eat this, let us remember that God is present not only in our freedom, but also in our times of bitterness and slavery. God never abandons us.

**Male Leader (Blessing):** “Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who sanctify our lives with Your commandments and prescribe that we eat maror.”<sup>204</sup>

[**Participants:** Dip the bitter herb in the charosset and eat.]

## ***11. Shulchan Orech: Meal***

**Elders Participant:** “Is it time to eat yet?”

**Male leader:** It is time to eat.

**Female leader:** It is time to celebrate.

**Male leader:** In the midst of our celebration, it is time to “question our beliefs and pet ideas to discover if somehow slavery has entered our lives.”<sup>205</sup>

**Female leader:** It is time to celebrate the new life that God has offered us.

**Male leader:** It is time to ask questions and reflect upon such a great salvation and its significance to our lives.

## ***12. Tsafun: Finding the Afikommen***

*[Male leader: Give the rules for the search: Limit the search to certain rooms. Define whether the afikommen can be completely hidden, or if some portion of the napkin is showing. Give other parameters, such as between such and such height off the ground. Define who can search for the afikommen. The one who finds it should shout, “I’ve found it!” Generally, a prize is given to the one who finds the afikommen.]*

**Male leader:** Let’s find the afikommen.

[Search for the afikommen.]

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<sup>204</sup> WOLFSON, 186.

<sup>205</sup> STRASSFELD, 43.

**Male leader:** Is the search for the afikommen a child's game, or is it a significant symbolic experience?

[Give a chance for participants to respond.]

**Male leader:** It really depends on whether one is truly searching.<sup>206</sup>

We speak of the redemption of the afikommen as a symbol of the redemption of the captives. As Christians, through this symbol, we can see that **Jesus, our redemption, has risen.**

**Female leader:** His body was wrapped in a linen cloth and hidden away in the grave. When the women first went to the grave to care for his dead body, they could not find it, because he had risen.

**Male leader:** His body was broken for us, just as he broke this bread and said, "This is my body, which is for you."

[**Male leader:** Break the afikommen in pieces for all to share and eat.]

### ***13. Barech: Blessing after the Meal***

[**Participants:** Pour the third chalice for each other.]

**Male leader:** My friends, let us offer the blessing.<sup>207</sup>

Blessed be the name of the Lord now and in the days to come.

Blessed is He, our God, whose food we have eaten and under whose goodness we live.

Blessed are You, Lord, our God, Sovereign of the world—God who is our Father, our king, our Powerful One, our Creator, our Redeemer, our Maker, our Holy One—the Holy One of Jacob; our Shepherd—the Shepherd of Israel; the King who is good and does good to all, that each and every day has been good, is good, and will be good to us. He conceded, concedes, and always will concede grace, goodness, mercy, rest, rescue, and success, blessing and salvation, comfort, a living and sustenance, and mercy and life and peace and all that is good—and may He never allow us to suffer want of any good thing.<sup>208</sup>

**Male leader** [lift the chalice for the blessing]: "Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine."

[**Participants:** Drink the wine.]

[**Male leader:** Serve the chalice of Elijah]

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<sup>206</sup> WOLFSON, 197.

<sup>207</sup> This is a shortened form of the blessing used today by many Jews. The original is at least six times longer. Note that the Hebrew verb does not carry tense, so it is translated here as past, present, and future each time it refers to God's action on the people's behalf.

<sup>208</sup> PALATNIK, 52-56.

[**Female leader:** Open the door to allow Elijah to come in.<sup>209</sup>]

**Male leader:** The cup of Elijah has been served

**Female leader:** and the door is open to allow him to enter.

**Male leader:** Do you remember when we opened the door to invite the poor to enter?

**Female leader:** If we do not really open our doors and we “allow the poor to remain famished, how can we hope for Elijah to come in when we open our doors for his messianic coming?”<sup>210</sup>

## **14. Halel: Psalms of Praise. Psalms 115-118.**

[**Participants:** Serve each other the fourth chalice.]

*Observation—The Psalms are divided here to be read as a choral reading by two people (**bold and underlined**), at times reading together. In Jesus’ day, the Psalms would have been sung.*

[Read by the Male and Female leaders]

**Psalm 115:**

**Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to Thy name be the glory, for the sake of Your steadfast love and Your faithfulness!**

Why should the nations ask: “Where is your God?”

Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.

**Their idols are silver and gold, the work of the hands of men.**

**Having mouths, they speak not; having eyes, they see not;**

**Having ears, they hear not; having noses, they smell not;**

**Having hands, they touch not; having feet, they walk not; nor does any sound escape their throats.**

**Similar to them be all who make them, and those who trust them.**

**Trust, O Israel, in the Lord! He is your help and your shield.**

**House of Aaron, trust in the Lord! He is your help and your shield.**

**You who fear the Lord, trust the Lord! He is your help and your shield.**

**The Lord has remembered us, He will bless us; He will bless the house of Israel; He will bless the house of Aaron;**

**He will bless those who fear the Lord, both the small and the great.**

**The Lord give you increase, to you and your children.**

**Be blessed of the Lord, who made the heavens and the earth.**

**The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth He has given to the sons of men.**

**The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do those who go down into the silence.**

**We, however, will bless the Lord, from now and henceforth. Bless the Lord!**

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<sup>209</sup> STRASSFELD, 23.

<sup>210</sup> *ibid.*, 21.

**Psalm 116:**

***I love the Lord, for He hears my voice and my supplication.***

***Because He inclines to me His ear, I will invoke Him as long as I live.***

***The cords of death have surrounded me; the anguish of Sheol has overcome me; I have suffered tribulation and sadness.***

***Then I will call upon the name of the Lord, saying: "O Lord, I beseech You, free me!"***

***Compassionate is the Lord and just, yes, merciful is our God.***

***The Lord guards the simple; when I find myself beaten down, He saves me.***

***Return, my soul, to your repose, for the Lord has done you good.***

***For He freed my soul from death, my eyes from the tears, and my feet from stumbling.***

***I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.***

***I trusted, therefore I spoke; I was very distressed.***

***I would say in my conflict: "All men are a vain hope."***

***What will I give to the Lord for all the benefits He has given to me?***

***I will take the cup of salvation, and will invoke the name of the Lord.***

***I will pay my vows to the Lord, in the presence of all His people.***

***Precious is in the sight of the Lord the death of His saints.***

***O Lord, truly I am Your servant; I am your servant, the son of Your handmaid; You have loosed my chains.***

***I will offer to You sacrifices of thanksgiving, and I will call upon the name of the Lord.***

***I will pay my vows to the Lord, in the presence of all His people,***

***In the courts of the house of the Lord, in the midst of you, Jerusalem! Praise the Lord!***

**Psalm 117:**

***Praise the Lord all the nations; exalt Him all the peoples.***

***Because His steadfast love toward us is great, and the truth of the Lord endures the ages. Praise the Lord!***

**Psalm 118:**

***Give thanks to the Lord for He is good; for his steadfast love endures the ages!***

***Say, then, Israel, "His steadfast love endures the ages!"***

***Say, then, the house of Aaron, "His steadfast love endures the ages!"***

***Say, then, those who fear the Lord, "His steadfast love endures the ages!"***

***In the midst of my anguish I called on the Lord; the Lord heard me, and set me in an open place.***

***The Lord is for me, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?***

***The Lord is for me among those who help me; for which I will see fulfilled my desire over those who hate me.***

***It is better to refuge in the Lord than to trust in humanity.***

***It is better to refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.***

***All the nations have encircled me; but in the name of the Lord I cut them off!***

***Surrounded me, yes, surrounded me on every side; but in the name of the Lord I cut them off!***

***They surrounded me as bees, but they went out as a thornbush fire; but in the name of the Lord I cut them off!***

*With power I was impelled to make me fall, but the Lord helped me.*

*The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation.*

***In the tents of the righteous there is joyous singing of victory; the right hand of the Lord does mighty deeds.***

***The right hand of the Lord exalts; the right hand of the Lord does mighty deeds.***

***I will not die, but I will live, and I will tell the deeds of the Lord.***

***The Lord has chastised me sorely, but has not delivered me unto death.***

*Open to me the gates of justice, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.*

***This is the door of the Lord; through it the just will enter.***

*I thank You that You heard me, and You have become my salvation.*

***The stone that the builders rejected, this has been placed as the cornerstone.***

***It was the Lord who did this; it is marvelous in our eyes.***

*This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

***O Lord, save, we ask You; O Lord, we ask you, send us prosperity!***

***Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; from the house of the Lord we bless you.***

***The Lord is God, and grants us light; bind the victim of the feast with cords to the ends of the altar.***

*You are my God, and I will give you thanks; You are my God, and I will exalt You.*

***Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures the ages.***

**Psalm 136:**

[Participants read the bold print as a refrain. Italics portion read by Male leader.]

*Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

*Give thanks to the God of gods,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

*Give thanks to the Lord of lords,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

*To the only One who does great wonders,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

*To the One who with understanding made the heavens, ... [and] stretched the land over the waters,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

*To the One who made the great lights, ... the sun to rule the day, ... the moon and the stars to preside the night,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

*To the One who struck Egypt in its firstborn... and took Israel out of their midst... with mighty hand and outstretched arm,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

*To the One who parted the Sea of Reeds in two parts... and made Israel pass through its midst... but felled Pharaoh with his army in the Sea of Reeds,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

*To the One who guided His people through the desert,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

*To the One who struck the great kings ... and gave death to famous kings, ... to Sion, king of the Amorites, ... and to Og, king of Bashan, ... and gave their land in inheritance, ... yes, inheritance to Israel His servant,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

*Who remembered us in our humiliation, ... and freed us from our enemies,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

*[To the One] who gives food to all flesh,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

*Give thanks to the God of the heavens,*

**Participants: for His steadfast love endures the ages!**

**Male leader:** [Lift up the chalice] “Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.”

**[Participants:** Drink the wine.]

**Participants** [Hymn of praise: Tune to the chorus of Hymn#153 *My Tribute*]:

*To God be the glory,  
To God be the glory!  
To God be the glory  
For the things He has done.  
In His grace He has freed me;  
By His pow’r He has rescued me;  
By His love He redeemed me  
And He made me His own.<sup>211</sup>*

**Male leader:** It is Hassidic practice to prepare the cup of Elijah by having all pour a little from their cups into a common chalice, symbolically saying that we must work together to bring Elijah, the precursor of Messiah, and the final redemption.<sup>212</sup>

**Male leader:** [Lift the chalice of Elijah in the right hand.] We have the cup of Elijah already prepared, and we all drink from it, for not only has Elijah come, but the very Messiah, Christ, has come and redeemed us, inaugurating the Kingdom within our very lives.

**Male leader:** [Raise the matsah in the left hand, keeping the chalice raised in the right hand.] With this chalice, we share matsah, representing the bread of life that is for us, Who as the afikommen was wrapped in linen and hidden, but has been found. He arose, giving us hope of new life, as we in faith accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, our long-awaited Messiah.

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<sup>211</sup> Original words, Andraé Crouch, ©1988, Communiqué Music, adapted here from 1991 Baptist Hymnal, Broadman, Nashville.

<sup>212</sup> STRASSFELD, 33.

## **Foods and Necessary Articles:**

**Charosset** (enough for all to eat with the bitter herbs) See the recipe to follow.

**Parsley** (enough for all to eat at least one stem dipped in salt water)

**Bitter herbs** (bitter-tasting leafy greens or horseradish, enough for all to eat at least two leaves—some are allergic to horseradish, so an option should be included)

**White candles** (at least two to remain lit during the feast)

**Candle holders** (in accordance to the number of candles to be used)

**Table cloth** (white, preferably of lace)

**Flower/Fruit arrangement**

**Platter** (to display the symbolic foods of the Seder)

**Bowls of Salt Water** (accessible for all to dip parsley)

**Bowls/Plates** (for parsley, bitter herbs, and matzoth)

**Matzoth** (unleavened bread, available in some Kroger stores in Lynchburg and Richmond or in Jewish stores) about one box for 10-12 participants

**Goblets/small cups** (3 oz of juice/wine to be drunk at a serving by each participant)

**White linen napkin** to cover the three matzoth

**White linen napkin** to wrap and hide the afikommen

**Foods without yeast** and that do not rise or swell when cooked (potatoes, vegetables, salads, and fruits—no breads, dried beans, rice, or pasta)

**Grape juice/wine** (16 oz. per participant)

**Drinks for the meal** (juice, water, tea, other drink, preferably not carbonated)

**Plates, silverware, cups**

**Pitchers for serving juice/wine** (with a large group, more than one helps with the serving—about one for every five 5 participants)

**Goblet, Plate, and utensils for Elijah** (nicer place setting for Elijah)

**Hagadoth** (guide for all, printed out or projected on a screen for all to follow)

**Gifts** (optional) for each child/person. These are used after the search for the afikommen.

### ***Recipe for Charosset:***

Ingredients: Dried fruits, nuts, and apples, all finely diced, powdered cinnamon, stick cinnamon, and grape juice/wine, mixed to a consistency of mortar.

The dried fruits and apples should be chopped as finely as possible. They should be mixed with a little juice or wine and cinnamon until it reaches the consistency of mortar. The ideal is for the children or all the participants to help to prepare the charosset, spending the time not only in the preparation, but also in talking about the symbolism<sup>213</sup> of the ingredients. At the end of the process, add the stick cinnamon to represent the straw used to make bricks.

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<sup>213</sup> See page 67, step number 9.

## **Appendix B—Sermons on Being the Body of Christ:**

# **Audacious Request**

**Mark 10:35-45; Acts 8:14-24; 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 2:6-14**

There are things that we would like to request of God that are beyond what we know we should ask. There are times we wish for material blessing or power, and we may recognize that it is not God's will to grant those requests. On the other hand, there are things we fail to request in our lack of understanding God's will for our lives. What should we ask of God? What requests is God pleased to grant His people?

In the Ancient Near East, including Israel, the chief religious concern of the people was the fertility of the land, animals, and people. In order to receive the blessing of the gods in fertility, many approaches centered mainly upon claiming the attention of the gods to whom the people cried. On Mount Carmel, we found the prophets of Baal cutting themselves in order to let the life in their veins flow back to Baal and thus grant them an audience with their god. They cried out in loud voices, hoping that Baal might hear their cries and come down to answer them and spare them some of his attention.

Such was the general mindset of the peoples. They thought that the gods had to be cajoled and pressed in some way to grant the people an audience. Once they had the ear of their gods, the people felt that they might present their requests and inform their gods of their needs. The peoples developed many means to attempt to gain the ear and attention of their gods. This was due in great part to insecurity regarding the gods' concern for the welfare of the people.

To some extent, this was because the people understood their gods to be little more than superhumans. Their concepts of the gods was limited to the basic ideas of the Greek mythologies with respect to power, authority, and character. *Yahweh* was not always considered on the same plane as these lesser deities, but a full understanding of *Yahweh* as being unlimited in power and authority was still developing among the people.

In Ancient Israel, the people still held the same essential concerns as their neighbors about gaining the attention and blessing of God. They did not resort to letting their blood to gain the *Yahweh's* attention, but they did not consider *Yahweh's* attention something to be taken for granted. In the story of Elisha's succeeding Elijah, we should be shocked at the audacity of Elisha's request.

As Elijah is to be taken up in a whirlwind by God, Elisha follows on his heels wherever God leads Elijah to travel. At each major junction, Elijah tells his servant to follow no further, yet Elisha is stubborn in his insistence to follow Elijah to the end. In order to free himself of his shadow, Elijah asks Elisha to make the request that is on his heart. That request seems to stun Elijah. He is not willing to assume the authority of granting Elisha's request.

"May a double share of your spirit be mine." Elisha was requesting that he might be the one to be Elijah's successor as the prophet of *Yahweh*. The double portion referred to the rights and responsibilities

of the first-born son, who was given a double portion of the inheritance. The greater portion of the responsibilities of sonship was laid upon the firstborn, along with a greater portion of material wealth. Elisha requests that he might be anointed and accepted as the true heir to the prophetic ministry of Elijah—*Yahweh's* prophet.

In a context in which the people would not presume to have audience with God, would it not appear audacious to make such a request? Elisha asked that the relationship which Elijah had enjoyed with God might be his as well. Would that God would speak to me as to Elijah, and use me before all Israel in like manner! Elijah seems to have been taken aback by such a request. It seems not to have bothered God in the least.

While the nations were concerned with gaining the ear of their gods, *Yahweh* was in the business of gaining the ear of the people. While the nations were unsure of the responsiveness of their gods to the needs and desires of humanity, *Yahweh* was concerned with helping Israel to know their need to trust God. What any self-respecting Israelite would have deemed an audacious request, *Yahweh* was ready and willing to grant.

God allowed Elisha to see the Elijah being taken up, and confirmed time and again *Yahweh's* presence in the life and ministry of Elisha.

What is it that we desire of God? What is it that plagues our hearts? Are we concerned with things that do not matter in the end? Are we worried with riches and fame as Simon the Magician in Acts chapter 8? Are we focused on power and authority as James and John in Mark chapter 10? Or do we truly desire to know God and place our lives completely in God's service? Are we ready to make an audacious request of God, that we might know and serve God even as Elijah, or are we settling to ask for things that do not really matter?

It would seem at first glance that Elisha was being audacious in his request. Then again, he was asking for the privilege of service and great responsibility. Perhaps it is more audacious of us when we ask for lesser things to satisfy our selfish desires. What request will we make of God?

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## Spiritual Focus

### Isaiah 1:10-20; Matthew 5:38-6:1; Romans 12:21-13:10

Many people seek a church to meet their own needs. They seek fellowship, friends, acceptance, good music, activities for children or youth, comfort, security, or encouragement. These things are good, and we would do well to offer them here. This search, however, focuses on the desires or needs of self. What is the proper focus of true spirituality? What is the proper direction and perspective for this gathering of disciples? What should be center stage for who we are and all we do?

Isaiah came on the scene at a critical period in the life of Israel. The nation was at one more crossroads in their relationship to *Yahweh*. Following God seems to be a constant problem and challenge

for each generation. The Hebrews in Egypt cried out in their distress and *Yahweh* heard their cry. After wandering in the wilderness, Moses called them to faithfulness. At the end of Joshua's leadership, he called them to account for their waywardness and half-hearted devotion. The theme goes on.

In Isaiah's day, following *Yahweh* was still less than normative. Isaiah's scroll opens with a striding critique of a nation claiming to belong to *Yahweh*, but in reality serving only their selfish interests. Isaiah's words paint the picture of a nation embattled in corruption and self-seeking aims that relegated justice and the good of others to the forgotten sidelines of life. Isaiah speaks harshly of a people who have forgotten God's very identity. They have strayed far enough that he can equate them with the destroyed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Despite Isaiah's harsh words, they continue to offer sacrifice and the rituals of worship to *Yahweh* as though there were no problem at all! Who is this nation that Isaiah addresses? How can they ignore Isaiah's biting critique in the midst of their traditional worship of *Yahweh*, God of Israel?

God's words through Isaiah were not comforting. They called the nation to evaluate the focus of their lives. They were going through the motions of worshipping God with the feasts, sacrifices, meetings, and all the other external displays of piety. They were neglecting their mission—their responsibility to care for others and serve God rather than their own interests. They were selfishly serving the structures of religion rather than God.

They had forgotten their origins. When *Yahweh* sent Moses back into Egypt to rescue the band of Hebrew slaves, they were nothing. They were a neglected bunch of downtrodden people with no hope, no future, no purpose, and no position. Now that they had become a nation and chosen to live under a king and an established and respected political structure, they sought to care for themselves and maintain the status and abundance they had come to expect. They failed to recognize how God had dealt with them in mercy, grace, and love. Rather than apply God's attitude of grace toward others, they demanded more for themselves. They focused inward, rather than outward. They confused grace with merit, blessing with deserving, gifts with rights. Isaiah called the nation to account for deviating from God's purpose. They were to mediate the greatness and presence of *Yahweh*, but were too busy trying to make themselves great, instead. God warned them that focusing on themselves would destroy them. They were to serve others.

Jesus called for a refocus of perspective off service to self and toward others. He taught that an external show of religiosity served self, and then only momentarily. His Sermon on the Mount denounced appearance of holiness that masked inner drive for self-service, position, power, and recognition. Jesus called the people to redirect their lives in service to God by meeting the needs of others. Jesus' disciples were to ignore self in order to minister grace. They were to release control over their lives into God's hands. God would supply their needs if they would trust Him.

They labeled Jesus a radical, an extremist, a fool. They came to hear him and watch the show, since he was the strangest thing around. They wanted to write him off, but were confounded by the truth in his words. Jesus' demands were outrageous! Love my enemies? Serve the hated Roman oppressors far beyond what was required? Share with those who might abuse my generosity? Ignore my rights and allow others to run roughshod over me? Give gifts to those who come to steal? How could anyone live according to such outlandish guidelines?

The standards of true spirituality are far above those of human societies, even religious ones. We try too hard to temper Jesus' words and make them fit our own molds and standards of conduct. It would be easier just to ignore them altogether. The problem is that Jesus' demands are at odds with our values, even while we call ourselves Christians. We claim to follow Christ, but in reality we follow our limited

understanding of who we want Christ to be. We don't really want to see Jesus as He is, for that would make us too uncomfortable. We might lose the security of thinking that we have become all that we need to be.

When we find true spirituality, we tend to remove it far from our reality. We want to distance it far enough away to make it impossible to recast our lives in similar molds. We really don't want the full challenge that Jesus issued to those who would be His disciples.

Paul reminded the Roman Christians that life was not about getting more for themselves, but about giving to and loving others. It seems that he took Jesus' words to heart—at face value! “Overcome evil with good! Obey the authorities! Pay all your taxes! Fulfill your every obligation to others! Seek the best for everyone else!” Was Paul serious? Did he mean obey every law, including things like speed limits and reporting all income and benefits to the IRS? Did he mean respecting those who abuse their positions of authority like the Roman governors of his day?

Paul wanted believers to quit focusing so much on themselves. He wanted them to shift the focus of their lives to serving the needs of others. That was Jesus' essential challenge of faith. It was the same challenge that God issued in Isaiah's day. Stop allowing the routines of worship to distract us from focusing outside ourselves. Stop allowing the rituals of religion to obscure our responsibility to be God's presence among others in need. Remember whose we are and from what we were called. Extend the grace that we received to our enemies, to the outcasts of society, to those who are forgotten. Treat others with the grace we have received and trust God to see us through.

Our tendency is ever to focus on ourselves—our own needs and comfort. God calls us to redirect our focus upon the needs of others. Are we willing to accept Jesus' challenge? Can we trust God to meet our needs if we focus our attention on others? Was Jesus serious, or just too extremist?

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## Abrahamic Faith

### Genesis 11:31-12:4; Matthew 10:30-39

Commitment to trust God is simple when we can remain in our established comfort zone. We can look around at friends and neighbors who join us in the challenge of following God and slip into a comfortable commitment. We grow accustomed to our structured lives and ways of doing things. Our routines provide us with security, peace, and comfort. When the structured quality of our lives is attacked, however, we may be forced to step outside of the patterns and structures that provided us with stability. What does it mean to trust God by moving out of our comfort zones? Is it really necessary?

God called Abram. The words sound comforting to us, because they are so familiar. To us, they have become part of the structure and stability of our lives, for we have heard of God's call to Abraham since childhood. God called Abraham to step out of his comfort zone, leaving behind all that he knew. Suddenly, that sounds a little different.

Abram left Haran with his wife and orphaned nephew. He left his aging father behind in Haran. From the ages listed in Genesis 11, Terah was 145 years old when Abram departed to Canaan. He took his possessions, his servants, his wife, and his nephew and left all else.

Realistically, Abram had no hope for a future, for Sarai was barren. In the understanding of the day, he would have no hope of life beyond the grave apart from the extension of life through the children he did not have. While he had no reasonable expectation of a future, God called him to leave behind his past. He was to leave all he had known—his land, his father, his extended family. While the gods were generally considered only to have limited geographical spheres of power, he was to trust God to lead him to a new land. His father had been called to go to Canaan, but had stopped short of the goal. God called Abram to go on.

If Terah were not willing to finish the pilgrimage to Canaan, Abram was to finish it alone. He was to leave his parents behind and follow God. God called him to step into the unknown and trust that God would lead and provide. That is not so comforting a call as we are accustomed to believe.

Perhaps at issue is that we want God's call to Abram to be simple and sweet. We want to find in his example a life of ease, comfort, and gentleness. We crave the same for ourselves. If God's call to Abram was simple to accept and acknowledge, then we can more easily excuse our own reluctance to accept the cost of discipleship in our day.

The words to the beloved hymn come all too readily to mind: "Softly and Tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me. See on the portal, he's waiting and watching, watching for you, and for me." They are words of comfort in a melody designed to soothe the stress on life. If we are not careful, they may also soothe over the demands of faith and the call to discipleship.

We'd rather hear Jesus speaking softly and tenderly than hear the lashings of a whip driving out the money changers from the Temple in Jerusalem. We would rather picture Messiah riding into Jerusalem on a donkey—a symbol of a king coming in peace—than to hear the words of discord in Matthew chapter 10, announcing the difficulties of dividing loyalties between family and God. We prefer not to speak of standing against family, tradition, history, nation, or friends to honor God. We like to believe it is not necessary. For Abram, following God meant leaving family behind. It meant standing against his father's failure to persevere in faithfulness.

We would do well to remember that Terah had been very faithful. He had stepped out in faith, trusting God to protect him as he led his family over hundreds of miles from his home place. He had trusted God, even through the death of a son. He had suffered the loss of his homeland and relocated in exile under the call of God, over 600 miles from his homeland. Terah had trusted God and started out on the pilgrimage. God called Abram to carry on when Terah stopped short.

Terah had gone far under God's direction. He had given up much. He chose to settle down and enjoy some of the blessings and comforts of life. Was that too much to ask? He had had a rough life. A 600-mile trek with all one's belongings in the semi-arid landscape of the time was a hard lot. He had lost a son and was advancing in age. He had put in his time. He had done enough.

God called Abram to carry on. He was to leave his father to spend his last days in Haran. God called him to take up the journey to Canaan. That was a tough decision to make.

Abram could hardly be expected to obey God. After all, he had enough problems without leaving his family behind in Haran. He had lost one brother years before to death. His other brother would not be leaving the region of Haran. He had no children of his own. He was responsible for his orphaned nephew. Now God called him to leave his father and the rest of his family behind and go on. God promised to make him a great nation. God promised him a land for his descendants. God promised him a future.

Why should he trust God? What purpose could there be in following God's direction when it meant leaving his father behind as though he were already dead? He had already come 600 miles from home. God wanted him to travel some 400 miles further to Canaan. Why should he trust God for a glorious future, when his past did not seem very glorious at all?

Pack up and start out on an uncharted course. Trust God to direct and to guide. Trust God for a future, regardless of the past you have known. Leave everything behind, even family, in order to be faithful to God. Those are tough words.

We want to know where we are going. We want to know how we will get there. We want to know how the path will look and what is waiting for us at its end. God says, "Just trust me." We don't like those words.

When we left Brasil a year ago, we did not know where we were headed. Friends told us, "Stay here. We need you. We want you. God is not through with you here." Some said, "Oh, just sign the piece of paper and all will be well. It's only a piece of paper. It's not that important." Others said, "We hate to see you go, but God has a place for you."

It hurt to leave the comfort of the known. It was no easy thing to march into the unknown and say, "God will provide." We wanted desperately to keep things the way they had been. We wanted to hang on to what we knew, what we loved, the people, organizations, and structures that gave us security. We wanted to trust God only as far as we could see into the future.

If we had known what was in store for us, we might never have accepted God's call to serve in Porto Alegre. We would never have walked willingly into the stress, pain, and anxiety we lived through in those final months in Brasil. We would have missed out on the joy and blessings of God.

In 1995, heading to Brasil under Foreign Mission Board appointment was comfortable. We were within our comfort zone trusting God to provide through the faithful organizations and giving of Southern Baptists. We could look into that future of service and foresee God's blessings based on what we had seen in the lives of other missionaries and our experience in Mexico. We weren't really trusting God, we were trusting the human institutions built by Baptists.

God calls us to trust Him, instead. He calls us to lay aside reliance on our personal vision of the future. He calls us to set aside our own desires for comfort and security. He calls us to trust Him, and Him alone.

Are we willing to live up to Abraham's standard of faith? Are we willing to allow God to take us beyond our comfort zones? Are we truly willing to place all in God's hands? If not, what are we living for?

# Fulfilling Purpose

## Isaiah 2:2-8; John 4:15-26; Acts 11:1-12

It is not news to us that God calls us to witness and take the gospel to all the world. Baptists have long identified ourselves with the Great Commission. Churches such as Rocks joined together out of the recognition that Christ tasked us to take the gospel to the entire world. How then, do we fulfill the purpose to which Christ called us? How do we take the message of the gospel to those who need to hear? How do we share the good news of redemption with those who do not come to this place we call holy?

Isaiah speaks of a glorious day when the nations would stream to Jerusalem to learn of God. In Isaiah's time, that was not a reality. The nations were not looking to Jerusalem to hear about the Creator and Sustainer of the world. They were not making pilgrimage to learn how *Yahweh* had freed the Hebrew people and made of them a nation. They were not looking to Israel for guidance in following God. Worship of *Yahweh* was not calling the nations to take notice. Neither was Israel taking the name of *Yahweh* before the world.

They were comfortable in their worship and sense of security. They were unconcerned with being the nation of priests God wanted them to be. Religion and worship of *Yahweh* was just habit, routine, heritage, "the way they'd always done it." It had lost its vitality and meaning. They had lost their vision. They were looking to themselves, caring for their own, but not really concerned with fulfilling the larger plan of God.

Peter had gone to the house of Simon. He had been called there to minister to the needs of the saints. God used him to bring Dorcas back to life. On the heels of that great victory, however, Peter was faced with a crisis of decision in his walk with God. He was to stop making distinction between categories of people: clean or unclean. He was to stop using the artificial category of Jew versus Gentile and be the presence of Christ before all. He was to open his heart to serve anyone, not just those who were like him.

One can only imagine his discomfort on the way to Cornelius. Perhaps we can imagine it as well. He had never eaten with a Gentile. He had never entered a Gentile home. Receiving a Gentile was one thing, but entering a Gentile home was another. It was taboo. Jews were not to eat food that was not kosher and ritually pure. Gentile homes had abominable idols and statues. For Peter to follow the men sent by Cornelius and enter his home was unprecedented.

When Peter returned, he was confronted by the Christian community for failing to maintain conduct expected of a believer. Jews don't mix with that kind of people. A leader of the followers of Jesus should know better than to ruin his reputation and dishonor God. More than that, he was accused of defaming God by baptizing men who were not Jews! The believers were astounded to recognize that God had granted His intimate presence to the Gentiles. They were incredulous, for they had assumed that the gospel of Christ was for Jews alone.

Jesus had shocked the disciples on passing through Samaria. They went into a town to purchase food, leaving Jesus waiting at the well. When they came back, they found him talking with a woman! Jews didn't speak to Samaritans, other than to conduct necessary business. Men did not approach women in public. Was a woman who would draw water at noon the kind of woman with whom a rabbi should speak?

What did he think he was doing? Did he give no thought to keeping up his respectability? What would people think of him acting with such disregard for the proper way to do things?

Jesus had to teach them that God's love included the Samaritans, even though the Jews cast them as unworthy of God. After all, they had mixed themselves with other nations. They disagreed over who were the true nation of Israel—the real remnant. They disagreed on many things, even the proper mountain on which to worship *Yahweh*. They argued over who had proper version of the Scriptures, for the Samaritans had a different version of the Pentateuch. First century Jews would not share food utensils with Samaritans, for such would make them ritually impure.

Jesus did not seem to care much for these arguments, differences, or social and religious injunctions to keep people in their proper places. He was concerned to meet the needs of this woman and share the grace of God with the people of Sychar and his own disciples. John chapter three has shown Jesus decrying that the religious community of Israel needed rebirth to become true sons and daughters of faith—children of Abraham. Now he takes the news of God's redemption into the land of Samaria and shares openly that He is Messiah! That is something he has not done openly in Israel. It would seem that this outcast society was more ready and willing to hear and to follow Jesus' lead than the Jewish establishment.

She was an outsider, rejected by the religious authorities. The Jews considered that a woman could be married no more than twice, but Jesus completely disregards the issue, as He has brushed off the fact that she is a woman and a Samaritan. He did not care for these barriers, but for bridging them. When she brings up the argument of the proper place for worship, Jesus tosses that aside as well. Rather than accept all the arguments against "having dealings with Samaritans," Jesus tosses them all aside to focus on the real issue at hand—worshipping God in spirit and in truth.

He had not come to Samaria to teach his disciples to classify and evade certain types of people. Jesus went through Samaria to destroy the artificial human barriers to exclude people from the news of God's grace. As Jesus broke through the imposed barriers of society to witness to the woman, God used her disreputable witness in her own town to bring others to worship in spirit and truth.

While the Jews awaited the glorious day of Isaiah, Jesus went out in search of those He might call to God. While Peter was busy ministering among the Jews, God invaded his comfort zone, sending him out to the Gentiles. What are we doing to carry God's news of redemption to those outside this building. Peter was not sent to bring Cornelius to Jerusalem, but to take Christ to Cornelius. Jesus did not call the woman to Jerusalem, but offered her God's grace and presence in her own environment. Is that not what it means to serve God in spirit and in truth? Does that service not entail bearing Christ to all, meeting them where they live? Are we concerned about our holy mountain, or are we concerned about taking Messiah before the people? Will we serve in spirit and in truth, or are we too unconcerned? Jesus spoke of food the disciples did not know. Are we ready to take up His fulfilling purpose, or will we just bypass Samaria like any good Jew?

# Meaning of Worship

## Psalm 1; John 8:39-47; James 1:22-2:1

What does it mean to worship? Why are we here, and what do we expect to do, hear, or take away with us? What did Jesus mean on telling the Samaritan woman that true worshippers would worship God “in spirit and in truth.” What is this worship all about? We focus on the presence of God, so that we might take Christ’s presence with us into the world.

James wrote a general letter to Jewish believers scattered throughout the Roman Empire. He called on them to take their focus off themselves and meet the needs of others, especially those neglected by society. Widows and orphans were imperiled persons in the society at large. They found themselves neglected, forgotten, and unseen. Society was much more male-driven than what we know today. A woman not living with a male had no hope. She needed a man to plead her case in the city council, to seek justice, to conduct business. Her word was unacceptable as evidence in court. If she became a widow, the best she could hope for was to return to her father’s house or to that of her son. The elderly and childless were in great peril.

James apparently found that the believers were too caught up in their own pursuits to worry with those who were less fortunate. He calls them to focus their attention and service on those who have no hope to repay their kindness. He asks them to share God’s grace, bounty, and blessing with those who are in true need—simply for the sake of ministering to them. He wanted them to be and do as God in Christ had done for us. While we were undeserving, unrepentant, rebellious, and with no concern to follow God’s will and plans, Christ came to meet us at our need.

Jesus chastised the Jews of his day along the same lines. Forgetting what God had done for the nation of Israel, they prided themselves on having been chosen by God as a special people. Being this special people had become the motive of pride, arrogance, and the disdain of others. They had forgotten grace. They had forgotten their mission. They had forgotten the reason that God had chosen them.

God had never chosen them on the basis of their wonderful deeds, kindness, moral caliber, or their inclination to serve. God had chosen them because they had been no account. The Hebrews had been slaves in Egypt—hardly the elite class by any stretch of the imagination. Jesus came preaching to the neglected in his own society—the poor, the lame, the sick, the lepers. He taught them the good news of God’s acceptance and love. Though their society deemed them to have no worth before God, or even living out God’s punishment for sin, Jesus preached God’s love, grace, forgiveness, and healing.

Jesus called the Jews back to God on the grounds of Abraham’s faith. They were to step out of their position and self-reliance and trust God to care for their needs. Rather than casting their all upon God, however, they wanted to sit on God’s blessings and gorge themselves. They had become selfish and stingy with God’s blessings. They allowed their focus on self to interfere with worship and service to God. They came together to pat themselves on the back and gloat over how God had blessed them above their enemies. In the process, they had lost the meaning of being God’s people.

Psalm 1 calls us to rethink what it means to worship God. We are presented with the merits of choosing God’s way of life. We are to delight in the Torah of *Yahweh*—God’s instruction for our lives. Our translations generally render this as God’s law, but the Torah refers to much more than legal code. It

does not limit itself to the 10 commandments, the Levitical code, or the 613 commands in the Pentateuch on which the Jews based their interpretations of becoming conduct.

Torah is God's instruction. It encompasses the entire Pentateuch, emphasizing the stories of the patriarchs and God's dealings with them. Rather than taking instruction for other sources, the instructions for our lives are in the stories of God's dealings with humanity. That is where we are to seek direction, nourishment, and comfort—not in others, not in ourselves, but in God.

Worship is a process of re-focus for service. We gather to take our eyes and thoughts off of ourselves and our petty concerns to find direction, guidance, and purpose in God. Worship is not about the music. 200 years ago, Baptists were intensely debating whether or not it was alright to have music as part of our church services. Worship is not about formality, or the lack of it. Jesus worshipped God in the Temple, as well as at the well in Samaria. Worship is not about what pleases us, but about our pleasing God.

We please God by recognizing God's presence, care, grace, and love. We please God by focusing our attention off of ourselves and onto God's will and purpose. We please God not so much by coming to this place of worship to find God here, but by refocusing on God here to take God with us into the world. We are here present with God. All too often, we forget to take God with us as we leave this sanctuary—this refuge from the cares of daily life.

How do we care for those cast off by society if they will not come here? We take the grace and presence of God to them. How do we worship God in spirit and in truth? We find God, focus on God, and allow that focus to carry us into a hurting world. We allow God to speak through us, intervene in the rush of our lives, and use us as conduits of God's presence in the midst of a hurting world.

Worship may begin here, but it should not end here. This is just the refueling station. Worship is a lifestyle. It is serving God. It is a life given to focusing on God, day in and day out. It is being present with God, so that God might be present through us. Will we allow God that kind of access to our lives? Or will we relegate God to a couple of hours on Sunday? Do we want worship to be real, or just a formality? The choice is ours.

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## **Surrender: Our Image to His**

### **Genesis 1:24-2:3; John 8:37-47; Romans 8:18-31**

Society sounds few personal responsibility claims, but cries of individual rights constantly bombard us with messages to take charge of our lives. Brad Paisley says he can't wait to make it big, "'cause when you're a celebrity it's adios reality. You can act just like a fool, and people think you're cool just 'cause

you're on TV.”<sup>214</sup> It would seem to be the new American Dream: “my desires are my rights! The world should conform to my will.”

Genesis tells us that we were created for a different track. In detailing the myriad elements that God created, there is a pause to reflect on the creation of humanity. The narrative sets apart the creation of humanity as special and endowed with a special purpose. Much has been made over the phrase, but the context of the passage and the responsibilities detailed for humanity highlight that in creating humanity God gave us a special function and responsibility.

“Let us fashion humanity in our own image and according to our likeness and having dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the face of the earth.” God created humanity, male and female, to represent God upon the earth, serving as steward of all creation with dominion and responsibility over the earth. We were created in God's image, to represent and serve God's interests upon the earth. The problem is that we have never liked the idea of serving God. Rather than surrendering to His image, we strive to take advantage of power and position to serve ourselves.

The Jews have always looked back upon Abraham as their father, claiming the promise and blessings of God given to Abraham. Jesus called them to task on their claims in His day. They were laying claim to their position as Abraham's descendents, but were ignoring their responsibilities to live up to the character. They wanted the freedom to live according to their own desires and yet lay claim to the position and rights afforded by their heritage. They wanted to determine their own lives and ignore the reality of personal responsibility.

In claiming their Abrahamic lineage, they were ignoring what made it special. They ignored the fact that Abraham had surrendered his life to accepting the responsibilities and direction that God had for him. He had accepted God's plan for his life and surrendered self, ambition, and personal desires to following God's direction. He was not perfect, but he surrendered to the picture of life that God had for him. He lived in accordance with his position as God's servant and representative before others. His life called others to surrender their lives in faithfulness and service to *Yahweh*.

In His letter to the Romans, Paul recognizes that there is a difference between what creation was created to become and the reality that has developed. Paul writes that creation itself groans and aches for redemption. We were created to conform to the image of Christ Jesus, but we have not attained that goal. Humanity was designed to serve God and represent God upon the earth even as Jesus fulfilled that purpose. As we have not fulfilled the reason for our existence, not we alone, but all of creation suffers at our hands.

Amid the turmoil, there is hope. Hope of redemption. There is redemption for our lives and redemption for our distress. There is hope, for God is yet at work among us, creating life among the wreckage of our crafting. Paul says that God works all things for the good of those who are called according to His purpose. No matter the disasters of life in our midst, God can create good out of them.

Notice, Paul does not say that all things are good. He does not claim that everything that happens to those who love God is good. He claims that God is redemptive and will bring good out of the hopelessness in which we enmesh ourselves.

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<sup>214</sup> Brad Paisley, “Bein’ a Celebrity”.  
Edition: 2007-11-05

We were created for more that we have accepted to become. We have thwarted God's plan to fashion us into the image of Christ—servants surrendered wholeheartedly to God. And yet, in the midst of the chaos that we make of life, God intervenes to grant redemption in love. We are still called to become more than we have become. We are still offered redemption from our recklessness and self-centered ways. We are called to become true children of Abraham. We are called to conform to the image of God, as portrayed in the surrender of Christ Jesus.

That surrender is redemption. That surrender is to accept the greatest blessings that life can afford—the blessings of God's love and care. After all, if we are willing to surrender all of who we are to God, what do we have to lose? It is for surrender that we were created. It is for service to God that we were given life and breath. This same God who created us for service also gives Himself for us in love.

What can separate us from the love of God for us in Christ Jesus? He who gave Himself for us that we might live, granting us life not once, but twice? Nothing can separate us from God's love, except our own lack of surrender. When it gets down to it, we must answer whether we will live a life seeking to please ourselves and serve ourselves or whether we will surrender to what God has called us to become. Nothing else can separate us from God's love—only our own selfishness.

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## **Surrender: A Body United**

### **Psalm 133-134; Mark 9:33-42; Ephesians 4:1-13**

Today is Baptist World Alliance Day on the Southern Baptist calendar. Today we celebrate unity among Baptists around the world. This unity is based on our common acceptance of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the mission that binds us into one body of faith. It is a day to remember that we are a small part of a global people bearing witness to God's love and gospel of redemption.

From our earliest beginnings, Baptists have sought out means to come together to accomplish what the local gathering of believers could not accomplish. Over the years, we have formed societies, associations, and conventions. As missionary efforts resulted in new Baptist bodies overseas, we recognized the need to develop Baptist unity beyond national borders. Ninety-nine years ago, Southern Baptists helped to form the Baptist World Alliance, the largest example of unity and cooperation among Baptists around the world, now uniting 211 Baptist unions and conventions around the world. This alliance was designed to unite Baptists worldwide, lead in world evangelism, respond to people in need, and to defend human rights. Baptists of this alliance represent the fruit of missionary efforts throughout the world, including that of missionaries from England, Germany, Korea, Mexico, and Brazil. We can celebrate, for much has been accomplished over the last ninety-nine years to spread the gospel around the world.

Amid celebration of what has been accomplished is a certain irony, for the SBC Executive Committee is meeting this month to vote on a proposal to sever ties with the Baptist World Alliance. The BWA was created to foster unity and cooperative mission among the world of Baptists, but now SBC

officials propose to sever the ties we created. In this month's newsletter,<sup>215</sup> you will find a partial list of individuals and entities from six continents who have written to express their dismay at this proposal before the executive committee. Their dismay is my own as well.

The Bible calls us to unity. Psalm 133 speaks to the blessings of living in harmony with fellow servants of God. Psalm 134 calls us to praise and serve God as one. The call is not optional. It is a command. Jesus speaks to the disciples in Mark 9 about welcoming and accepting all who come in His name, with emphasis on the insignificant members of society. He chastises them for worrying about who is greatest, prompting them to focus on accepting and receiving all. When they reported stopping one who was not of their band from casting out demons in Jesus' name, He reprimanded them. He told them that it would be better to die than to cause another to fall away. Jesus called the disciples to set their own interests aside to receive others. It was no small request.

Paul understood the need for unity. He knew firsthand the problems with forcing conformity on issues of faith. He had done his share of forcing his understanding of truth on others. When he encountered Jesus, God ripped apart the box in which Paul had tried to enclose the Almighty. Jesus' call for unity in purpose and service was passed on to Paul. Paul saw fit to pass it on to Christians in Ephesus, Corinth, Galatia, and Philippi.

In Ephesians 4, Paul reminds us of the constant need to strive for building bridges of unity to enable us to fulfill our mission. We are but one body in Christ Jesus and we are to strive to live in harmony with one another. We are to seek the things that edify us in unity, even shunning those who engender division, dissension, and controversy.<sup>216</sup> "Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ."<sup>217</sup>

Paul didn't think too much of most doctrinal controversies of his day. He called some garbage in contrast to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus. He spoke harshly of, and to, those who would press their personal views upon others while destroying the unity of the body of Christ by forcing the conformity of legalism. He urged believers to come together in love and humility, uniting in the service of the gospel. He urged us to lead lives worthy of our calling in humility, gentleness, patience, and loving forbearance.

He also told us not to allow ourselves to be deceived by empty words, but to expose that which is not of God. We are to discern God's will and follow Christ. His path is unity. His desire is that we reflect that we are one body—not just those of us at Rocks Baptists Church, but Baptists around the globe, even all Christians. We need not give up our identity as Baptists. We need not give up our personal convictions. We must give up misplaced loyalties, our submission to any lordship other than that of Christ Jesus. We are charged with growing together as the singular spiritual body we are. "For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all."<sup>218</sup>

Our convention leadership is failing to make "every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."<sup>219</sup> They choose to work for unity limited by constricted doctrinal parameters. They have

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<sup>215</sup> [http://www.mainstreambaptists.org/harbin\\_bwa.htm](http://www.mainstreambaptists.org/harbin_bwa.htm)

<sup>216</sup> Titus 3:9-11.

<sup>217</sup> NRSV, Ephesians 4:15.

<sup>218</sup> NRSV, Ephesians 4:4-6.

<sup>219</sup> NRSV, Ephesians 4:3.

chosen not to put away falsehood, but bear false witness<sup>220</sup> of others to excuse their failure to reach the mark. They are taking the path of division. Rather than growing together as one body into Christ, they demand for conformity to a political agenda. Some choose to sacrifice alliance with fellow Baptists to promote a cause other than conformity to Christ.

Baptist leaders around the world did not write to say “Good riddance!” Rather, they show grace by calling on Southern Baptists to remain at the table of global fellowship. They show patience in asking Southern Baptists to partner, dialogue, and minister with the diverse members of the body of Christ around the world. They have pleaded for Southern Baptists to stand against division and for unity. They recognize that the body of Christ must stand united in the gospel, not divided by personal agendas.

How shall we answer their call to unity? How shall we answer Paul’s call to unity? How shall we answer the claim of Christ Jesus over our lives? “United, we stand; divided, we fall” by failing to live up to the demands of the gospel. Which path shall we choose? Will we surrender all to be the presence of Christ, or will we be the cause of another’s stumbling?

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## Surrender to God’s Love

1<sup>st</sup> Kings 17:8-16; Matthew 6:25-34; Romans 8:31-39

How am I going to get through this? I don’t see how things will ever work out! What can I do about it? We concern ourselves with many things that we cannot control. We worry about a future that we cannot foretell. We fret over uncertainties we can do little or nothing to change. Jesus calls us not to worry. Is it so difficult to trust God’s love and provision for our needs?

When Elijah came to Zarephath, he brought a challenge to a poor widow. *Yahweh* had sent him to speak to her, charging both Elijah and this widow with trusting God to provide for them. I am not sure that I would have wanted to be in Elijah’s sandals. He was told to ask her to give of the meager resources at her disposal to feed a foreign prophet.

She knew who he was. She knew of the confrontation between Elijah and Ahab, king of Israel. She knew that *Yahweh* had spoken through Elijah that the heavens would be sealed against Baal’s reported power to bring rain and fertility. Drought had come over the land since Elijah’s words to Ahab. Baal had been unable or unwilling to thwart *Yahweh* and send rain.

Elijah called this widow from Jezebel’s homeland to trust *Yahweh* to provide for her needs. Placing my own life at risk by trusting God’s provision is one thing. Challenging someone else to risk their livelihood by trusting God is another. Elijah had experienced God’s provision at the brook now dried-up. Based on that experience of God’s faithful love and provision, he accepted the charge to call this poor, idolatrous widow to trust to God’s love and provision for her as well.

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<sup>220</sup>Ephesians 4:25. See footnote 1, Rocks Baptist Church newsletter, Feb/2004.

When Jesus spoke of God's love, he often spoke of provision. That major issue consumed the people of long ago. It was the issue underlying the fertility cults prevalent throughout the ancient world and is still the major issue that consumes the anxieties of people around the globe. All too often, we worry about financial resources and provision of things beyond our control. While our nation might not be as preoccupied with financial provision, we allow health and safety concerns to control much of our time, energy, and thought. Jesus addressed the underlying issue of these concerns as being our need to trust God's love and provision.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed the issue of God's care, love, and provision. He reminded us of the care God takes of the birds and the lilies. His message was to trust God into the unknown future, relying on God to provide for our needs. The message was simple, but it turned many people away, for it seemed ridiculous. The rich young ruler could not bring himself to give everything away to the poor and trust God to supply his needs. It was somehow easier for a poor widow to place her mite in the temple coffers than for the rich to trust God to supply their needs. Those who do not have control over their lives often can more easily trust God to provide, for they have no other means. Those who have more control find it harder to give it up.

"Be anxious for nothing.... Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ...seek first God's rule in your life and His righteousness, and He will supply your needs." Those words are simple, but hard to live by.

Paul said that God's love makes trusting God worth the risk. Nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus. God's provision may not match our desires, but God's love transforms everything and every event in our lives for our benefit. If nothing can separate us from God's love, can we not trust Him to provide for our needs? If nothing can interfere with God's will to work all things for our good, can we not trust Him to meet our daily needs and provide us with a future?

Probably our biggest obstacle to trusting God's love and provision is that we don't recognize our true needs. Since we don't understand what life is really about, we worry about things that are just not important. Alabama sings a song that summarizes the worry that pervades our society:

*I'm in a hurry to get things done.  
Oh, I rush and rush until life's no fun.  
All I really gotta do is live and die,  
But I'm in a hurry and don't know why.<sup>221</sup>*

Though time may not be our biggest worry, it is worry that destroys the joy of living. Worry replaces confidence in God's love and provision and keeps us from resting in and enjoying God's care.

Worry is a thief. It steals the joy out of life. It keeps us from accepting and trusting God's love and provision. It keeps us from experiencing the fullness of life that God has for us.

If the widow of Zarephath had not risked laying worry aside to trust *Yahweh's* faithful provision, would her resources have lasted the drought? If Elijah had not trusted God's provision through the means of a destitute widow, how would he have eaten? If we are loathe to trust God to meet our needs and shower us with His love, how will we experience the true joy of life that God has in store for us?

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<sup>221</sup> Alabama. *American Pride*. "All I Really Gotta Do is Live and Die (But I'm in a Hurry and Don't Know Why)". 2000.  
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Nothing has the power to separate us from God's love. If God loves us, He will provide for our needs. When worry creeps in, it destroys the blessings and joy of God's provision. We often rush around so much that we lose track of where we are headed. We can worry about things that make too little difference in the long run and lose track of what is important—what life is really all about.

Few things are truly necessary for us to do. Worry is not one of them. We have a God who loves us, and in loving provides for our needs. Are we up to the challenge of surrendering to His love and provision? Are we up to the challenge of enjoying God's blessings, or will we hold tightly to our perceived control over our lives? If we are not careful, we may allow worry to keep us from enjoying God's greatest blessings: His love and provision.

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, make your requests known to God with thanksgiving.”<sup>222</sup> It sure beats the worry and pressure of having to be in control.

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## Body of Christ: Providing

1<sup>st</sup> Kings 17:14-24; Matthew 7:7-20; 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 8:3-15

When we think of being the body of Christ, we may be tempted to dwell on the privilege it affords us. Being the body of Christ makes us special. Perhaps we glory in our knowledge of and relationship to God. Perhaps we pat ourselves on the back for being so loved by God that He called us into His family. Perhaps we miss the point. Being Christ's body has much more to do with our responsibility to portray Christ before others.

We are called to be the body of Christ. As such, we are Christ's physical presence in the world. Christians, then, are to do as Christ would do, extending His ministry in our surroundings. Among other things, that requires that we provide for others.

Elijah was not just God's spokesman—he represented God. His coming announced *Yahweh's* presence and action among the people. Even in the land of Baal, he heralded God's presence before such as the widow who accepted the challenge to trust *Yahweh* to meet her needs. In heralding God's presence, he met material needs. Meeting the human needs was one of *Yahweh's* prime traits. It was a calling card that helped Israel remember to return to God in service.

As *Yahweh* met the widow's needs through Elijah, she came to understand God's loving character and trust *Yahweh* to be faithful to her. She did not expect to find a loving God coming to her. The gods of the nations, like Baal, were not loving and caring, but had to be cajoled not to forget the plight of those who served them. They were as self-absorbed as men who allow power and wealth to blind their eyes to the needs of those less fortunate than themselves. Her cry to Elijah was a cry of desperation—a cry of “I knew this was a bad idea! I should never have trusted you!” She considered that Elijah had not come to meet her

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<sup>222</sup> Philippians 4:6.

needs at all, but to herald before *Yahweh* her own sinfulness. She began to feel that she would have been better off without being brought to God's attention.

In the midst of her turmoil and distress, Elijah took the dying child and restored him to health. In so doing, he did not simply restore the child's health, but the woman's faith and understanding of *Yahweh's* love and care for her. She received a healthy son, and a healing faith as well. She began to truly understand that God cared for her.

Peter characterized Jesus' ministry as "going around doing good."<sup>223</sup> This summary was not a comprehensive statement of Jesus' ministry, and yet Peter understood Jesus' merciful actions to be a major portion of his teaching ministry. One of the core elements of God's character presented in the Sermon on the Mount is the aspect of God's love, care, and calling us into His presence. Jesus taught confidence in approaching God. He preached a God with arms open to receive humanity. We are called to ask and receive audience with God. He are told to knock and be invited into God's presence. We are told that God cares for our needs and response to us in love. We are then taught to treat others in the same manner as God treats us—with love, acceptance, and generosity.

Peter pointed to Jesus teaching us by example to use power and authority to help the oppressed as an expression of God's love. Jesus also spoke of our responsibility to care for others as His disciples. Just as meeting the needs of the hungry, poor, sick, and disabled characterized His earthly ministry, it should characterize ours. This was not the only aspect of Jesus' ministry, but it was a core ingredient to establish his identity and God's loving character. He warned that meeting the needs of others becomes a test of the genuine character of one's faith. In John's words, "Since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another."<sup>224</sup> Love expresses itself in care.

Paul wrote the Corinthian Christians to give generously to meet the needs of Jewish Christians suffering with the ravages of a famine in Palestine. He impressed upon them how Macedonian Christians had given sacrificially and joyfully to aid those suffering famine in Palestine. This was an overflow of Christ's love and character flowing through them. Paul characterized it as an expression of the fullness of the gospel. He said it is one thing to know God, but knowledge is only complete when it bears fruit in the genuine expression of meeting the needs of others.

As Peter, Paul points to Jesus' example in giving His riches to meet the needs of the poor. It is the model of Jesus' life that we are to follow. It is in emulating Him that we truly become Christians, for then knowledge and surrender bear fruit in action. We are called to be His body, and indeed we are. It is in living out that reality, however, that we truly begin to understand who Christ Jesus is. We begin to know Him more fully when we allow Him to act in and through us.

Being the body of Christ—His presence on earth—includes caring for the needs of those around us, and even those far away. Lottie Moon exemplified Jesus' care for meeting needs by baking cookies to share with children in China. It was in this service that doors opened for her to teach others of the love of Christ that enabled her to share. Long ago, other women joined Lottie's giving spirit by joining her in giving sacrificially to share God's love by meeting the needs of those who still need to know of Jesus' love.

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<sup>223</sup> Acts 10:38.

<sup>224</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:11.

Following the example of Christ, we share God's provision for our own needs reaching out to Liberia with seeds of love. In doing so, we become the body of Christ—the corporate expression of Jesus' love and presence in a hungry world. We share the gift of God's love, trusting God to meet our own needs, even as we take our own resources, energy, and position to help others in need. We are His hands. We are His feet. We are His people. We are His body.

We love, for He first loved us and gave His own life as a ransom for our own. It is up to us to find ways to express the same love and care for others. This is being the body of Christ: giving all we are that He might live through us. How else shall all know that we are His disciples?

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## Body of Christ: Encouraging

1<sup>st</sup> Kings 19:9-18; Luke 22:31-41; 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 2:14-3:5

Sometimes the stresses of life bear down upon us. We may find ourselves struggling to make it through the day or even the hour. We may even struggle with issues of faith and whether faith is real or whether we are the only ones who struggle to allow our relationship and confidence in God to make a difference in our lives. Despair may force itself upon us, tempting us to believe that we are utterly alone and there is no hope—no way out.

As the body of Christ, we are called to encourage the downhearted and downtrodden. We are called to lift the spirits of others, pointing them to God's love and care. It's hard to do that when despair invades our own lives.

That is precisely where Elijah found himself the week after the great confrontation on Mount Carmel. God had proven beyond doubt that Baal was impotent, but when Jezebel issued threats against his life, he plunged into great despair. God had proven to be powerful, great, and faithful, but the very leaders of Israel had simply ignored *Yahweh*, returning once more to worshipping Baal. Elijah fled into the desert, fearing for his very life. All that he had done and that *Yahweh* had done through him had been for naught! Even in the face of Mount Carmel, the people had proven to be utterly unfaithful. He had nothing more to live for, seeing as his ministry was having no effect at all. He was ready for God to take him out of the picture. He lay down and asked God to end his life, for he had no more hope. Despair had settled upon him, and it wasn't letting go.

Elijah lay down in the midst of the wilderness, begging to die. God sent one to feed him and strengthen him for the journey ahead. Rested and fed, Elijah journeyed through the wilderness to a cave at the mountain of God. The Word of *Yahweh* visited him there: "What are you doing HERE, Elijah?" From the question, it would seem that Elijah's long journey had been pointless, and yet *Yahweh* had fed him, rested him, and strengthened him to make the long trek. "What are you doing HERE, Elijah?"

"Oh, Lord, I have been very zealous for *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, but those people are so unfaithful! They have ignored that *Yahweh* is truly God—the only God—and they have gone right back to worshipping Baal! It is just so pointless! I am the only one who is faithful, the only one who is willing to

serve you, but it is just no use! They don't listen! They have killed all the others who were serving you with integrity, and there is no one else left. Now, they are trying to kill me, too! I've had enough!"

God sent Elijah to stand outside the cave and await *Yahweh* to pass by. A great breath blew by, breaking the very rocks and forcing them apart before *Yahweh*, but *Yahweh* was not in that great demonstration of power. Then came an earthquake and shook all the land, but *Yahweh* was not in that great demonstration of power. Then came a great consuming fire, but *Yahweh* was not in that great demonstration of power. Then came a profound silence. At that silence, Elijah covered his face and stood before *Yahweh*. "What are you doing HERE, Elijah?"

"Oh, Lord, I have been so zealous for *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, but the people have ignored and despised their God! I am the only faithful one left, and they are trying to kill me, too!"

"Elijah, go on back where you belong and wait for me. All is not over. You cannot see the end right now, but judgement will come in due course. Oh, by the way, there are still another seven thousand men who have not bowed down to Baal, but remain faithful to me. Don't worry so much about those visible signs of power, for I come in the quiet stillness and find those who seek my presence. I have more for you to do, so get up and let's get back on track. I have servants for you to anoint, a remnant you do not imagine."

Jesus knew that his disciples would fail. He knew that despair would overtake them and accepted it as a reality of human life. He did not accept, however, that his disciples remain despondent. He prayed for them to regain strength, courage, and purpose to encourage others as well. On the night of Jesus' betrayal, he called on Peter to return and strengthen the rest of the disciples after he had recovered from betraying Jesus.

It seems a very strange way to address someone: "After you are through betraying me and come to your senses, encourage the rest to be faithful once more!" Jesus accepted our failure of strength and character. He prayed for our encouragement and calls on us to encourage one another as well. Despair and dejection seems lonely, but it is all too common.

Paul wrote to encourage Christians who were struggling with a lack of strength. He reminded them of God's love and the strength they had in God's care. Apparently, they needed reminding, much as we often need to be reminded. Even as he writes to comfort and strengthen them, he calls on these same Christians to pray for his own encouragement. We were given the task to encourage one another—specifically because we need reminding that we are not alone.

Without encouragement, we are tempted to fall into despair. Without encouragement, we are tempted to believe that no one else is faithful. Without encouragement, we are tempted to determine that we are no longer fit to serve God. Without encouragement, we are tempted to believe that we must accomplish the mission before us on our own strength.

Jesus did not see himself as able to face the tragedy and horror of crucifixion. Christ had to turn to God for comfort, strength, peace, and encouragement. On the way to the cross, He took the time to encourage those He knew would forsake Him. He told them to encourage others as well.

As the stresses of life bear down upon us, we must remember that they bear down on others as well. We need the encouragement of the body of Christ, just as we need to encourage those around us who struggle with their own burdens. If Jesus could take the time to encourage Peter on His own way to the

cross, should we do less? If the burdens of others are lighter than our own, maybe we should be carrying their burdens, instead of our own.

Are we up to the challenge?

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## Body of Christ: Confronting

1<sup>st</sup> Kings 21:15-24; John 2:13-22; Acts 5:1-11

Confrontation is not a nice word. We generally avoid it like the plague. We have heard so often of turning the other cheek that confrontation sounds anti-Christian. We are tempted to ignore issues that call for confrontation, since the very idea makes us uncomfortable. Perhaps we equate confrontation with animosity. Perhaps we just don't understand what confrontation is all about and consider it too risky.

Elijah's ministry was filled with confrontation. God used him to challenge people to faith and understanding who *Yahweh* truly was. It didn't make him popular with the king, but that was not Elijah's fault. The king had distanced himself from following *Yahweh's* will and direction. As *Yahweh's* spokesman, it was Elijah's responsibility to confront Ahab with the true nature of his actions. While we may overlook it, in Elijah's words of warning and pronouncement of doom, there is room for Ahab to repent. Ahab chooses to harden his heart against God and live under the direction of his own desires.

Jesus' life and ministry conjures up many pictures in our minds. "Softly and Tenderly" has etched its own image on our minds of a Jesus who never spoke a harsh word and never made people uncomfortable. The Gospel of John discards that image immediately in its first chapter, clarifying the point in chapter two with a picture of how Jesus made people uncomfortable.

Temple worship in Jerusalem had veered from the definitions and requirements in the Pentateuch. Religious leaders determined which animals might be sacrificed, effectively ruling out animals that might have been brought in by individuals. The Temple tax had to be paid in coinage authorized by Temple authorities. To this end, moneychangers set up their booths, charging four to eight percent profit from those who did not have appropriate coinage. This use of the Temple grounds for economic activities was thwarting the purpose of worship.

Disgusted with the way the Temple was being used for extortion and reasons other than worship, Jesus fashioned a whip of cords to drive the offenders away. Jesus could not condone the actions of these merchants and moneychangers. He also could not simply ignore them. In His role as prophet, mediating God's presence, let alone being God incarnate, this abuse of the Temple was not something for Him to ignore. He confronted the offenders in a very direct manner, reminding them of how Scripture called for the Temple to be dedicated solely to the worship of God. It was not a place for serving selfish interests. They had transformed it into a place of greed, extortion, and profit.

Jesus confronted the moneychangers and merchants with the inappropriateness of their actions. He confronted the rest of the people as well. In all actuality, they were just as guilty for allowing the

inappropriate activities to go on. We often see Jesus portrayed as whipping the people, but He used the whip to drive out the animals. He did not set the birds free, but ordered the merchants to remove them. He confronted them with the issue at hand and dealt with that issue alone.

We often portray Jesus' actions as righteous anger, but that goes beyond the gospel texts. He modeled confrontation not in anger, but with authority. In the same breath, he drove out the merchants and taught the people to worship God. Matthew links Jesus' cleansing of the Temple to receiving and curing the blind and lame. Jesus confronted the excesses and brought people back to the heart of worship.

In Acts, Luke records an account of Barnabas giving up land he owned to share the proceeds with needy believers. On the heels of that account, Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property, pretending to do the same as Barnabas. They intended to appear to be what they were not. From Peter's words of confrontation, their actions were a challenge to God's knowledge. Peter confronted them with the false character of their piety. He confronted them with their hypocrisy, clarifying that God is above our ability to deceive.

Luke says the fear came upon those who heard of the event. This is the standard expression for awe before God. God's confrontation through Peter awakened in the community a sense of respect and worship that seems to have been lacking. Notice that Peter is not involved in the death of either Ananias or Sapphira. His only role is to challenge them to clarify their stand and speak for truth. He does not actually condemn them, but seems completely surprised at the false nature of their actions. He announces God's message, but God is the One who acts in justice.

Confrontation is an emotionally difficult issue for us to deal with. In part, because it requires us to have courage to match our convictions. Elijah did not take lightly the matter of confronting the king. He knew that it might result in his own death. Jesus was well aware that raising issue with the misuse of the Temple would have consequences. He knew that there would be opposition, but He could not be silent on important issues. Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira in an uncomfortable situation. There was a risk in confronting them. What if he had misunderstood God? What if he himself were wrong? He decided that taking the risk to follow God's direction was more important than facing the risks of ignoring it.

Confrontation is not easy for us. It is not something to take lightly. To confront, we must have courage to match our convictions. We must also allow God to act as God desires. Confrontation is not the same as attacking others, nor the same as anger. It is speaking the Word of God with integrity, knowing that there may be a personal cost involved. It is having the courage to stand for our convictions.

As the body of Christ, we are called to confront the world with the truth of God's message. We are called to live lives that reflect God's will, character, and love. We are called to awaken others to the demands of the gospel—a life laid upon the altar of faith.

Are we up to the challenge? Do we have the courage to stand for our convictions, while discerning our own failings? Will we be the body of Christ, or will we serve our own interests instead? Confrontation may be risky. It must be applied with humility rather than anger.

# Body of Christ: Standing for Truth

1<sup>st</sup> Kings 22:13-23; John 9:24-34; Acts 4:8-20

Truth is a tricky thing. On the one hand, truth is a reality. On the other hand, humanity is too finite to grasp its complexities. There are truths we can depend on, but we cannot always be sure that we have understood the truth in its fullest sense. For centuries, the church held that the earth was a flat disk around which the sun traveled. That stance called Galileo to recant his findings or be condemned as a heretic. When we face the uncertainties and complexities of life, how can we be sure that we stand upon truth, rather than our misconceptions of it? As the presence of Christ, how are we to stand for the truth of the gospel we don't fully understand?

When Micaiah was called to prophesy before the king of Israel, he was given disturbing instructions. They told him that his word needed to agree with what all the other prophets were saying. These others claimed to be *Yahweh's* prophets, just as Micaiah. They all spoke in one accord, encouraging the King of Israel to proceed in war against Ramoth-gilead. Micaiah had to make a decision. He had to decide whether to speak in agreement with the other prophets or to be true to the message of *Yahweh*. It was a difficult position. Standing faithfully for God is often a difficult task. It requires courage to match one's convictions, as well as the humility to discern between one's own thoughts and the thoughts of God.

The generally expected word from *Yahweh* should have been in agreement with the other prophets. *Yahweh* had spoken innumerable times of giving victory over Israel's enemies. Victory was to be expected, for that was *Yahweh's* promise. There were other issues at hand, however. There was the question of the king's ambition, greed, and materialism. There was the question of dependence upon *Yahweh* for victory, versus dependence upon the strength of the Israelite army. Even so, standing to speak against victory would appear as taking a traitorous position. Micaiah knew that the message he was to deliver would not be well received. He knew he might suffer for standing true to God. He took the risk, was slapped, and sent to prison. En route he affirmed that if the king returned in peace they would know that *Yahweh* had not spoken through him.

The blind man of John 9 faced a difficult situation. He had been blind since birth and Jesus had given him sight. His own parents were afraid to answer the synagogue authorities regarding how his sight had been restored. On being confronted by these leaders, he had to choose how he would answer them. They had already declared Jesus a heretic and that any who declared Jesus to be the Messiah would be thrown out of the synagogue. Any positive confession he might make regarding Jesus would be unacceptable to them. Standing for the truth would reflect negatively on his own parents, who were afraid to take a stand.

He chose to confront these leaders with the truth as he knew it. He did not delve into matters of speculation and uncertainties. He simply addressed the issue from the standpoint of what he knew with certainty. He testified of what he knew. He shared his experience without making unnecessary explanations. In so doing, he forced others to face the issues for themselves. He accepted that their reactions might not be positive. He recognized that he might suffer consequences for his stance. He took the risk, trusting the resulting reactions of others to God.

For Peter and John, standing true for Christ placed them in an uncomfortable situation. They were fully aware that the Temple authorities wanted to silence and punish them for speaking in the name of Jesus.

That had been stated openly. They knew that they were enjoying momentary popular support in the wake of a healing. They also knew that continuing to stand for Jesus would increase their difficulties with Jewish authorities. They had to define their allegiance to Christ—was standing firm for their convictions worth ridicule, suffering, and even death?

Authorities of their day had the right to use corporal punish rather freely. Jewish authorities had the right to condemn non-Romans to death for reasons other than sedition. While they were under Rome's watchful eye, they could still mete out punishment by flogging, beating, or stoning. As far as the Romans were concerned, beatings were useful tools to verify the accuracy of one's testimony. Standing against the will of the Jewish authorities of the day was not a simple matter to brush aside. Their threats were not empty words designed to bully those over whom they had no real power. They had plenty of power to wield among their own people. The Romans might wield supreme political power, but Jewish authorities still had plenty of room to exercise their own will and muscle.

Faith and conviction mattered to them. It mattered enough to confront a nation and its rulers with the truth of Jesus Christ. It mattered enough to take a solid stance before those who opposed them. This stance was not made in anger or antagonism. It was taken in sincerity, honesty, and with courage. They set aside issues of personal comfort, popularity of their position, and their own "pursuit of happiness." They recognized that faith and standing for their faith might bring conflict with those who would not accept their witness. Standing for the truth of the gospel was not optional for them. Failing to make a solid stance would be to turn their backs on Christ. That was not an acceptable option.

Micaiah faced prison for truthfully proclaiming God's word. The blind man faced rejection from the synagogue and estrangement from his own family. Peter and John faced the wrath of the Jewish authorities of their day. Daniel faced plots against his life and a den of hungry lions. Samuel faced an off-balance, angry king. Elijah faced 450 false prophets supported by a powerful queen. Moses faced the Pharaoh of Egypt. Stephen faced Jews that were angry over declarations of Jesus as Messiah and God incarnate. Paul faced crowds of plotting Jews of which he had been a part.

They all recognized that faith demanded taking a stand that included risk. They accepted that being true to God has a price tag. They were willing to pay the price. They did not march out to attack the world, but they stood to defend God's Word in honesty and integrity. They stood firm to bear witness of what God had done for them and to affirm God's message through them to the world.

Are we willing to make the same kind of stand for our own faith? The truth of the gospel requires that Jesus' followers stand openly for Him. The gospel took Jesus to the cross, there to proclaim God's love in the face of human sin. Being the body of Christ demands that we make the same stand for the truth of the gospel we have accepted. God is true and faithful, and it is for God's truth that we stand, not our limited understanding of reality.

Will we make the necessary stand for God's truth, or just sidestep the issues we face? We may well find ourselves in a difficult situation. Is standing for the truth worth it? Shall we stand against it instead? Whom shall we call "Lord?" Isn't that the real question?

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# Body of Christ: Integrity of Stance

1<sup>st</sup> Kings 22:24-34; John 10:27-38; Acts 7:49-60

Integrity is a word that seems lost in current society. We are too comfortable with political “spin” and “cover-up” to reclaim speech and living that reflect integrity. What does integrity mean? IMB leadership told me integrity means different things to different people. Integrity is supposed to refer to wholeness that results from the relationship between honesty and upright character. It is being true to one’s beliefs in word and deed. Is that no longer possible?

Micaiah stood for something. His deeds matched his words. He lived in accordance with his convictions. He did not allow the discomfort of opposition to silence him. He lived a life that confessed his beliefs and convictions. He did not go around pointing fingers at all who were in disagreement with him, but he was known for the purity of his stance. He spoke in accordance with his convictions; he also lived according to them. He trusted the validity of his convictions and built his life upon them.

His faith was real. It was true. His confidence in God was more than words to place on paper or to fill the air. His convictions were the basis of his actions. They expressed themselves in the decisions he made. He stood steadfastly for *Yahweh* in the midst of great pressure to conform to what everyone else was saying. The king’s words show that this was a constant for Micaiah, not a one-time thing.

Micaiah was a model for integrity. His beliefs, actions, and words were in harmony. He truly lived and believed what he said. He was the same person through and through. He would not bottle God up, neither would he use God-talk to advance his own agenda. As a whole, His life had meaning. He was what we might call a hero, for he lived faith as we profess it ought to be lived. His words, his beliefs, and his actions were of one accord.

Jesus spoke with integrity about God’s character and identity. He did not adapt his words or deeds to conform to what people wanted to hear. He did not allow social pressure to dictate what he said or did. He stood for what he believed; He taught what he believed; and He matched the truth of His words with the actions he took.

He forced no one to conform to His teaching and beliefs, yet He spoke with conviction and lived in accordance with the teaching on His lips. He challenged others to measure His words and actions and search their own actions, motives, and attitudes. He spoke of being one with the Father. His actions portrayed that unity and purity of heart. He called others to assess His words on the basis of His actions and their relationship to the teachings that He set forth. He expected them to measure the integrity of His teaching by the consistency of His living.

He met resistance along the way. His audience picked up stones one more than one occasion to stone Jesus for teachings they could not accept. They could not comprehend the things He said, but they could not find contradiction in the way he taught and the way he lived. The intimacy that He shared with the Father flowed naturally into His words, for it was real.

Stephen was a man of integrity and faith. He stood for what he believed and spoke honestly of his faith in Christ Jesus. It cost him his life. We call him a martyr, since he died professing his faith in Christ.

We tend to overlook that the term “martyr” really means “witness.” It would seem that using the term martyr helps us distance ourselves from using Stephen as an example for our own lives.

We don’t want to be martyrs, for we are just not sure that faith is something that we are to die for. Oh, we proclaim that faith is real. We can easily speak of God’s love, grace, peace, and comfort. We can wonder how someone could live their lives and face the stresses of cancer, death, separation, and pain without a firm relationship with God. We are just not sure about suffering or dying for the faith we profess.

Hear a few words from Zimbabwe:

*I’m a part of the fellowship of the unashamed. The die has been cast. I have stepped over the line. The decision has been made. I’m a disciple of His and I won’t look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still. My past is redeemed. My present makes sense. My future is secure. I’m done and finished with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tamed visions, mundane talking, cheap living, and dwarfed goals.*

*I no longer need preeminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits, or popularity. I don’t have to be right, or first, or tops, or recognized, or praised, or rewarded. I live by faith, lean on His presence, walk by patience, lift by prayer, and labor by Holy Spirit power.*

*My face is set. My gait is fast. My goal is heaven. My road may be narrow, my way rough, my companions few, but my guide is reliable and my mission is clear. I will not be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded, or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice or hesitate in the presence of the adversary. I will not negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity.*

*I won’t give up, shut up, or let up until I have stayed up, prayed up, paid up, and preached up for the cause of Christ. I am a disciple of Jesus. I must give until I drop, preach until all know, and work until He comes. And when He does come for His own, He’ll have no problems recognizing me. My colors will be clear!<sup>225</sup>*

The young African pastor who wrote those words was killed for the faith he lived and professed. These were words of integrity—wholeness. His was a full commitment to serve God. Faith was real to him, and it flowed naturally through his words and actions. He was a man of true integrity.

Will we allow integrity to take root in our lives? Do we have the moral courage to make our faith real? When faith is real, it cannot be hid. If it is not real, it is worthless.

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<sup>225</sup> Original source unknown. Received as email on 10 Feb 2004.

# Body of Christ: Heralding God

2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 1:1-8; John 5:30-40; Romans 10:8-17

Where is God? We most often ask this question when we face circumstances that we do not understand. We are supposed to know, but it often seems that we forget the simple fact of God's presence. Can we be sure of God's presence even in the midst of the turmoil of life? Can others find assurance of God's presence and love by watching us?

The prophet Elijah was very confident of God's presence. He was sure that *Yahweh* was in the midst of the nation and stood readily to herald the fact of God's action, presence, and will. He had the certainty of God's reality, but also of God's interest in the nation. That he recognized God's presence was really no big deal, for the people of Elijah's day were very attuned to spiritual reality, even if they did not understand the truth of God. Their lives were immersed in recognition of the world of spirits, gods, and the messengers of the gods. What they did not seem to grasp was just how different *Yahweh* was from the way they imagined the gods to be.

As *Yahweh's* mouthpiece, it was Elijah's task to announce not only the fact of *Yahweh's* presence, but also *Yahweh's* will. He was the voice to remind the people that they owed their allegiance to *Yahweh*, who had created the nation and rescued them out of Egyptian slavery. His was the voice calling them back to trust the one God they should be serving.

Elijah's words to Ahaziah are a sharp critique to the king. No one denied the existence of the gods. What Ahaziah denied was allegiance to *Yahweh* as the God of Israel. He denied his own responsibility to follow *Yahweh* and to live in accordance with *Yahweh's* will. While he did not deny the fact of *Yahweh's* presence, his life and actions denied *Yahweh's* authority over his life, his plans, his desires, and his will. He knew that *Yahweh* was present, but he chose to ignore that fact by the way he lived and responded to the pressures and difficulties of life.

We may overlook the fact that *Yahweh's* words through Elijah are a warning. God's pronouncements of judgement in the Old Testament are generally conditional. There is an underlying assumption that if the king were to repent and seek *Yahweh* in honesty and integrity, God would be willing to intervene with grace and mercy. Despite the conditional aspect of Elijah's words, Ahaziah chose to shut God out of the picture. In so doing, his actions denied God's presence. It was Elijah's task to herald God's presence, will, and action. His was the call to remember that *Yahweh* was still there.

The same could describe a major component of Jesus' ministry and teaching. A large part of Jesus' task was to remind people that God was present and interested in becoming an active part of their lives. He was brushed off by many, for they already knew that God was present. They already knew that *Yahweh* was the only true God and their only God. What they did not realize was that they were far from following God's direction for their lives. They proclaimed God's presence and reality, but did not see the inconsistency of their actions in light of the faith they proclaimed.

Jesus' words in John chapter five are recorded in the context of a discussion over the validity of healing a man on the Sabbath. They celebrated the Sabbath in accordance with God's commands through Moses, yet they failed to understand the meaning of the Sabbath they celebrated. They were intent of following God's words through Moses, yet they failed to grasp the meaning of those very words. They

were so caught up in their misconceptions about God that they could not easily accept the reality of God's presence in the words, ministry, and person of Jesus Christ. They knew that God was in their midst, but they did not recognize that they were holding fast to the form and ignoring the essence.

Jesus challenged them to recognize that they were missing the point of Biblical witness. They could not see God's grace and mercy for the blinders of legalism that they wore. Jesus came then, to herald *Yahweh's* grace, mercy, and love, for they had missed it. God's love and mercy was manifest throughout Scripture, but they just would not accept that reality. They preferred to trade God's grace for judgement, mercy for punishment, and love for anger. They were missing the whole point. The result was that they completely ignored the will, identity, and character of the God they reported to serve. They might as well have defended that God did not exist, for they had legislated God out of their lives.

They knew about *Yahweh*. They had a lot of information regarding God. They had memorized many facts, but they were not allowing the information to transform their lives as it should. They might as well have been ignoring the fact of *Yahweh's* presence and sought after false gods. Their lives announced that *Yahweh* was absent from Israel, for they were not allowing *Yahweh* to have full sway in the direction and action of their lives.

Paul wrote about the proximity and duality of knowledge and faith. Faith is much more than information, it is relationship and acceptance. It is allowing the knowledge of God to change our lives in acceptance of the reality of God's love and grace. He wrote that the message is nearby, but has to be accepted. He also wrote that it needs to be proclaimed.

That is our charge—to accept the reality of God's presence, love, and grace, and then announce that reality to the world around us. As Elijah, we are called to herald the presence of *Yahweh* in the world around us. We herald God, not simply by announcing God's presence in words, but by living the reality we proclaim.

Many will not understand our lives. Many will not understand our words. Many will fail to grasp the reality of God's grace, mercy, and love, even while they proclaim God's existence. Many will claim to know the God we proclaim and yet live in disregard to that knowledge. Even so, we are to herald not only the presence of God, but God's true identity. We must allow the character and identity of God to transform our lives into beacons of God's presence.

Where is God, anyway? Do we allow God's presence to permeate our lives? Do our words and actions herald God's presence? Do others see the reality of God in the way we live? We are the body of Christ—God's physical presence in the world. God is in our midst. Do our lives herald the presence of Christ Jesus before others? Are we up to the challenge of becoming beacons of God's presence, grace, and love?

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# Body of Christ: Acclaiming Christ

2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 5:4-14; John 12:12-19; Colossians 1:15-25

God often gets lost in the shuffle of life. We keep our schedules busy, running at a hectic pace. At times, it may seem there is just no way to fit God into our daily planners. How do we find the appropriate time, place, and energy to acclaim God—to hail and praise Him as king and lord of our lives? Can we do better than scheduling appointments with God? How do our claims of Christ's kingship stack up against the actions of so many who sacrifice their lives to defend their faith from what they understand as ungodly Western aggression? While we correctly acknowledge that those we call terrorists do not follow mainline Islamic teaching, we forget their integrity and understanding that they do indeed serve Allah. Does our acclamation of Christ measure up to their standards of integrity and service to God?

The crowds lined up on what we now call Palm Sunday to acclaim Jesus as their king. They praised Him and hailed Him as their hope and redeemer. They did not recognize Jesus as God, but they hoped that He would bring about their dreams of a messianic golden age. They had seen the way crowds had been fed and had heard Jesus' teaching on God's rule. They did not understand all that He had taught, but they were ready to acclaim Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah—the Christ, the Anointed One.

In recognition of Jesus as Messiah, they spread clothing and palm leaves before Him on the ride into Jerusalem. They hailed Jesus as the King of Peace, paying homage with the palm branches as they recognized Jesus as the victorious king. We might easily overlook the gospel evidence that the crowds were hailing Jesus as their king. This is not the first time that they had looked upon Jesus with the desire to crown Jesus. While there is opposition to Jesus as Messiah, it comes from the ruling class in Jerusalem, not the crowds who had followed Him.

The disciples did not want Jesus to go to Jerusalem. They wanted Him to become king in a more rural setting, where He would be safe from clashes with the powerful in Jerusalem. From their perspective, Jesus needed to consolidate support that would enable his protection and rise to power. Jesus refused to accept kingship in their terms. He allowed the crowds to acclaim Him as the King coming in peace to Jerusalem, but not as a military leader who would bring war. They wanted to acclaim Jesus king and dictate expectations for His rule. Jesus only accepted their acclamation in accord with his own definitions. He would be king, but king of peace. He would direct them to God in honest worship. He would have them refocus their hearts and lives away from the externals of popular Judaism and onto the outflow of their relationship with God.

Leprosy was an extremely feared disease. Because of this fear, the term was applied to more than one specific condition, so as to protect the population from contracting the disease. There would be no cure available for leprosy, and subsequently no hope. When Naaman heard that there was a chance to be cured of his leprosy, he went to Israel and found his way to Elisha. While there is no compelling reason for him to have believed his wife's servant girl, he chose to travel to Israel on the outside chance that there might be a cure.

The king assumed well that Naaman's arrival was a provocation to war by the king of Aram. As the people understood that sickness and disease was brought about by the gods, Naaman's request for cure was correctly understood as a request for the king to intervene with the gods on Naaman's behalf. While the

king tore his robes in protest at Naaman's words granting the king divine authority, Elisha sent word for Naaman to be brought to him—"that he might know there is a prophet of *Yahweh* in Israel."

After balking at Elisha's words, Naaman accepted the prescription to bathe in the Jordan. On being cleansed of his leprosy, he recognized the action of *Yahweh* on his behalf and made haste to express his thankfulness to Elisha. In his words, we find not only an external cleansing of body, but the transformation of Naaman in relation to *Yahweh*. Naaman found out not only that there was a prophet of *Yahweh* in Israel, but that *Yahweh* was the only God worthy of service, adoration, and praise.

It is this quality of Christ to which Paul points in Colossians. Christ Jesus' singularity and supremacy remind us that only Jesus is worthy of our acclamation, praise, honor, and service. If we acclaim Jesus as Messiah, Lord, and King, we must lay our lives down in service to the Lord we acclaim. Paul states that God's call upon him included the extension of Christ's suffering in order to proclaim the good news of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. His was not lip-service to Christ, but the laying down of his own life to serve others with the gospel of grace, love, and reconciliation.

Paul accepted that the fullness of God dwelt in Christ Jesus. As such, he accepted that if he were to acclaim Jesus, he must accept service to the gospel of grace to take living hold of his life. To acclaim Christ would have to be more than to recognize the grace of God for personal redemption and comfort. To acclaim Christ includes accepting Christ's claim upon all of one's life, even if it were to mean that Christ's suffering were to continue through one's own experience.

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, accepting the people's acclaim as King, the Messiah coming in peace. They hailed Jesus, albeit with inappropriate expectations of what Christ's rule would mean. Naaman went before Elisha seeking a cure and left with an unexpected recognition of *Yahweh* as the only true God worthy of service, adoration, and praise. Paul wrote of the supremacy of Christ—the fullness and expression God's very presence, grace, and love in our midst. For Paul, recognition of Christ's supremacy gave validity to accepting the personal cost involved in giving his life to mediate the gospel before others.

What will happen with our acclamation of Jesus as the Christ, Victor, King, and Redeemer? Will our lives bear out the truth of God's claim upon our lives? Will the expression of our faith in Jesus match the claim of Christ upon our lives? Will our lives back up our claims of the truth of the gospel and the supremacy of Christ Jesus? It is so easy to allow the rush and hectic pace of life to crowd God out. Will we allow God time and space for our acclamation of Christ Jesus to become reality?

It is so easy to water down the claims of the gospel on our lives. Is a watered down gospel worth dying for? Is it worth living?

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## Body of Christ: Sharing Joy

2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 7:3-9; Luke 24:21-35; Philippians 1:15-26

The first thing we want to do with good news is share it. We talk about the birth of grandbabies, graduations, new jobs, birthday parties, new cars, baby chicks, and sports championships. For some reason, good news doesn't seem so exceptional when it becomes yesterday's news. A lot of good news has brought us where we are, but after it becomes "old hat," we are not as energized to talk about it. It's about the same with the resurrection.

### **Too Good Not to Share:**

During the time of Elisha, the lepers at the gates of Samaria stumbled onto God's unexpected blessing of provision and liberation. They had decided that there was no hope for them remaining at the gate with the Arameans besieging the city. There was no food left in Samaria, and certainly none that would be thrown their way. If they remained outside the gate, they would become the first casualties of war upon attack. It was a risk for them to seek food in the Aramean camp, but that was better than certain death by remaining where they were.

They took the risk and went to beg food at the Aramean camp. On arriving, they found the camp deserted, but filled with food, clothes, and other desirable goods. Quickly, they began taking care of their hunger and taking some of the wealth for themselves. Soon, however, they realized that they should be thinking of others, and not only of their own needs. They thought back to the city of Samaria with no food. They thought of the thousands of people believing themselves to be besieged and afraid to leave the city, dying of hunger while food was in reach.

They left the camp and headed back to Samaria. They told the people of the good news and the food that was left at the enemy camp. They shared their joy at *Yahweh's* provision for the besieged city in want of food. The people were afraid to believe their news. It was too good to be true! They were afraid, but they eventually accepted the word of the lepers and rushed out to accept God's provision. The news was too good not to share. As it was shared, the joy of God's provision was increased, for the whole city could celebrate *Yahweh's* gift of new life!

### **The Best News of All (Children):**

Today is a very special day for us. Today is Easter, and on Easter we celebrate that Jesus is alive. You know, we forget sometimes that that is really good news. That is why we have a special day to remember and celebrate that Jesus is still alive.

After Jesus' death, the disciples were very sad. They did not know what to do. Jesus had told them that he would come back to life, but they did not remember that. Many of them were scared. They thought that since Jesus had been killed, they might be killed, too. So they hid and did not realize that Jesus was alive.

Some of the women went to the tomb on Sunday morning and found that Jesus' body wasn't there. When they told the other disciples, no one wanted to believe them. Peter and John went to the tomb. They saw that it was empty, but they did not understand it.

Two of the disciples took a trip back to a city called Emaus. Jesus talked with them on the trip, but they did not recognize Him. After Jesus explained to them again how He was supposed to have died and then come back to life, they recognized Him. That made them really happy. They did not know what to do, because they were so happy that Jesus was alive again! Even though it was night-time, they ran all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples that Jesus was alive!

They knew that this was really good news, and they wanted to be sure that everyone knew about it. It is good to know that Jesus is alive. Just like those two disciples, we need to remind people that Jesus is alive and loves them. Let's try to do that this week.

### **The Joy of Remembering:**

When Paul wrote the Philippians, he had lots of bad news. There were countless depressing details to recount of his present circumstances. He had tales of individuals and groups who were hounding him and seeking to end his ministry and life. He chose to remember something else. He chose to look back at the very purpose of his life, mission, and ministry. He chose to recall the purpose that God had for him and the joy of receiving grace in Christ Jesus. He looked back on the best news he had to share, and focused his attention on that.

It is easy to share good news when it is news! It is easy for us to recount the new-found joys to life. We celebrate our victories, accomplishments, and the blessings of daily life. It helps us lift our eyes out of the drudgery and routine of our activities. There are some things, however, that we should never tire of celebrating. It may be harder to recall the joy of old news, but some old events are much more important than the news we so readily share.

Paul found joy in the midst of his suffering and imprisonment. He did not overlook the pain and injustice of his situation. He simply looked beyond it to the reality of older news that gave his life meaning, purpose, and direction. He sought out those things that were really worth celebrating and focused his life on sharing the hope of life in Christ with the world.

If he had focused on his pain, distress, and suffering, he would essentially have been acting as the lepers on finding the abandoned hoard of Aramean wealth. He would have been looking only to his current circumstance and ignored the larger picture of life. The joy of those lepers did not blossom until they had shared their abundance with the dying city. The disciples on the road to Emaus did not receive the full joy of Jesus' resurrection until they returned to share the news with the others in Jerusalem. By that time, the others had heard the news, but it was only beginning to make a difference in their lives.

Paul allowed the news to take root in his life. He focused on the meaning of the news he had to share. He allowed it to become the central focus of his actions, words, and understanding. He allowed the gospel of Jesus Christ to interpret the other events of life. Will we allow the good news to impact our lives fully? Will we share the joy of Easter with the world? It is too good not to share. If we don't share it, we miss the greatest blessing—the greatest joy.

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## **Body of Christ: Trusting God's Deliverance**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 18:28-37; Luke 12:1-12; James 1:2-12**

Trusting God for deliverance is not always easy. God does not always deliver in the way we expect or desire. Then again, God is often more intent on teaching us to trust Him than in fulfilling our desire for

ease. God calls us to trust that He is faithful, even when we cannot what lies ahead. We need not fear if we can trust God. Can we trust God through an uncertain future? Can we realistically present the world a call to trust God into the unknown? Can we live out that confidence in God?

As the Rabshakeh of Assyria stood before the people of Judah, everything appeared to have been lost. His words contained the flavor of truth. They matched the circumstances of the people and seemed to be an appropriate expression of certain doom and destruction. There was no way out for Judah in the face of the Assyrian army. Israel had fallen to Assyria, as had many nations, and Egypt would have been a meager resort as an ally against the invading army. There was no way out for a besieged Jerusalem. The pride of Judah was now a hopelessly besieged city.

There seemed no way out at all. Trusting *Yahweh* did not seem to have done any good. It seemed that either *Yahweh* cared no more, or *Yahweh* really had abandoned the people to Assyrian domination. Hope was gone, for the people could see no way out of their predicament. Hezekiah put on sackcloth and ashes—symbols of mourning—and went to the Temple to seek direction from *Yahweh*, for *Yahweh* had not yet spoken. *Yahweh* sent word by Isaiah—simple words, but hard to hear. “Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the King of Assyria have reviled Me.”

Do not be afraid. Await God’s deliverance. Trust God and wait to see what God will do. It sounded so simple—too simple, in fact! Those words sounded foolish, just as the Rabshakeh had deemed Hezekiah’s trust in *Yahweh* to be mere foolishness. How could *Yahweh* do anything about the besieging army? If *Yahweh* were going to intervene, surely it would have come before the city was hopelessly surrounded and cut off from food and water! It was too late to trust God for a way out, wasn’t it? Isaiah’s words were clear. Trust *Yahweh* to deliver. Trust *Yahweh* to get you through the uncertainty of a future you cannot grasp.

Don’t be afraid—trust God. Jesus had the same message to the disciples. Trust God, no matter what the circumstance. Do not fear the authorities, do not fear those who might bring death. Just stand for God and be faithful. Remember that life is about more than what we can see. God is Lord of this life, and the one to come, as well. There is no need to fear.

That sounds nice and comforting in theory. It sounds nice in the comfort of our sanctuary, in our Sunday school classrooms, and maybe even in our homes. Jesus did not couch these words for such comfortable surroundings, however. Even as He spoke to the disciples, He referred to their being brought before synagogue authorities to be questioned. He referred to their being tried before the rulers of their people. He spoke of being confronted by those who had the authority and power to sentence them to punishment, torture, or even death.

In that context, these words just don’t sound quite as comforting. They are still every bit as true. Jesus did not want the disciples to fear people. He wanted them to live their lives in open honesty before God. He talked about how the hypocrisy of the Pharisees would one day be unmasked as nothing more than a farce. He warned the disciples that they needed to be true and open in their dealings and service to God. We can’t “pull the wool over” God’s eyes. We can fool people for a while. We can pretend to be what we are not, but in the end it will only have been pretense. In the end, it is only the truth of our inner lives that counts.

Do not fear the things of this world, but reverence God and await God’s deliverance. Await God’s justification. Await the day on which God will declare the reality that we have lived. It may be

discomforting for a while. It may be hard to sit back and watch injustice play itself out in our midst. It may be painful to feel the brunt of those who would abuse, ridicule, or take advantage. We are not to live for the short term, but for eternity.

James takes up the call, encouraging us to “Count it all joy!” Could he really be serious? How do we “count it joy” when we have been surrounded by an army of enemies who blaspheme God’s name and there is apparently no response from God? How can we “count it all joy” when we become the brunt of ridicule, lies, or derision? How do we “count it joy” when our denominational leaders use lies and pretense to advance their political aims? How do we “count it joy” when what we see is loss, pain, grief, sickness, and despair.

James does not tell us to believe that our trials are pleasurable. He simply calls us to look beyond the problems of the moment, however great they may be. He calls us to look beyond to the eternal issues at hand to the developing of character and endurance. He challenges us to look to what God is doing, rather than seeing the near results of human destructive action.

Why does he call us to “count it joy”? Because there is a side of difficulties that we so often overlook. We focus too often on the pain of the moment and overlook the long term result. James would remind us that our difficulties are tests of our faith, not problems to be obliterated. They are not symptoms to be medicated or obstacles to be erased. They are opportunities for growth in our dependence upon God.

Hezekiah learned to lean on God in a way he would not have done without the Assyrian forces surrounding the city. He learned that God was truly worthy of our trust. He learned that his own analysis of a situation does not rule out God’s intervention and deliverance. He learned that our perspective is partial and shortsighted. Jesus stressed the importance of a long-term view of life. He calls us to look beyond the difficulties at hand and live life with an eternal perspective.

From a perspective of eternity, we can “count it all joy,” for we learn confidence in God. We can “count it all joy,” for we can be sure that God is yet present, active, and directing our steps. We can “count it all joy,” for there is joy in God’s action of deliverance. We can take matters in our own hand, or trust God for deliverance. Will we trust God to deliver, or will we despair for our lack of perspective? May we have the courage and confidence to seek God’s perspective, not our own. It is our choice, whether we count our trials as joy or as despair.

“Fear not, for I AM with you.” It is our choice—shall we take courage, or keep despair?

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## Body of Christ: Living God’s Hope

2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 19:20-31; Romans 8:14-24; Hebrews 6:11-20

Peter calls on Christians to be ever prepared to present an answer to any who ask about our hope. For people to ask about the hope we hold, it must first become reality in our daily lives. How can we live

out the hope that we find in Christ? How can we present the world a clear and true picture of God's hope that is within us? How do we make this hope a reality that we live?

When Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem, Isaiah proclaimed *Yahweh's* word of hope. He proclaimed to all the message that *Yahweh* would not allow Assyria to oppose God's people in arrogance, proclaiming themselves superior to the will and action of *Yahweh*. While Sennacherib was a tool in the hands of *Yahweh* to bring all the nations to recognize the frailty of their own gods, he was still only a tool for *Yahweh* to wield. He had come to believe himself to be much more than he was. His self-assuming importance was beginning to carry over into how the very people of *Yahweh* viewed him as well.

They heard the words of Sennacherib through his officials. They heard his threats against the people and against Jerusalem. They saw their city besieged by the Assyrian army. Despair threatened to engulf them as hope began to dissipate. It was much easier for them to look at the army and successes of Assyria than to consider the faithfulness of *Yahweh* in their past.

We often measure our problems not by their true greatness, nor by the greatness of God, but by their immediacy. Too quickly do we forget the grace and mercy of God. Too easily do we discard what we know of God's love, power, and concern for our needs. Too readily do we overlook that God is greater than the difficulties of life that assail us. We find ourselves besieged by enemy forces, stress, pressures to perform, anxiety, and conflict. We hear the message of faith in God and the message of a society that decries our need to do for ourselves, leaving God out of the picture of life.

"I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul," cries the poet.<sup>226</sup> All too readily, we listen. It would seem that the words of the poet have made a stronger impression upon our lives and our society that have the words of God. We have come to believe that "life is what you make it," with the stress on our own responsibility, actions, and initiative. If we plan for the future, we make our plans based on our personal strength, initiative, and resources. We focus our plans on our personal dreams, desires, and perceptions of what we want out of life. Somewhere along the way, it would seem that it is the word of William Ernest Henley that we seek to guide us—*Invictus!*—I am invincible!

*OUT of the night that covers me,/ Black as the pit from pole to pole,/ I thank whatever gods may be/ For my unconquerable soul./ In the fell clutch of circumstance/ I have not winced nor cried aloud./ Under the bludgeonings of chance/ My head is bloody, but unbow'd./ Beyond this place of wrath and tears/ Looms but the Horror of the shade,/ And yet the menace of the years/ Finds and shall find me unafraid./ It matters not how strait the gate,/ How charged with punishments the scroll,/ I am the master of my fate:/ I am the captain of my soul.*

My future is up to me! My life is my own! I can do whatever my heart desires! Whatever gods there may be, only I will steer my path and fashion my future according to my own will!

What a sad state of affairs for a people who claim service to *Yahweh*, God, Creator of the Universe! What a sad state of affairs for any who would believe that it is up to them to make something out of life! What a sad state of affairs for one who lives as though the individual is alone and cut off from God to fashion life and confront the stresses and uncertainties of life!

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<sup>226</sup> William Ernest Henley, *Invictus*.  
Edition: 2007-11-05

Sennacherib's arrogance was similar in many ways to the individualistic philosophy of Henry's poem. *Yahweh* mattered not in the equation from the Assyrian perspective. Assyria would plan the future and make its will happen. Assyria would decide its future and the future of the nations around it. Israel had fallen to Assyrian advances. Jerusalem now lay besieged.

The prophet called the people to look beyond themselves. The prophet called the nation to live in accord with the hope they claimed. They claimed to be the people of *Yahweh*. They claimed to trust *Yahweh* for their future. Their claims, however, had not taken hold of the realities of their lives. Their faith claims had not become living realities in their lives.

While they claimed to serve *Yahweh*, they were not living in accordance with the hope they claimed. While they called themselves the people of *Yahweh*, they were living in dread of a king, rather than hoping and trusting in the protection of the Creator. They had shifted their focus off of the hope they claimed, living by sight rather than by faith.

As Paul reminds us, we were not freed from slavery to live as slaves. We were freed to live in the confidence and hope of the children of God. We may not always see the realization of our hope, but we may live in the full confidence of God's provision for a future. We are not alone, cut off from the world to traverse a raging storm on our own resources. We are called to face the storm in a living hope, dependence, and confidence in God's love, mercy, and protection.

We have been given a gospel of hope. We have been offered a future based on God's gracious offer of access to the throne of the universe. We do not need to live as though we had no hope. We do not need to live as though God does not care, nor as though we cannot be sure if there is any divine being out there. We have been offered a hope by which to live. Will we allow this hope to take root?

If we do not choose to live the hope we claim, what good is it? If the claims we make for the gospel do not find reality and living example in our lives, what are they worth? We might as well go through life in accord with Henry's poem, wondering if there is anything out there beyond ourselves, but ignoring the possibility, charting a course for our own disaster. Should we not rather live the hope we have been given? It is in living our hope that we offer the gospel of Christ to the world. Shall we live hope, or shall we live hopelessly?

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