

DO WE TEACH ANOTHER GOSPEL?

**BREAKING THE CHAINS OF LEGALISM AND
RETURNING TO FIRST PRINCIPLES**

by Jay Guin

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PREFACE

I've been a member of the Churches of Christ for nearly as long as I can remember and happily remain a member today—despite the fact that I'm about to criticize the teachings of some within the Churches. There are many noble, profoundly correct and righteous ideas found within our Churches. Unfortunately, among some, they've been adulterated with very false, very dangerous errors. But before we consider our faults, let's reflect briefly on what's good and right about the Churches.

1. We have a wonderful history that, unfortunately, we often ignore. Indeed, I grew up in the Churches and attended one of our affiliated colleges and was not once taught about our history other than “We are not Campbellites!”—a term I'd never heard and didn't understand.

The fact is we are a part of the Restoration Movement founded by Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, and his son, Alexander Campbell. These men founded two independent movements in the American frontier in the early 19th Century. Western Pennsylvania, West Virginia (Virginia, then), Kentucky, Ohio, and Illinois were key regions of early Restoration Movement activity. The movements merged around 1830 (different times in different locales) into what is generally called the Restoration Movement.

As important as those men are, just as important is Walter Scott, a missionary of the Movement who proved to be a brilliant sloganeer. He converted the Campbells' highly scholastic and (frankly) often hard-to-read teachings into easily understood slogans that have stood the test of time.

Much of the teachings of these men is summarized in the following sayings:

- We speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where the Bible is silent.¹
- We refer to Bible things by Bible names.²

¹ I will occasionally criticize how we've applied this principle, but the principle itself is sound. It is just a restatement of the Reformation's *sola scriptura*, Latin for “Scripture only.” The slogan means that the Protestants refused to be bound by traditions, church council, Papal decrees, or the writings of uninspired Christians. In the Restoration Movement, it was observed that the Protestant churches had left this founding principle by being more insistent on adherence to their creeds than to the Bible itself. In fact, Thomas Campbell went so far in his *Declaration and Address* (1809) to insist that not even inferences from Scripture, correctly inferred (!), should be terms of fellowship. The *Declaration and Address*, available at <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/tcampbell/da/DA-1ST.HTM>, is considered one of the founding documents of the Restoration Movement.

² Alexander Campbell wisely observed that many of the fights that divide Christians arise from an insistence on inventing terms and concepts not found in the Scripture. Thus, for example, he and Stone disagreed regarding the doctrine of the Trinity (a word not found in Scripture), but agreed on all that the Bible explicitly says on the subject. As their disagreement was over matters of inference rather than the explicit teachings of Scripture, they had no trouble accepting one another as brothers and merging their movements.

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- We are Christians only but not the only Christians.
- We have no creed but Christ.³
- In faith unity, in opinions⁴ liberty, and in all things charity.

Moreover, Scott invented the “five-finger exercise”: to be saved, all you have to do is 1. believe, 2. repent, 3. confess, 4. be baptized, and 5. receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁵

Now, you may have already noticed some theological trends from the changes in our slogans. For example, we now say that to be saved you must 1. hear, 2. repent, 3. believe, 4. confess, and 5. be baptized. Someone dropped the reference to the Holy Spirit, I suppose because many within the Churches began to deny “the direct operation of the Holy Spirit” on the heart of the Christian. I’ll note more later in this book.

You’ll also notice that many now say, “We have no creed but the Bible,” and then apply this slogan by imposing as tests of fellowship inferences taken from the Bible. Stone, the Campbells, and Scott intended to teach that the test of salvation is whether one is in Christ, not whether one agrees on certain inferences from Scripture.

These slogans demonstrate some of our other better traits.

2. As originally conceived, the last thing that anyone would say about the Restoration Movement is that we think we are the only people going to heaven. Indeed, the call of the founders was for Christians (meaning saved people) to leave the denominations because the denominations believed that *they* were the only people going to heaven. Creeds in the early 19th Century were used as tests to determine who was saved. If you couldn’t agree with all the statements of your denomination’s creed, you wouldn’t be given communion and you’d be considered a, literally, damned heretic. Stone and the Campbells labored mightily to end this state of affairs. This is precisely the meaning of being “Christians only but not the only Christians.” We are to drop the trappings and exclusiveness of denominationalism and become nothing but Christians.

³ Quoting again from the *Declaration and Address*—

That although doctrinal exhibitions of the great system of divine truths, and defensive testimonies in opposition to prevailing errors, be highly expedient; and the more full and explicit they be, for those purposes, the better; yet, as these must be in a great measure the effect of human reasoning, and of course must contain many inferential truths, they ought not to be made terms of christian communion: unless we suppose, what is contrary to fact, that none have a right to the communion of the church, but such as possess a very clear and decisive judgment; or are come to a very high degree of doctrinal information; whereas the church from the beginning did, and ever will, consist of little children and young men, as well as fathers.

⁴ By “opinions” they meant anything that is not “faith,” as the New Testament uses the term. We will find the New Testament’s (and early Restoration Movement’s) usage later on.

⁵ See James DeForest Murch, *Christians Only* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co. 1962), 103.

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3. The Movement is and always has been very Bible-centered. Generally, the level of Bible knowledge in Churches of Christ is quite remarkable. There is a strong emphasis on the need for each believer to study the Scriptures for himself to reach his own conclusions. This valuable tradition grew out of a call to urge our friends to leave the divisiveness of denominationalism behind, and so we had to ask them to study the Word for themselves. In so doing, we obligated ourselves to do the same.

4. Around 1906 the Movement split over a number of issues, most significantly the practice of *a cappella* singing. The Churches of Christ do not use instruments in their assemblies, and so are often accused of “not liking music”—but the opposite is the case. We *love* music—so much so that we want to make music, not listen to music. Churches of Christ are filled with sight singers who can read four-part harmony (and many who can improvise a harmony when the sheet music is missing), resulting in true congregational singing that needs no accompaniment. Indeed, an organ would be as out of place, as Alexander Campbell once remarked, “as a cowbell in a concert.”

I’ve been to services in some of the world’s great churches: the 20,000 member Saddleback church in Southern California with its very contemporary music, St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, and St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, and there’s no contest. There’s nothing like the harmonies of the Churches of Christ.

5. The teaching of the Churches of Christ has long stressed the importance of baptism as the occasion of salvation, of immersion as the New Testament mode of baptism, and believers as the proper recipients of baptisms. I believe that all these doctrines are correct. In fact, the baptism of infants has been productive of great harm as those churches that do so have often failed to convert those they’ve baptized. The New Testament practice is to convert and then baptize.

6. The Churches have long insisted on church autonomy, meaning that there is no national or international supervising body telling the local congregations what to do and how to conduct their affairs. One of the strengths of this lack of hierarchy is that each congregation is free to seek out its own interpretation of Scripture. In fact, the similarities of the Churches after 200 years of existence is far more remarkable than their increasing dissimilarities.

When a single congregation is affected by heresy, that heresy cannot become an enforced orthodoxy by a vote of some central controlling board. When congregations dispute over doctrine, they do so in church periodicals, if not in person, but rarely in the public eye. And this has allowed for some experimentation but has also preserved the Churches free from the theological liberalism⁶ that has infected many of the mainline denominations from the top down. Indeed, para-church organizations, such as colleges,

⁶ We greatly misuse the term “liberal” in the Churches of Christ, I’m afraid. In serious theological conversation, “liberal” refers to someone who rejects the divinity of Christ as the literal Son of God, incarnate in real space-time in the First Century, and rejects the inspiration of Scripture. Think of the Jesus Seminar as an extreme example of liberalism. I try not to use the term in any other sense. Indeed, to call someone who is a devout believer and who accepts Scripture as inspired a liberal is slander, contrary to many Scriptures.

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cannot become bastions of liberalism, as they rely on hundreds of individuals and congregations for support, not a single national body that can be taken over by heretics by majority vote.

There is a downside to autonomy. Small churches have difficulty raising up and supporting missionaries by themselves, and many churches struggle with how to cooperate with other churches without violating their understanding of autonomy. Also, the tendency is for a town with multiple churches to have a congregation for each variation of Church of Christ doctrine, so no one is ever required to hear a lesson from someone with a different mindset. Rather, each one of us picks out a congregation that affirms all that we believe every Sunday. Hence, autonomy tends to preserve division along doctrinal lines. And because we tend to overemphasize the importance of autonomy, we don't make much effort to work or fellowship with other Churches of Christ even in our own community.

7. We are a restorationist movement, and this is a good thing to be—when we do it right. We want to be as much like the First Century church as possible. However, we have sometimes erred by over-emphasizing the First Century modes of worship and organization over the First Century understanding of evangelism, sacrificial living, care for the needy, grace, and the Spirit. However, wanting restoration of the early church is a vital ideal, as it gives us a common benchmark to compare how we're doing with how we ought to be doing.

I believe that there are good reasons why God has preserved our Movement to this day, and I'm confident that he has plans that will bless the world through us beyond our imagining. Personally, I'm looking forward to it and hope to live long enough to be part of it.

Unfortunately, many within our Movement have, sadly, descended into legalism (or, if you prefer, creedalism), making their preferred doctrines not only tests of truth but tests of salvation. Increasingly, many of us are insisting that you have to get *all* the doctrines right to be saved! Thus, any variance in belief on, say, divorce and remarriage is not only wrong, but damnable. This has produced a strident subset of those who contend that we are indeed the only Christians—and that even many of *us* aren't Christians—only the select few that happen to agree with a particular spokesman on every point.

This state of affairs greatly saddens—and increasingly—angers me. And yet I'm also unhappy with many of my more broad-minded brothers—who more correctly understand grace and yet feel no duty to reach out to the right wing of the Churches to correct their thinking. Increasingly, we are being polarized into two camps that have nearly no communication at all. And I'm not too surprised, as those on the most legalistic fringe of the Churches have often very caustic in their criticism of those less legalistic than they. It can surely get tiresome talking to people who speak so harshly of you.

Yet I've found that those on the left—more grace-filled—side of the controversy often just don't take the time to explain their position in terms that can be understood by those on the right—more legalistic—side of the Movement. And our brothers on the right make arguments that, though sometimes in error, are fervently believed to be sound and

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true, and those of us more to their left should respect their sincerity enough to reply in terms that speak to their concerns.

Hence, I have two desires in writing this book. First, even among those on the leftward side of the Movement, we still retain many vestiges of legalism, and as we don't have a well-articulated doctrine in this area, we tend to be content with just being less legalistic than "the church down the road" or where we grew up. That's just not good enough.

Second, for those who remain convinced by the arguments of those on the right—such as the publishers of *The Firm Foundation* and *Seek The Old Paths*—here's why many of us disagree. And more importantly, here is what the Bible says may be the consequences of being a legalist.

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PART I
DO WE TEACH ANOTHER GOSPEL?

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

One of my earliest memories is of attending Sunday School in the old downtown church. I well remember the feeling when I had to leave my friends when my church split because the old church refused to support orphanages out of its treasury. For several years, we met in a warehouse so we could care for orphans.

Yet many of my best Church-of-Christ friends were the children of preachers for the local non-institutional⁷ Churches of Christ. Indeed, I had a crush on the daughter of a non-institutional preacher, who wouldn't let her date me because my parents were “liberal.”

It's been over 30 years since I left my home town. Not a single church split has been healed since I left. There's at least one more congregation in town though. My first home church had a second split shortly after I left for college.

I guess you could call me a “lifer,” as in I've been in the Churches of Christ all my life—born and raised. And I'm an extreme lifer, at that. I'm third generation. My undergraduate degree is from David Lipscomb College (now University). I'm an elder of my home church (third generation on that one, too). Most of my friends growing up were Church of Christ members.

Even before getting to college, I'd had a large dose of the legalism and division that characterizes much of the recent history of the Churches of Christ. I guess it's not too surprising, then, that I've spent a large portion of my adult life studying the Scriptures to see if there's a way for good Christian people who disagree to get along without splitting churches and tearing up families.

My study has led me to a great many observations and conclusions, but there's one conclusion that troubles me greatly, and I write this in hopes of being proved wrong. I know that's an odd thing for an author of a religious book to say. Indeed, we church authors just about always write to prove ourselves right and our opponents wrong, but I find myself wishing to be wrong.

You see, I'm of the opinion that Galatians teaches, and teaches quite plainly, that adding any command to the gospel—that is, making *any* law beyond obedience to the gospel a requirement to be saved—causes one to fall from grace, indeed, to be alienated from Christ. If this is so, many within the Churches of Christ are in jeopardy of their souls, as it is nearly universal in the Churches of Christ to add commands to the gospel as further requirements to be saved.

⁷ In the 1950's, many Churches of Christ divided over the “institutional” question, being whether a congregation may support an orphanage, among other related questions. The argument against orphanages is that the Bible creates a model for raising orphans—the family—and that orphanages are outside the scope of the authority of an eldership. Those favoring such support often refer to those opposed as “anti's,” while those opposing support for orphanages often refer to those favoring it as “digressives” or “liberals.” The current, less pejorative terminology, is “non-institutional” and “institutional.”

Now this is a difficult subject to discuss, as those in the Churches of Christ disagree over a great many things, not the least of which are the meanings of “gospel,” “faith,” and “grace”—not to mention whether the Holy Spirit personally indwells each Christian. With so many fundamentals in dispute, it is difficult to construct an unambiguous sentence—much less a book—that will be understood the same by all factions within the Churches.

Thus, after covering some background, I will attempt to define these terms as the New Testament uses them. I will then begin an explanation of the true nature of Christianity, and then I’ll undertake an exposition of key portions of Galatians. I will finally propose an application of Galatians to the modern problem of legalism in the Churches of Christ.⁸

A. Background

Within the Churches of Christ, we have a serious dispute over our understanding of grace. Indeed, we have brothers who argue quite vociferously that Christianity is a works-based religion. For example,

We are required to keep every specific of the law of Christ, if we receive spiritual blessings, which include forgiveness and the promise of eternal salvation. ...

The grace of God guarantees our final salvation. This, of course, does not mean grace alone, but grace accessed by faith, which includes works of obedience.⁹

and

God will not do for man what man can do. God performed only that which man could not do. The commands of grace are obeyed by faith. Works perfect faith, otherwise it is dead.¹⁰

and

However, man’s reception of God’s gifts is not the work of grace alone. Man must cooperate with God in order to benefit from the rich provisions of grace. This principle embraces both physical and spiritual matters. Physical sustenance is a gift of grace; yet, a tremendous amount of human effort must be exerted by the farmer in order to receive this gift. The consumer must then match the farmer’s effort with sufficient work to accumulate the funds

⁸ The author’s book *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace* (Nashville: PowerSource Productions, 1995) addresses many of these issues in much greater depth and anticipates many objections that space does not permit handling here.

⁹ H. A. (Buster) Dobbs, “Does Grace Guarantee Final Salvation?” *The Firm Foundation* (September 1996). <http://www.bible-infonet.org/ff/editorials/grace/111_09_02.htm>

¹⁰ Goebel Music, *Behold the Pattern* (Colleyville, TX: Goebel Music Publications, 1991), 508.

necessary to purchase the food grown and harvested by the farmer.¹¹

These authors seem driven to this conclusion by two concerns—a desire to preserve baptism and repentance as essential to salvation and a fear that if works aren’t required to be saved, there would be no reason for Christians to live righteously. I will shortly address both concerns.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are prominent Church of Christ personalities such as Rubel Shelly—

Salvation rests upon and arises from the grace of God. We don’t deserve it. We can’t be worthy of it. It will always be a free gift. Yet it remains the case that not everyone who is offered the free gift will be saved, for some remain in unbelief. Faith as trust, submission, and obedience to God is the means of access into grace. Then, justified by grace through faith, our lives are given over to the pursuit of good works that give God glory. These good works are “Thank You’s” from redeemed people and contribute nothing to the ground of our salvation. They are rather the natural outcome of a redemptive work that is being done in our hearts by the indwelling Spirit of God. As he lives within us, our lives bear the lovely fruit that testifies to his presence.¹²

To similar effect is Max Lucado—

There is never a point at which you are any less saved than you were the moment he first saved you. Just because you were grumpy at breakfast doesn’t mean you were condemned at breakfast. When you lost your temper yesterday, you didn’t lose your salvation. Your name doesn’t disappear and reappear in the book of life according to your moods and actions. Such is the message of grace. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Rom. 8:1 NIV).

You are saved, not because of what you do, but because of what Christ did. And you are special, not because of what you do, but because of whose you are. And you are his.¹³

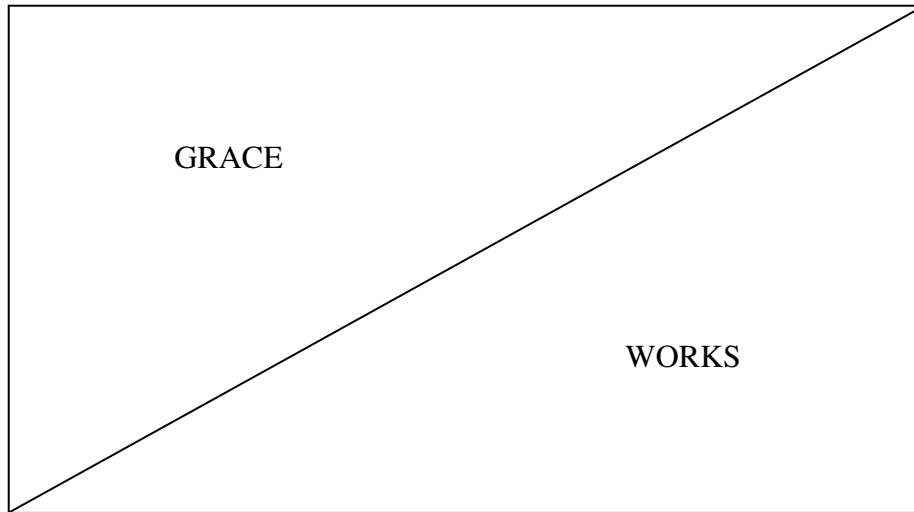
It’s amazing that authors with such diametrically opposed views on such a central issue coexist in the Churches of Christ at all. After all, those who view grace as Shelly and Lucado do see no room at all for works as a basis for salvation, while Music, Dobbs, and Chesser see works as absolutely essential. Clearly, one camp or the other is teaching error.

¹¹ Frank Chesser, “Liberalism and Grace,” *The Spirit of Liberalism*, quoted in *Seek The Old Paths*, vol. 13, no. 5 (April 2002), <<http://www.eastcorinth.org/stop402.htm#LAG>>.

¹² Rubel Shelly, “Grace, Faith, and Works,” *RubelShelly.Com* (April 14, 1992) <<http://rubelshelly.com/content.asp?CID=10478>>.

¹³ Max Lucado, *In the Grip of Grace* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 148.

But the Churches of Christ don't divide neatly into a grace camp and a works camp. In fact, the situation looks something like this—



In the far left, there are the “100% grace” advocates, while on the far right are the “100% works” advocates. In between, there's a near infinity of mixtures of some grace and some works. In fact, there is likely no one entirely on the far right. I know of no author who denies the necessity of some grace. And yet as the preceding quotations show, some get very, very close.

As we look at the graph, we can imagine that those on the right are more likely to find a particular doctrine a question of salvation than those on the left. Thus, there are those on the leftward side who practice weekly communion but don't see the choice to do so weekly as essential to salvation. Toward the middle are those who not only practice weekly communion, they see it as essential to salvation. And a bit further to the right are those who not only see weekly communion as essential to salvation, they see believing that weekly communion is essential to salvation as itself essential to salvation. Numerous other issues follow the same pattern.

I have books on my shelves that contend that one's salvation depends, in addition to “hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized,” on having the author's understanding of the doctrine of divorce and remarriage or agreeing with the author as to the age of the earth. Of course, countless authors have added having a scriptural form of congregational organization, having a scriptural name, and having a worship service consisting of only the right five acts of worship.

I could make literally hundreds of examples. The point is that, except for those on the very left edge, all of us within the Churches of Christ see some matter or other as a law essential to salvation in addition to the simple “hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized.” We often take comfort in the fact that there's always some brother or sister to our right more legalistic than ourselves, and so we feel free from the accusation of legalism. But those on our left look rightward and see *us* as legalists. In fact, we're nearly all legalists, just to different degrees.

Hence the question arises: is there a correct position somewhere between the extremes where we insist on the right laws and only the right laws as requirements to be saved? And if so, just which laws are the essential ones, and how do we tell?

Discussion questions—

1. Where would you place your congregation on the author’s Grace/Works chart?
2. Where would you place yourself?
3. In your congregation, which doctrines are taught as essential to salvation? Which are taught but not as essential to salvation?
4. Where in the Bible is there a statement distinguishing which doctrines are essential to salvation and which are not? Or are all doctrines essential to salvation?
5. In your class, does everyone agree on every single doctrine? Does the class always agree with the teacher? The preacher? The elders?
6. Have any of the Churches of Christ in your county resulted from a split? What was the issue? What Scripture makes that issue one that requires dividing a church?
7. Was God’s work of extending the borders of the Kingdom of Heaven in your community helped or hurt by the split?

CHAPTER 2 DEFINITIONS

I remember sitting in Bible class at David Lipscomb College. While I owe a lot to DLC, including meeting my wife, the fact is that most of the Bible classes were boring and badly taught—little better than poorly taught Sunday School classes. But the class I was in was different. Dr. Harvey Floyd was teaching a class on Romans, and for the first time in my experience, a college Bible teacher was actually teaching on the college level.

Dr. Floyd was a brilliant man. Some of us spent weeks trying to find the same translation he was teaching from, only to learn that he taught straight from the Greek and translated as he went along.

That day’s lesson was on grace. I knew what grace meant: “unmerited favor,” and in more practical terms, that if I attained a certain level of holiness, God would make up the difference and treat me as perfect and so saved. But I could never figure out just what level I had to attain to earn God’s grace. And I couldn’t tell from reading the Scriptures why some doctrines, like instrumental music in worship, would damn you if you were wrong; while so many other doctrines, such as the indwelling of the Spirit, permitted differences of opinion.

That day Dr. Floyd explained that grace is a gift, not something you earn. And gifts are by very definition free (Rom. 7:23). They may have conditions attached, such as faith, but nothing of intrinsic merit, such as works, or else grace and salvation just wouldn’t be gifts.

As he led the class through Romans 3 and 4, for the first time in my life I felt 100%, ironclad, totally saved. I had been baptized when I was eight! And yet for over a dozen years had never felt saved! But I did that day. Indeed, it was the only day in my life when I felt like my feet didn’t touch the ground. I felt as though physically lifted six inches off the ground—as though the heaviest of all possible weights had been lifted off my shoulders.

A. “Gospel” and “Faith”

For all Christians, the first and foremost question is what the Jews asked in Acts 2: “Brothers, what shall we do [to be saved]?” And in the Churches of Christ, we’ve never had much disagreement on that issue. Going all the way back to Walter Scott, 170 years ago, we’ve been teaching “hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized.” And I think that’s pretty much right.

But it’s critical we understand what we mean by this slogan. What do we hear and what do we believe? The passage we’ve always relied on for the “hear” part is Romans 10:14-17 (KJV)—

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?
and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?
and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they
preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the
feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad

tidings of good things! But they have not all obeyed the gospel. ...
So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.¹⁴

So what do we “believe” when we believe? Well, what we heard. And what we heard is the gospel. And just a couple of verses before, we see what we confess—

(10:9-11 KJV) That if thou shalt **confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus**, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.

We confess “the Lord Jesus” and we believe “God has raised him from the dead.” And this is just a brief way of saying “the gospel.”

We often define as “gospel” a lot of stuff that’s just not part of the gospel, and we thereby add a lot of conditions to being saved that just aren’t conditions. And so the first thing we have to do is hammer out what the “gospel” is. And if we define “gospel” rightly, we’ve defined “faith,” because “faith” is just believing the gospel.

In the Romans passages we just read, Paul describes the gospel as “Jesus” or the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. Paul expands on this only slightly in other passages. Early in 1 Corinthians, Paul says,

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the **cross of Christ** be emptied of its power. ... [B]ut we preach **Christ crucified**: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, **Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**¹⁵

Paul says he preached “the gospel,” that is, “Christ crucified” and “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Near the end of 1 Corinthians, Paul expands further on his definition—

(15:1-6) Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of **first importance**: that **Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures**, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.

¹⁴ Boldface in a quotation is always my emphasis. Italics are always in the original.

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 1:17,23-24 (NIV). Hereafter, quoted Scriptures are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

Here Paul defines “gospel” as the fact that Jesus died for our sins and was resurrected on the third day. And he says that this is of “first importance.”

In 2 Corinthians, Paul offer another thought—

(4:4-5) The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.

In short, Paul says the gospel is “Jesus Christ as Lord.” Now this is a critical point, because it ties “repent” and “faith” together as one. When we “repent” we accept Jesus as Lord. When we make Jesus our Lord, we commit to serve him, to obey his commands, to do his will. In other words, faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin. Accepting the gospel is not just the intellectual acceptance of Jesus as the Son of God, crucified for our sins, but it’s also accepting Jesus as our Lord. “Believe” and “repent” are simply acceptance of these two elements of the nature of Jesus: the fact that he is the Son of God, the Messiah,¹⁶ and the fact that he is our Lord. And, of course, the acceptance is more than intellectual assent—we must make the commitment that these facts demand.

There are plenty of other verses we could read, but these are sufficient to make the point that we often misuse “gospel” and “faith.” For example, if we were to disagree about the requirements for someone to be an elder, we’d likely be disagreeing about the meaning of inspired Scripture, but the dispute would not be a matter of “faith.” After all, we could vigorously disagree about how many children an elder should have or what happens if an elder’s wife should die without disagreeing about the death, burial, resurrection, and lordship of Christ. When we dispute over divorce and remarriage, or the age of the earth, or the role of women in the church, we want to declare that these are matters of faith—but they’re not—not as the Bible uses “faith.” And when the *Gospel Advocate* publishes articles advocating one view or another on these issues, the articles may be scriptural and true, but they’re not gospel. And if I disagree, I’ve not disagreed on a matter of “faith.” I’ve not become unfaithful. I’ve not left the faith or the household of faith. I may be wrong. I may be ignorant or stupid. But there’d be no reason to question my faith.

I should hasten to add that in some respects, we in the Churches of Christ have gotten this right. When converts come forward in church and wish to be baptized, we ask them to confess the Great Confession, that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). Well, this is just another way of saying that they believe the gospel. They are confessing their faith, what they heard, and what they believed, and the reason that they repented and made Jesus Lord. This is entirely sound and biblical.

¹⁶ “Messiah” literally means “anointed,” which is a metaphor for “king,” and, of course, refers to the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. “Christ” is simply “Messiah” in Greek. They are really the same word.

Think about it. If we believe that someone has to have the right position on divorce and remarriage to be saved, why don't we ask him to declare his position before baptizing them? What would be the state of someone with genuine faith and repentance, who is scripturally baptized, but who goes under the water with the wrong views on divorce? Would God save him? Or is there a grace period so that he has, I don't know, maybe 30 days to get these things right? Just how does this work?

B. “Works”

We now must spend a little time defining another important word: “works.” We get very confused on this, and indeed much of the recent infighting within the Churches of Christ has arisen due to misunderstanding this word. “Works” generally means anything one might do to earn his salvation based on the merit of what is done. Hence, “works” does not include baptism, faith, or repentance. Rather, it includes things like moral living and obeying whatever laws God imposes that you believe you have to fulfill to become or to stay saved.

Now, this makes “works” a bit subjective, as different views of doctrine result in different understandings of “works.” For example, if I believe that I must worship God by singing only *a cappella* to merit salvation, then singing *a cappella* is a work to me. However, if I believe that singing *a cappella* is God's will but that those baptized believers who sing to God with an instrument in all good conscience will not be damned, then *a cappella* singing is not a work to me.

Thus, as we'll see when we get to Galatians, circumcision is a work if you view it as a requirement to be saved. If you see circumcision as a good health practice or just a tradition, then it's not a work.

In Paul's vocabulary, “works” and “grace” are antithetical.

(Rom. 11:6 KJV) And if by grace, then *is it* no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if *it be* of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.

Paul could not be more clear that grace and works are opposites. It's never grace plus works—it's always one or the other.

(Gal. 3:2) I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by [works of] the law, or by believing what you heard?¹⁷

Quite plainly, Paul's arguments presuppose that it is impossible for the Spirit to be received by a combination of faith and works—it must be one or the other.

And could any sentence be plainer than Romans 4:5 that “faith” does not include works?

¹⁷ The NIV typically does not translate *erga* as “works” and is not entirely consistent with its choice of translation, often making it very hard to follow Paul's arguments about works. Hence, I will frequently replace or add words in brackets to make the NIV close enough to the Greek to follow Paul's logic.

However, to the man who does not work but [believes] God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.¹⁸

Now, a common point of confusion here is to confuse “works of the law” or “works” with obedience to the ceremonial elements of the Law of Moses. But Paul means by “law” any action believed to have saving merit before God. Certainly, in the First Century obedience to the Law of Moses was a preeminent example of works, but the concept is much broader.

This is seen in Paul’s discussion in Romans of why Gentiles who were never taught the Law of Moses are nonetheless condemned by the law—

(Rom. 2:12-15) All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature [works] required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)

Paul’s point is that the Gentiles are subject to the “law” even though they’ve never heard the Law of Moses or had any similar revelation. Rather, Gentiles are “a law for themselves” because their own consciences show that they apprehend much of God’s law without special revelation—and the Gentiles violate their own incomplete understanding of God’s will, and thus stand condemned, needing a Savior.

Thus, if a man¹⁹ who has never been instructed about God does anything that he knows is wrong—or condemns in others—then he is self-condemned because God’s law is sufficiently written on his heart to teach him how to treat others. And this is sufficient to prove he violates the portion of God’s will he knows. Every person believes in right and wrong, moral and immoral. You and I might disagree about particulars, but we agree that some actions are wrong and some are right. And none of us lives up even to his own standards.

Now, plainly, the kinds of laws that are written on the heart of a Gentile are moral laws—don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t bear false witness—not ceremonial laws, like circumcision or animal sacrifice. Thus, in Paul’s vocabulary, “law” includes both moral laws and ceremonial laws. And “works” are just doing what the law requires.

¹⁸ The NIV can be frustratingly inconsistent in its translations. The translators say “trust” when the verb is “believes” (*pisteuo*), which is simply the verb form of “faith” (*pistis*).

¹⁹ My female law partner takes pains to correct my use of “he” and such to refer to both males and females. And her point is well taken. However, such constructions as “he or she” or “he/she” or (worse yet) “s/he” get very old very fast. I’ve tried using “one,” but it came across as pretentious (despite often being better grammar). Believe me when I say I intend no disrespect to the female readers, but on occasion I will use “he,” “man,” and such in their gender-neutral senses.

Perhaps another of Paul’s arguments would make the point clearer—

(Rom. 4:1-5) What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but [believes] God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Paul raises the question of whether Abraham was justified by faith or by works. He quotes Genesis 15:6 to prove that Abraham was justified by faith. But why bother? If “works” refers to the Law of Moses, it would be enough to point out that Abraham died hundreds of years before the Law of Moses was given.

To those under the Law of Moses, works includes not only the Ten Commandments and other moral laws but also the sacrificial system. To those outside the Law of Moses, “works” and “law” include at least basic morality. To Christians, “works” and “law” are what we think we have to do to be or stay saved beyond acceptance of the gospel through faith, repentance, and baptism.

C. A note on James

Now, this brings us to James, because many within the Churches of Christ insist that James teaches that faith includes “works” or that works must be added to faith before faith can save.²⁰

(James 2:14-19) What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no [works]? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by [works], is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith; I have [works].” Show me your faith without [works], and I will show you my faith by [works]. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.²¹

²⁰ Both Music and Dobbs, quoted above, rely heavily on James 2 in making their cases. Many commentaries on Romans and Galatians by Church authors state that faith includes obedience to God’s laws. See, e.g., David Lipscomb (edited with additional notes by J. W. Shepherd) III *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles, Second Corinthians & Galatians* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co. 1936), 221-222.

²¹ The NIV obscures the issue by translating “works” as “deeds.” But the identical Greek word is used here as in Romans.

James’ argument, of course, makes perfect sense. What good would it be for God to send his Son to save us, to forgive our sins, if we were to respond by continuing in sin? Surely God expects more from us than just faith!

The distinction is this: when Paul opposes “works” against “faith,” he means works on which we rely to give us merit before God, that is, anything that we add to the gospel as additional requirements to be saved (or stay saved). When James refers to “works,” he is speaking of doing good deeds, not to become saved, but because we *are* saved.

The contrast is well seen in Ephesians 2:8-10—

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by **works**, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s **workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus to do good **works**, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Here Paul speaks of three kinds of works. First, Paul denies that we are saved by our own works. Indeed, we are saved by a second kind of works: not our works but the works of God. Hence, we are God’s workmanship, that is, we have been re-made by the working of God. But all this is for a purpose, for us to do a third kind of works: “good works.” Hence, our salvation rests on the working of God, not our works, but having been saved, we are charged with doing good works.

Now the key is the direction of the arrow of causation. Works do not cause salvation; rather, salvation causes works. We can state this in terms of formal logic. The statement “If I do good works, then I will be saved” is false, because no one other than Jesus is capable of doing works that merit salvation (Rom. 3:23). On the other hand, the statement “If I am saved, then I will do good works” is true. Now, my logic professor at David Lipscomb taught me that any true statement can logically be “double reversed” into the “contrapositive,” and it will still be true: “If I don’t do good works, then I am not saved.” And this is precisely what James says.

It is easy to confuse the first statement, which is false, with the contrapositive, which is true, because they look very similar—but they are not the same. If all saved people do good works, then the fact that I don’t do good works necessarily means I’m not saved. But it’s not because my salvation depends on those works. It’s because salvation necessarily produces works. (We are confident that God makes allowance for those whose physical or mental frailty make them incapable of good works.)

An example might help. My wife loves me, and I love her. Because I love her, I do good things for her. Thus, it is generally true that “if I love my wife then I will do good things for her.” But this does not mean “if I do good things for my wife then I love her.” I may not love her at all and yet out of guilt or duty do many wonderful things for her. But if I love her, that love will inevitably produce good deeds benefiting her. Thus, it is also true that if I don’t do anything beneficial for my wife, then I don’t love her.

Discussion questions—

1. How does the Bible use “gospel”?

2. What makes the gospel good news?
3. What are some things we often refer to as “gospel” but which really aren’t?
4. What is faith? What is the content of faith?
5. What are some things we often refer as “faith” but which really aren’t?
6. What denominations in your town teach the same faith and same gospel as your church? Which do not? What are the differences?
7. Do you know of any Churches of Christ that have split over matters of faith or of gospel (in their New Testament senses)?
8. What’s the difference between how Paul and James use “works” in their letters?
9. Do Paul and James contradict each other on the necessity of works?
10. In Ephesians 2:8-10, give examples of each kind of “works” that Paul refers to.
11. What works are absolutely essential for a Christian to go to heaven? Which are not? How do we decide between one and the other?

CHAPTER 3 LOVE

When I was in junior high school, my best friend was the oldest son of a local Church of Christ preacher. I well remember how excited he was one fall day when he told me his father had decided the family could celebrate Christmas that year—so long as they understood it to be a secular holiday that had nothing to do with the birth of Jesus. No angels, no Nativity scenes, no wise men, and no stars—but plenty of Santa Claus and presents!

“It’s stupid, I know, but Dad says that Jesus wasn’t born on December 25, that Christmas is based on a pagan holiday, and it’s just not right to celebrate Jesus’ birthday in December.”

Being the smart aleck that I was, I asked, “So, you mean that if you give presents to honor Jesus, it would be wrong, but if you give presents out of rank materialism, it would be okay?” My friend told me to shut up—he was just glad to get the presents.

The same friend wasn’t allowed to play with “face cards,” but could play all the Rook™ he wanted. He couldn’t shoot pool on my family’s pool table, but we could play Carom™ at his house. You see, Carom™ had only four pockets (not six), used rings (not balls), and spring loaded cues (not the entirely manual cues of pool). It wasn’t long before my friend told me how he’d spent the summer in the basement playing poker with the sons of an elder, by stripping the 14’s out of the Rook™ deck and using Carom™ rings as chips. He asked me if I wanted to join in, but I assured him I was happy enough playing “evil” Slap Jacks and Go Fish.

His family moved to Kentucky, and from then on, I only heard from him occasionally. I went to David Lipscomb College, but his father wouldn’t allow him to go to a “liberal” school—instead, he sent him to a state college. I asked my friend, “How is a pagan state school better than a Christian college?” He shook his head and allowed that he was just glad to get away. The last time we spoke, my friend was heavily into marijuana and vigorously defending its benefits.

All too often in the Churches of Christ, by adopting a legalistic posture toward interpreting the Scriptures, we’ve ignored the emotional and the spiritual side of our salvation. Thus, many of my legalistically inclined brothers can’t see why salvation should produce good works if good works aren’t required for salvation. I mean, why should I bother to do good works if salvation doesn’t require it? And from a purely legalistic standpoint, this is a very good question.

But it’s much the same question as why I should do good works for my wife if I know that our marriage is not based on my works. If I have no fear of divorce, then why bother? Well, of course, I do good works for my wife because I love her—not to earn her love, not to buy her love, not to get married, and not to stay married—but because I *want* to. I enjoy doing things for her because I love her.

I have yet to make the calculation: how little can I do and still not be divorced? I mean, my goal in this relationship is not to avoid divorce. I am already married, and now I want to make the most of what I already have.

Just so, I am already saved, and I deeply love Jesus. Because of this love, I never ever ask: how little can I do and still go to heaven? I’m going to heaven. The question now is: how can I best show my love and develop this relationship to its fullest potential?

We’ve made a mistake when we’ve presented the “plan of salvation” as a contract, where we do certain things in exchange for God’s doing certain things. God doesn’t need our faith or our repentance. All God does for us is a gift—but a gift motivated by his love for us (Rom. 7:23). And what God wants first and foremost from us is our love. Somehow, “love” isn’t ever stated to be part of the five-step formula, but in fact, that’s what God wants. And if we would truly understand that love must permeate the relationship between Savior and saved, we’d understand much better what Paul and James say.

(John 14:15,23) “If you love me, you will obey what I command.”

...

Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

You see, salvation *requires* that we love Jesus—it’s just as much a step in the plan of salvation as faith. And while it is stated as a command, love that is motivated by a command is a very shallow love indeed. Imagine loving your wife only because you can’t get married unless you love her! Such a “love” would be self-seeking, loving to get something. Indeed, love prompted by a desire to get is not love at all.

The love that results in salvation is the love that prompts obedience to Jesus’ teachings. The love comes *first*, and then the obedience. Thus, love can’t be merely a product of obedience to a command. Christian good works must be freely given just as God’s good work in saving us is freely given.²²

The incarnate Christ had a marvelous sense of humor and often spoke ironically. For example,

(John 13:34-35) “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

²² I’m not the first to see our five-step plan as true but superficial. K. C. Moser wisely comments on Rom. 4,

It is clear that Paul is interested, first of all, in the cross. He is not interested in a mere condition of salvation that happens to suit him. The cross was not made for conditions, but conditions for the cross. No condition of justification can be understood apart from its relation to Christ crucified. To be concerned primarily in some condition, instead of the cross, is to “put the cart before the horse.” Any attempt to expound Romans in the interest of any condition, except for the reason that this condition is the natural response to the cross, is doomed to failure.

The Gist of Romans (Delight, Ark.: Gospel Light Publ. Co. 1957, rev’d 1958), 28.

Grammatically, “Love one another” is a command. But we are told to love as Jesus loves us. And Jesus doesn’t love prompted by a command—he gives his love as a free gift. And my love for my brothers and sisters would be a pitiful love indeed if I only loved them because Jesus commanded me to do so. Rather, to love as Jesus loves I have to love because I want to—because it’s my nature to love—not because I’m afraid of hellfire if I don’t. Hence, Jesus has given us a command that we can only fulfill if we aren’t motivated by the command!

Love is not a work. It’s not something you do. Rather, it’s something that prompts you to do works. Maybe a better way to say it is that when we repent, we make Jesus our Lord, and in so doing we commit to live lives motivated by Christian love. In fact, that is a very precise definition of penitence. Merely getting rid of moral sin is not enough. You must fill your heart with the righteousness that comes from God—love of your fellow man.

Now you and I may well disagree over how to best love someone. Should I give money to that homeless man or does giving him money just encourage him not to work? Reasonable minds might differ. If I give him \$20 because Jesus helped the poor, God will accept me even if God knows (and I don’t) that the homeless man will take the money, get drunk, and hurt someone. If I refuse him and give nothing because he is able-bodied and work is available (2 Thes. 3:10), then God will accept me even though God knows (and I don’t) that I’m in error and the man really needed the money to eat and really couldn’t find work.

On the other hand, if I refuse the man out of a spirit of greed, my action will not be accepted by God, no matter how much good I do the man. And if I give the man \$20 to show my generosity to those who are watching, God will not accept that either, even if that was exactly the right thing to do (Matt. 6:1).

In each case, I could argue that what I was doing complies with a command, but whether I do right in God’s eyes depends more on the state of my heart than my actual conduct. If my action or inaction was an act of love, it will be accepted by God. Otherwise, nothing is acceptable. Thus, “love thy neighbor” becomes the very definition of penitence, that is, of what it means to live the life God would have us live.

As we’ll discuss later, love is the law that God writes on our hearts through the Holy Spirit. When we become Christians, God gives us his Spirit and changes our hearts. More precisely, God turns us into loving people. Love becomes our nature. It makes us a new creation. A mature Christian loves because God has made him a loving person, because it’s his nature to love. Just as a fish swims, a Christian loves. And when a Christian loves, he is no longer under law. God will judge a Christian by his heart. Of course, a Christian who loves will not steal, commit adultery, murder, or otherwise break the moral law of God, because loving people just don’t act that way.

On the other hand, loving people can and do disagree about the age of the earth, the role of women in the church, divorce and remarriage, etc., etc. And even those who get the answers to these questions wrong will go to heaven, because they have faith and penitence.

Some will doubt that love is as encompassing and central to the gospel as I contend. But the Scriptures are quite clear. Let’s start with John 13-17. These five chapters relate Jesus’ words to his apostles following the Last Supper and preceding his arrest. Jesus has much to say about many things, but the central theme of the discourse is love.

(John 13:34-35) “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Immediately after washing the apostles’ feet, Jesus states the theme of the five chapters: “love one another.” He declares this a “new command,” although “love your neighbor” is a command going all the way back to the Law of Moses (Lev. 19:18). The only thing new about the command is the measure of love that Jesus requires: “as I have loved you.”

Jesus also says that the true mark of the church will be the love the disciples have for each other. The one true church will be marked as such by its love—not its autonomy, not its *a cappella* singing, not its organization—its love.

(John 14:15) “If you love me, you will obey what I command.”

(John 14:21) “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”

(John 14:23-24) Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.”

Three times Jesus declares that if his disciples love him, they will keep his commandments or teachings.

(John 15:9-14,17) “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. ... This is my command: Love each other.”

Jesus now states the principle from the opposite direction. To “remain in [Jesus’] love,” the disciples must “obey my commands.” But then Jesus drives the point home and removes all ambiguity. “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” Jesus, now in chapter 15, refers all the way back to chapter 13, to the only command given in the discourse thus far: love each other.

The point is particularly emphasized by Jesus’ irony. He has repeatedly told the disciples to obey his commandments or teachings (plural!) and yet he gives but one

command. “Love each other.” And, indeed, it is the only specific command in this discourse.

(John 17:20-21) “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Jesus returns to this theme with parallel language in chapter 17. This chapter is a prayer uttered by Jesus but heard by his disciples. Picking up from chapter 13, Jesus declares that the world would believe in Jesus because of the unity of his disciples. The commands to love and to be united cannot be separated. How can we love one another and yet be divided?

John picks up the same ideas in 1 John.

(1 John 3:10-11,14,16-18) This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother. This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. ... We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. ...

Anyone who does not love remains in death. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

John closely parallels Jesus in saying we tell those who are true Christians by their love for one another—and “love” means being willing to lay down your life for your brothers. John makes the lesson more pointed by concluding that if you’re willing to give your life, you necessarily are willing to give up your possessions to those in need. Love is found in action, not just words.

(1 John 3:21-23) Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

And again we see the irony borrowed from Christ. We must obey God’s “commands,” but there is only one “command”: to believe and to love one another—faith and love.

Not surprisingly, Paul says the same thing, although in different terms. For example, Paul concludes in Romans—

(13:8-10) Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, **for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.** The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever

other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore **love is the fulfillment of the law.**

Paul says the very same thing in Galatians.

(Gal. 5:14) The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

I’ve read Romans many, many times, and each time I receive fresh insights. Romans is a lengthy, comprehensive discourse on Christianity in which Paul attempts to very thoroughly answer the hard questions—some questions so hard that I’d never have thought of them if Paul hadn’t raised them in Romans! It eventually occurred to me that in this most comprehensive of books, written to a church that Paul had never visited, Paul never gave the instructions that were central to the Christianity of my childhood.

Indeed, in chapters 12 through 15, when Paul is making practical applications of all the instruction that preceded, he never once mentions the five acts of worship, the organization of the church, the name of the church, congregational autonomy, or the like. Rather, he talks about serving your fellow man and love and acceptance of one another. He writes of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. And it’s not as though he just didn’t get around to these other instructions on church polity—rather, he emphatically denies that there are laws beyond “love your neighbor.”

In Ephesians 2:8-10, we are told that the very purpose for which we are saved is to do good works, meaning that we should serve other people. Indeed, the Scriptures are plain that service to our fellow man is a defining aspect of Christianity. “Pure and undefiled religion” is visiting the widows and orphans (Jas. 1:27). Jesus will separate the saved from the lost based on who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, and visited those in prison (Matt. 25:31ff).

Indeed, the essential purpose of evangelists, elders, and teachers is to prepare God’s people for “works of service” (Eph. 4:11-13). Rather than sinning, we are called to “serve one another in love” (Gal. 5:13). God gives us spiritual gifts so that we will “serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Pet. 4:10).

Love—meaning an active, serving, sacrificing love—is not a command. It is *the* command. Except it’s not a command at all, because you can’t command love, or it’s not really love. It is what we have to become. As God is love, we must be love.

Discussion questions—

1. Read Jesus’ account of the Judgment Day in Matthew 25:31-46. How does Jesus say the lost will be separated from the saved? Does Jesus say anything about church organization? The five acts of worship? Why not? Why make service to our fellowman the only test?

2. On the Judgment Day described in Matthew 25, would you be a sheep or a goat? Would your home church be sheep or goats?

3. Give some examples of “works of service” beyond those listed in Matthew 25.

4. How can love be the only command? Can you think of any commands that God imposes on Christians (not to become a Christian, but after having become a Christian) that can't be summarized by “love”? If you thought of any other commands, are they found explicitly in Scripture or have we inferred them from Scripture? If we infer a command that is not summarized by “love thy neighbor,” have we inferred wrongly?

5. When people in your community think of your congregation, do they think of you as a loving people? Why or why not?

6. Why would someone do something for a loved one if there was no penalty for not doing it? Do you ever do more than you absolutely have to for your parents? Your husband, wife, boyfriend, or girlfriend?

CHAPTER 4 SPIRIT

One reason I went to David Lipscomb was to learn about the Holy Spirit. I graduated from high school in 1972, which was at the height of the Pentecostal controversies in the Churches of Christ. Pat Boone had flipped over to the Pentecostal side, so at my home church we could no longer study his books in Bible class. At DLC, we no longer sang the alma mater, because Pat had written it.

In my home church, we had officially adopted the “we don’t know the answer” position on the Spirit’s indwelling. Some said all Christians had the actual but “ordinary” indwelling of the Spirit, but they weren’t sure what it meant. Others said the Spirit only operated through the Word. The Word-only view seemed to me little different from declaring the Spirit to have died nearly 2,000 years ago, but then I really couldn’t see point of being indwelled by a Spirit that didn’t let me do miracles. Now, if God would give me the gift of healing or of moving mountains, that would be cool!

I took a college course on the Holy Spirit. The professor believed in an actual indwelling, and he rattled off a page of Scriptures saying what the Spirit does in Christians even today. And I just didn’t believe him. It didn’t add up. We spent almost the entire quarter learning the errors of Pentecostalism and yet had only a hurried lecture on what the Holy Spirit DOES, and I just wasn’t persuaded.

Some years later, I began my own study. I literally read every verse in the Bible that refers to the Spirit, and then every verse that these verses were cross-referenced to. Eventually I concluded that it was all a bunch of nonsense: “Holy Spirit” was just a metaphor for some vague notion of spirituality but didn’t refer to a person of the Godhead. Yet deep down, I knew that couldn’t be true.

Sitting in my bedroom, surrounded by pages of notes, concordances, and translations, I was frustrated nearly to tears, and soon found myself in prayer for some help, because understanding this was plainly beyond my abilities.

In less than 10 seconds I felt an answer: read Romans 8. And I did. And then I understood. And just like finding the long word in a crossword puzzle, the other blanks virtually filled themselves in. I should have prayed sooner.

The third perspective is spirituality. We in the Churches of Christ have often denied that the Holy Spirit operates directly on the heart and mind of the Christian, insisting that the Spirit works exclusively through the Word, meaning the Bible. This doctrine has had the effect of causing us to view the Scriptures through legalistic eyes, rather than spiritual eyes. But the Scriptures themselves insist on being understood spiritually—

(1 Cor. 2:14-16) The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man’s judgment: “For who has

known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

Here Paul makes the remarkable claim that only those with the Spirit can discern inspired teachings. Now it is plainly contradictory to teach that the Spirit only acts through the inspired teachings, as then both the saved and lost would have received the same thing—the written teachings of God. But Paul says that while the saved and the lost might both receive spiritual teachings, only those with the Spirit (the saved) can discern them. Thus, there must be something remarkably different about the saved person himself. Paul goes even further, declaring that Christians have “the mind of Christ”! Clearly, he wasn’t speaking of the New Testament, which hadn’t even been written yet.

Proof texts could be multiplied by the score. The fact is that the New Testament plainly teaches that the Holy Spirit is given to all who’ve been saved (Acts 2:38) and that the Spirit indwells each of us—

(Eph. 3:16-19) I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit **in your inner being**, so that Christ may **dwell in your hearts** through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Paul prays that the Spirit strengthen his readers in their “inner being.” He is not telling them to study the Word—he is asking God to use his Spirit to work in the hearts of his readers—and to know love “that surpasses knowledge.” Plainly, we cannot by our own efforts have knowledge that surpasses knowledge. Paul is not calling on his readers to gain knowledge by human effort; he is asking God to operate directly on the hearts of his readers to give them a knowledge that can only be gained by spiritual means.

Just so, in Philippians, Paul teaches us that God works “in” us to will (that is, desire) and do his will—

(Phil. 2:13) ... for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

You see, when we are saved, we receive the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit indwells us with power and gives us not only spiritual understanding, he changes us to be increasingly Christ-like—so that we not only do what God wishes but we also *desire* what God wishes. Only this way can we love as God would have us love—

(Rom. 5:5) And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Scholars debate whether the “love of God” in this passage is God’s love for us or our love for him. But both thoughts are contained in the phrase. After all, the source of this love is God (and so it’s his love for us) but the location of this love is *our* hearts (the seat of our emotions, and thus it’s our love). And both truths are Paul’s point. As God pours out his love for us into our hearts, our hearts receive the love and our hearts

become loving hearts. And all this is made possible by the indwelling Spirit, which attunes our hearts to God’s promptings.

Now, if we see the world through law-tinted glasses, this verse is very hard to understand. But our God has devised a means of our salvation that perfectly fits our nature as humans—we have an intellect, but we are also emotional and spiritual people. And God’s solution is to rebuild all facets of our existence.

With Spirit-ual eyes we can better understand why saved people must do good works: God works in us to desire and act according to his good purpose. He makes us into loving people.

(Rom. 8:13-14) For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

In fact, God helps us even in our repentance, as we “put to death the misdeeds of the body,” that is, resist sin, “by the Spirit.” And as sons of God, we must be “led by the Spirit.” If you were raised as I was raised, on a Spirit-less version of Christianity, then this passage makes no sense. After all, I’ve had no visions, no handwriting on the wall. How does the Spirit lead if there’s no voice in my head telling me what to do?

Again, this is confusing because we presume that Jesus deals with us intellectually and not emotionally or spiritually. In fact, the leading we receive is not necessarily in the form of objective propositional truths, but in terms of how we feel—what we want to do. God helps us want to do right and despise doing wrong.

The Hebrews writer quotes Jeremiah’s prophesy of the Messianic age to great effect—

(Heb. 8:8-10) But God found fault with the people and said: “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. **It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers** when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. **I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.** I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

The new covenant is dramatically unlike the Law of Moses. Unlike under the Law, *God* writes his law in our minds and on our hearts—in our intellects and in our emotions. Clearly, Jeremiah is not speaking of our reading the Bible—the Israelites read the Law of Moses. No, the task is not ours; it is God’s. Of course, other Scriptures teach us that God does this through the Spirit.

For a very long time, this passage puzzled me because I’d never received an inspired propositional truth from God. God never came to me and wrote on my heart “Thou shalt sing *a cappella*” or any other law—nothing about church names, church organization, worship services, or all the other issues on which my training had centered. Only much later did I realize that God had written all over my heart: “Love your

neighbor.” “Love the Lord your God.” “Do not steal.” “Love one another even as I have loved you.” “Act according to God’s good purpose.” “Know an unknowable love.” “Enjoy a peace that surpasses understanding.” “Have an overflowing joy.” And many other things that are too deep to write. And these “laws,” because they are written on my heart, aren’t really laws at all—they are simply elements of my new essential nature. That is, these are true of me because that’s the way God has reworked me. I can take no credit at all for this. I yielded and God wrote on my heart and changed me.

Of course, we would expect God to write only those laws that really matter in my mind and on my heart. After all, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal. 5:6b).

Let’s pause for a couple of analogies that sometimes help people understand the Spirit—the power brake example and the radio example.

I used to own a Dodge Aspen, which was the car that drove Chrysler into bankruptcy. I was driving at 55 miles per hour on a heavily trafficked road when the engine just spontaneously cut off! Until that moment, I had always assumed that when I pressed the brakes, it was me pressing the brake pads into the brake drums and stopping the car. And I’d always been sure that when I turned the steering wheel that it was me moving the wheels. But when my engine stopped on a downhill incline at 55, I learned that the engine had been doing about 99% of all that work and I’d only been doing about 1%—because I had to push about 100 times harder to stop and steer the car than I was used to. It was an eye-opening experience!

Well, this is much how the Spirit works. Sometimes I think that my love for God and zeal for his work are my own doing—and they are, to some extent. But my own works are greatly empowered and strengthened by God’s working in me to not only do his work, but to want to do his work. But just like power brakes, if I don’t press the pedal, the car won’t stop, but I don’t really do the work. I haven’t lost my free will—I’ve just been helped more than I’ll ever fully realize.

Now many of my students don’t remember how radios used to work—radios with dials you turned to find the station, and that required frequent re-tunings as the signal drifted. But the Spirit is like a beautiful symphony on the radio. The music is inaudible to anyone without a radio. Only certain people are privileged to hear it. And even those who have radios have to know how to find the station and how to keep it tuned into the station. Of course, the stations never did drift off signal. Rather, old-style radio circuitry tended to drift off the frequency due to the inadequacy of the radio—not the transmitter.

Just so, the Spirit always communicates a clear, steady, beautiful signal, but only the saved can hear it. But even the saved hear poorly unless they tune in to the correct frequency. Prayer, Bible study, and other spiritual disciplines help keep us in tune with the will of God and allow the Spirit to speak more and more clearly to our hearts. The signal is always there, but we aren’t always tuned in.

So we see that God’s grace is powerful indeed. We receive our salvation conditioned on our faith, our repentance, and our love, on the occasion of our baptism. But all these are gifts. After all, while we must love to be saved, our love is the product of

God’s work in our hearts. And while we repent, we put to death the misdeeds of the body with God’s help, that is, “by the Spirit” (Rom. 8:13). Even faith is a gift—

(Rom. 12:3) For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.

Of course, we first have faith and repent before we receive the Spirit at baptism, but the Scriptures frequently speak of these as given by God. God deepens, strengthens, and enriches that which first brought us to Christ.

None of this is to say that human effort counts for nothing.

(Phil. 2:12-13) Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to **work out your salvation** with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Paul says that we are to work out our salvation—this is something that *we* do—because God is working in us for us to want to do the things it takes for us to work out our salvation. We cooperate with the Spirit. We are led by the Spirit, and we follow the Spirit’s lead. But no part of us is untouched by the Spirit. All that we do for Christ we do with the help of Christ. And the more we allow God to work in us, the more Christ-like we become. We yield. God works in us. And so we work, but it’s really God working in us. We take no credit. But neither do we lose our free will; it’s just that we have much more help than we like to admit.

Discussion questions—

1. Some have taught that the Spirit only operates on a Christian through the Bible. Others have taught that the Spirit can exercise an influence on Christians directly on their hearts. Which view is best supported by Scripture?

2. Is it permissible to ask God to “guard, guide, and direct us”? or to “give the speaker a ready recollection”? Might God answer such prayers through His Spirit other than through our reading the Bible?

3. How have you changed since you first became a Christian? Have your desires and feelings changed? Did you change these by yourself or do you think that God helped?

4. Do you know anyone who has dramatically changed since becoming a Christian? Did God help make the change occur? How?

5. Has God written any of His laws on your heart and mind? Which laws? How?

6. The author compares the working of the Holy Spirit with power brakes and with a radio. Is the Holy Spirit really like these things?

CHAPTER 5 GRACE

For several summers, our preacher’s niece and nephew would visit and play with us. I well remember their home church making national headlines when the church split over the preacher’s daughter winning a swimsuit competition. It seems her photo was splashed across the front page of the local paper.

The elders were outraged and voted to fire the popular preacher. However, it soon turned out that newspaper photo was taken by one of the elders. When the hypocrisy was pointed out, he decided to side with the preacher. The membership took sides between the anti-swimsuit elders and the pro-swimsuit, pro-preacher elders. It split.

In fact, Life magazine’s year-end review featured a picture of their home church with its steeple split down the middle as the result of a lightning strike. It was very embarrassing to the Churches of Christ and hurt our image for many, many years.

I wondered then, and still wonder, what really led to the split. I mean, if the members of the church truly loved each other, wouldn’t they have found a way to stay together—or is the doctrine of swimsuit wearing more important than love and unity? Did anyone every apologize? Was the church ever re-united? Or is that too much to expect of Christians? I mean, shouldn’t we extend to one another the same grace we receive from God?

Many passages teach us to be confident in our salvation. For example—

(1 John 3:21-24) Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have **confidence** before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how **we know that he lives in us**: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

John could not have written more plainly. The single command to love is expanded only slightly to add faith. And we have confidence, which depends on faith and love—and the Spirit, which, of course, produces in us faith and love.

Similarly, in 1 John 5:13, we are told—

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Notice the word “that.” We’d expect John to write “whether”: “whether you have eternal life.” But John says that if you have faith you have eternal life. His concern is that you realize the blessing you have. It’s just that simple. Now this makes us worry about repentance. But John sees no distinction between faith and repentance. How can you accept Jesus as the Son of God and not as Lord? The premise of the entire book of 1 John is that you can’t have one and not the other.

Now there is much more that could be said regarding grace, but I will limit myself to one critical thought. Paul’s favorite test of real grace, of really understanding what he is saying when he contrasts faith and works, is that in the true system of grace there is no room for boasting—

(Rom. 3:27-28) **Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded.** On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

(Eph. 2:8-10) For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, **so that no one can boast.** For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

I can boast of my scholarship and learning. I can boast of obeying God’s laws for organizing a congregation. I can boast of how I spend or don’t spend church funds. I *can’t* boast about how God has changed my heart. I *can’t* boast about what’s been given me that I don’t deserve. Any version of the gospel that gives you a sense of superiority to others is a false gospel.

A. Falling Away

At this point, some would surely wonder what limits there are on grace. If works don’t produce salvation but rather salvation produces works, then what could cause one to lose his soul? Or am I teaching “once saved, always saved”?

Let’s first take the two clearest cases. Obviously enough, if someone loses his faith, then he has in fact left the household of faith and is lost. 1 John 4:2 says so plainly—

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but **every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.**

To state the obvious, losing one’s faith is not the same as going through periods of doubt or of weak faith. It doesn’t take a lot of faith to have saving faith. In fact, just enough to be willing to confess it, make Jesus Lord, and accept baptism. This is not great, mature faith; but it is saving faith.

Another way to lose one’s salvation is by giving up the other side of faith: repentance. We had to repent to be saved; when we repudiate our repentance, when Jesus is no longer Lord of our lives, then we are lost in our sins. Hebrews 10:26-31 states the principle—

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished

who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

There is no stronger language in all of Scripture. But we need to be careful. The writer doesn’t say that we’re damned if we continue to sin after we’re saved. Everyone continues to sin after being saved. The difference is that we who are saved continue to sin although we no longer want to. We sin contrary to a commitment we’ve made and that we are intending to be true to. And the writer also doesn’t say that we’re damned for every deliberate sin. Unfortunately, we’ve all done things that we knew were sins when we did them, after being saved. It’s the weakness of the flesh that we’re all subject to.

The line from saved to lost is crossed only when we *deliberately* continue to sin, that is, when the continuing to sin is deliberate. In other words, we’re lost in our sins when we’ve repudiated our repentance, when Jesus is no longer our Lord.

Plainly, it’s hard to look into someone else’s heart and conclude whether he’s in this condition. It’s sometimes easy enough to see that someone is in deep spiritual trouble, but we can’t conclude that God has given up on him. Only God knows these things.

In short, there are two things that get us into Christ—faith and repentance (at the point of baptism)—and two things that take us out of Christ: losing either of these two things. There’s a third element that we’ll get to when we focus on Galatians: we must not only accept Jesus as the Son of God and as Lord, we must also accept him as our Savior.

Now, I’ve earlier mentioned my belief that love is a requirement for salvation, and love fits very neatly into this viewpoint. When we say that one must repent to be saved, we are saying that a convert must agree to put away sin and take on the holy life Christ wishes for us to lead—a life of an active, serving love. Love is simply the fulfillment of repentance. After all, “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:10).

Therefore, I readily accept as saved those within the Churches of Christ who disagree with me on any number of issues. The Scriptures teach that salvation is determined by faith and penitence—not by being right on the fashionable theological issues of the day. I can be entirely penitent and yet disagree on what the Bible says on any number of subjects. Neither the age of the earth nor the scriptural grounds for a divorce are matters of faith, and thus being wrong on those subjects is not a salvation issue—provided that I’m penitent, meaning that I’m trying to honor God in my study and teaching.

Now there are several Scriptures that authorize expulsion of church members who behave divisively (*e.g.*, Rom. 16:17; Tit. 3:10). But being in error is not by itself divisive—or else we’d all have to agree on every single point of doctrine and practice—and we don’t and can’t. Similarly, a church may disfellowship a member due to unrepented moral sin. But this is to shame him into repentance (2 Thes. 3:14-15) because an impenitent Christian is in jeopardy of his soul under Hebrews 10:26. But a Christian

who disagrees with me on, say, the role of women is not thereby impenitent and hence not a subject for disfellowshipping.

I could go on, but you see my point. There are admittedly very real, very practical problems associated with acknowledging the salvation of those who disagree with us on one subject or another. It’s especially tough when those people disagree in the area of worship, as we can’t worship together unless we can agree on a practice that causes no one to sin against his or her conscience (Rom. 14:13-23). But struggling with such issues is far superior to running off all who disagree on some issue that happens to be controversial at the time.

Thus, those of my brothers and sisters—baptized penitent believers—who worship with (or without) an instrument, who practice quarterly (or weekly) communion, who have women elders (or have no women elders), who have Sunday School classes (or teach that such classes are wrong), who teach that the earth is billions of years old (or that it’s only thousands of years old), etc., etc. are all going to heaven if they believe these things with penitent hearts, believing that they glorify God with their teachings and practices.

The church is made up of those who’ve been saved, less those who were saved but are now lost. Some people have gotten confused and frequently speak of “lost Christians.” There’s no such thing. Romans 8:1 teaches very plainly that all Christians are saved—

Therefore, there is now **no** condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ...

Plainly, if I’m in Christ—a metaphor for being in the church—then there is “no condemnation.” I can’t simultaneously be in Christ and be lost. All Christians are saved. All those in the church are saved. That doesn’t mean that everyone who calls himself a Christian or who attends church is saved. It does mean that the church is made up of saved people and only saved people. It means that all Christians are saved as long as they are Christians.

Now this changes everything. We sometimes tend to think that every time we’re guilty of a sin we’re lost until we confess the sin and pray for forgiveness. But this would mean that Romans 8:1 would be wrong—that there’d be condemnation for those in Christ. We need to understand that this is false teaching.

The truth of the matter is also found in such verses as 1 John 1:7-8—

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, [continuously] purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

I inserted “continuously” where I did because the Greek word translated “purifies” is in the present tense, which denotes continuous action, unlike the aorist tense, which denotes action taking place at a single point in time.

Maybe a better passage is Romans 5:6-10—

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, **how much** more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how **much more**, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

The first paragraph points how remarkable it is that God sent his Son to die for us while we were still sinners. We were “ungodly,” “powerless,” and “God’s enemies,” and yet God provided us the gospel so we could be saved by the cross of Jesus.

Now we’ve always taught—correctly, I think—that when we are baptized, all our sins are forgiven—utterly, thoroughly, completely. Our soul is washed clean, whiter than white. For those of us in the Church of Christ, when we first came out of the baptismal waters, we felt perfectly guiltless and fully forgiven.

In the next paragraph, Paul points out that we are no longer “God’s enemies”—we’ve been reconciled. We’re now God’s children, justified and saved. Well, Paul says, if God would give a good gift to his enemies, how “much more” would he give to his children? Indeed, we are “much more” saved after our baptism than we were at the moment of our baptism!

So, now that we’ve been saved, we’re not just whiter than white, we’re whiter than whiter than white! I’m not entirely sure what this means, although it’s certainly more than just words. Likely, it’s a reference to the fact that we initially had to come to God on our own, but now that we’re Christians, we’ve received the Holy Spirit and so have a Helper to strengthen us to keep us among the saved.

Anyway, the point is that we don’t lose our souls every time a wicked thought flits through our minds or we make some honest mistake. Rather, salvation is solid and lasting—it’s like being continuously baptized over and over until we die, but better.

B. The Salvation of Those in Error

As we discussed earlier, it is possible to forfeit our salvation. Here’s where many of my fellows get it wrong. It’s easy enough to find plenty of biblical teachings and commands that I believe some of our brothers and sisters misunderstand or violate. But thinking or doing wrong does not necessarily cause one to be lost. No matter how strongly I feel about a particular command or teaching, I can’t tell my brothers and sisters that violating that command or teaching will cost them their souls unless the Bible says so. It’s just not my place to damn those who disobey my understanding of the rules.

It is unthinkable to many of us that God would save those who are in doctrinal error. And he won’t—on matters of the gospel. But outside the gospel, on questions of how we live as Christians, God will tolerate any error other than failure to accept Jesus as Son of God, Lord, and Savior.

Understanding this requires making some fine distinctions. We start with Romans 14:1-4—

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Paul writes the Romans regarding two controversies: whether it’s permissible to eat meat and whether Christians should treat some days as especially holy. Before Paul addresses who is right and who is wrong, he gives the practical answer. We may “not look down on” those we disagree with. We may not “judge” those we disagree with. Again, this is addressed to Christians, those who have been saved and are in grace.

Paul then explains why we are not to judge or condemn those with whom we disagree—it’s because God will save that person despite his error. God will make him stand, that is, God will save him even though he doesn’t deserve it (as if any of us do!)

If God grants grace to a fellow Christian, then we must do so also. We can’t hold our brothers and sisters to higher standards than God does! Not that we can’t teach or correct someone in error—we just aren’t allowed to condemn someone for an honest mistake.

So just what is a “disputable matter”? Plainly, isn’t that any matter (outside the gospel) as to which we are disputing? I mean, the test can’t be subjective. Surely, the fact that I see the answer clearly does not take the question out of the “disputable” category. After all, we are disputing, and so the answer must not be all that clear!

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be **fully convinced in his own mind**. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

In verses 5-6, Paul reiterates the point. Those on both sides of each issue believe that they are honoring God by their conduct and by the positions they take. Because in their hearts they are blameless, God accepts their conduct and forgives their error.

Clearly, Paul sees each of these issues as “disputable,” even though Paul urges his readers to be “fully convinced.” In other words, the fact that *you* feel fully convinced on an issue does *not* take the issue out of the “disputable matters” category.

There is no sentence in the Bible more un-Church-of-Christ-like than “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” We’d rather say, “Each one should be right, because if he’s wrong, he is in the wrong church and won’t go to heaven.” But Paul is telling us that the standard is subjective. If the Christian is truly penitent—truly intending to honor God—then God will accept what he does according to the spirit of what is done.

It’s significant that, although Paul later tells us who is right on the eating-of-meat issue, he never tells his readers whether one day is more holy than another! Why not? Because the unity of the church and our willingness to accept one another cannot depend on being right on every single point. Thus, some celebrate Easter and Christmas and others do not. Some treat Sunday as an especially holy day, while others consider all days equally holy. Each does what he does to glorify God, and God accepts both practices.

Let’s skip over to verses 17-19—

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because **anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God** and approved by men. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Note carefully the first sentence. I’ll paraphrase: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of keeping rules, but of trying to do right the best you know how, getting along with your brothers and sisters, and celebrating the grace mediated to us through the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves God with a clean conscience while trying to do what’s right is pleasing to God and approved by men.”

Paul then points out that if we’ll think and behave this way, we’ll have peace in the Christian community (as opposed to today’s vicious, destructive behavior) and will build each other up—those who disagree with me will be in a position to edify me only if we treat each other as fellow Christians. And, of course, no Christian will be edified by me if I’m condemning him to hell. “Mutual” edification requires that those who disagree listen and learn from each other.

Now turn to 15:1-2—

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

If you carefully read chapter 14, you’ll see that the Christian with weak faith is the Christian who binds a rule that God doesn’t bind. Therefore, we who are on the leftward end of the Church of Christ spectrum are *required* to “bear with” our more conservative brothers. We should try to get along so that we can build them up. Of course, the principle works in both directions.

Verses 5-6 hammer the point home.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement **give you a spirit of unity** among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Unity is a gift from God. It’s not something that we accomplish by studying and debating so that one day we’ll all agree on every point of doctrine. That would be a works-based religion—and impossible. Two thousand years of church history surely proves the futility of unity through human effort! Rather God has already united us by adding us to the one church, the one body of Christ. The burden is therefore on us to act

like we’re united—because we are. That means having the “endurance” necessary to put up with those who so disagree with us.

Verse 7 is the climax and summary of the entire discussion.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

In the Greek, “accept” one another is in the present tense—indicating continuous action. “Be accepting of one another” or something like that. But “just as Christ accepted you” is in the aorist tense, indicating action at a single point in time: “just as at the point in time that Christ accepted you.” Clearly, this is a reference to the moment of our salvation. “Just as” means “in the same way.” Thus, the verse means—

Continually accept one another, then, in the same way that Christ accepted you when you were saved, in order to bring praise to God.

In short, and it’s quite unambiguous in the Greek, we must accept as fellow saved people all those who’ve met the terms that we had to meet when we were first saved. “Hear, believe, repent, confess, be baptized” defines not only who becomes saved but whom we must treat as still saved. More precisely, someone who’s become a Christian and who remains true to his original faith and repentance is still a Christian, and we must treat him as such.

Discussion questions—

1. In Paul’s understanding of grace, “there is no room for boasting.” How can this be? Don’t we have a role to play? Don’t our actions matter?
2. What are some sins of “omission” that we sometimes commit? How can we be guiltless from such sin? Is anyone ever guiltless of such sin? How and for how long?
3. How can Christians be continuously saved when they sometimes sin? How frequently do Christians sin? If we had to be sinless to be saved, how often and how long would we stay saved?
4. Why should I try to do right if I’m saved based on grace and Christ’s sacrifice and my own good works?
5. How can Christians lose their salvation?
6. What might cause a Christian to become guilty of the kind of sin described in Hebrews 10:26 and following? Why would someone who has learned better and been given such generous gifts by God himself continue to deliberately sin?
7. What is the lesson of Romans 14? Which doctrines does it apply to? Which ones does it not apply to?
8. What would the Church of Christ be like if everyone obeyed Romans 14?
9. Explain Romans 15:7. How can I accept someone who is in doctrinal error or who sins? Should I expect to be accepted when I’m in error or other sin? How can that be?

CHAPTER 6 FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

We recently received a disturbing email. Our town has a struggling black congregation with a talented young preacher. This summer, he spoke for our congregation a couple of times and was very well received. This is so even though he is theologically to our right—but he’s open minded and inquisitive, and we accepted one another gladly despite not seeing eye to eye on every nuance of doctrine.

The email explained that one of our city’s more right-wing congregations had “disfellowshipped” him because he had spoken in our pulpit! Now besides the fact that they have no business seeking to discipline a member of another congregation, the sheer unfairness of it all really hit home with me. I mean, we gladly heard a preacher who is more rightwing than we are, and he gets disfellowshipped for his trouble. If they really think we are too leftward in our thinking, then shouldn’t they be thrilled that we were willing to hear from someone to our right?

And what would be the point in hurting the feelings of an idealistic young preacher for teaching a lesson than no one in town would disagree with?

I thought about this quite a long time. I’m still trying to understand. How can love for God be transformed into hatred? And “hatred” is the right word, as there was no effort to correct or restore this preacher. Just a letter letting him know that they considered him lost and outside their fellowship.

But this is the price of legalism. When we seek salvation based on our own merits, we must at some point persuade ourselves that we actually merit salvation! And this leads inevitably to arrogance, and arrogance to hatred.

Now the remarkable thing is that the leaders of this rightward congregation surely think that they were acting in love—but what a strange love it is. A love without mercy.

(Matt. 23:23a) “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spice—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness.”

As I mentioned at the beginning, my study of Galatians leads me to conclusions that I truly hope are wrong. But avoiding the problem is not the solution. We have to trudge on into some very challenging teachings.

Early in the first chapter of Galatians (vv. 6-9), Paul begins with a remarkable series of declarations.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a **different gospel**—which is really **no gospel at all**. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say

again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

Whatever was being taught in Galatia was not just any error. It was so bad that Paul said it was “a different gospel,” indeed “no gospel at all.” It was a perversity. Those who so taught deserved damnation! What on earth could be such a wicked teaching?

Somewhat surprisingly, the answer doesn’t even show up until chapter 5, where Paul finally reveals the issue: circumcision. Circumcision! What’s so wrong with that? I mean, most American males are circumcised. Surely, they aren’t lost for that!

In fact, Paul eventually says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters (5:6). Well, if it doesn’t matter whether I’m circumcised, what causes teaching circumcision to destroy the gospel, so much so that the teachers deserve damnation? *How can a morally neutral teaching be damnable?*

Many have taught that the problem was teaching the Law of Moses after it had been nailed to the cross. But if this is so, then it’s damnable to teach any part of the Law of Moses that has now been repealed. We need to be really careful here. For example, many of our members teach that Sunday, as the Lord’s Day, is the Christian Sabbath, and so ought to be a day of rest. But, of course, the New Testament nowhere teaches that. Does that mean that those who insist on what is essentially a part of the Law of Moses are damned for trying to honor God by dedicating Sundays to him? Seems rather harsh, doesn’t it?²³

Many of our members teach that we should wear suits to church because we’re to give our “best” to God. That teaching is clearly taken from the Law of Moses, where God insists that sacrifices come from the best of the flock (Lev. 22:21, for example). Of course, we don’t really do that. I mean, for my suit to be a sacrifice, I’d have to leave it at church, maybe giving it to the poor. If I take it home with me after church, I’ve not sacrificed it, now have I? And besides, if I owned a tuxedo, no one would insist that I wear it to church, even if it were my best! Anyway, while I disagree with this teaching, I can hardly see that those who teach this part of the Law of Moses should be damned for their mistake.

We’ve often taught the ceremonial-part-of-the-Law-of-Moses explanation of Galatians, but we’ve never applied the principle beyond circumcision. And amazingly enough, many of our forefathers taught that circumcision is required, completely ignoring Galatians! After all, why else has it become standard American practice to circumcise our infants?

We need to read Paul’s words very carefully and let Paul explain his own reasoning. If we can’t find the answer in Paul’s own words in Galatians, then we must be

²³ Of course, Rom. 14, which we just studied, teaches that those who insist on treating certain days as holy are saved despite binding what was surely an effort to preserve an element of the Law of Moses. Just so, the teaching in Rom. 14 against eating meat was likely an effort to preserve the commands in the Law of Moses against eating “unclean” food. Many Jews find it impossible to eat meat in a Gentile community because the strictness of the “kosher” food requirements for the preparation of meat. Nonetheless, Paul did not condemn these teachings if the teachers did not condemn those who disagree.

approaching Galatians with some very wrong preconceptions. Surely Paul very explicitly tells us why teaching circumcision makes the gospel “another gospel” and damnable.

Let’s go back to chapter 1. After Paul makes his remarkably strong statements about the yet-undescribed false teaching, Paul seems to change the subject. He begins a lengthy exposition of his personal history as an apostle, culminating in the story of his confrontation with Peter, at the end of chapter 2.

(12-16) Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by [works of] the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by [works of] the law, because by [works of] the law no one will be justified.

The first paragraph describes Judaizing teachers who taught, among other things, that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Paul hasn’t said so yet, but he’ll later let on that this is the very reason for writing the letter.

In the next paragraph, Paul explains to Peter that it’s wrong to “force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs.” And then he says why: “a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.”

Paul’s contrast is not between the moral law and the ceremonial Law of Moses, or between correct law and false law. Rather, Paul contrasts salvation by faith with salvation by obedience to law. We have to figure that Paul condemns salvation by obedience to law because it contradicts salvation by faith.

But if obedience to law doesn’t matter, then why should Christians even bother to do right? Paul answers this question more thoroughly in chapter 5, but he gives a preliminary answer here in chapter 2:17-21—

“If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

Paul begins by pointing out that even though Jesus has saved us, we all continue to sin. Does that mean that Jesus promotes sin? No, because Christians have to die to sin

(repent) to become Christians and have to remain true to that commitment. In fact, the commitment is so significant that we can truly say that Christ lives in us.

But, Paul reiterates, as important as it is for Christians to live true to their commitment, this cannot set aside grace. We’ll never earn salvation through obedience to law. If we could, Christ had no need to die and there would be no need for the gospel, faith, and all.

Now the tendency among many Christians is to blend law and faith, and say we are saved by obedience and by faith, but faith is not enough by itself. That is, we say we have to have a certain level of obedience before grace is sufficient to make up the difference. But Paul doesn’t leave room for faith plus obedience. He makes it an either-or proposition. After all, Paul says that insisting on any obedience *at all* as a condition to salvation voids grace. And circumcision was not the only issue in Paul’s conversation with Peter: Paul condemns *any* reliance on works to be saved.

Next is chapter 3:1-5—

You foolish Galatians! Who has **bewitched** you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit **by [works of] the law**, or by **believing what you heard**? Are you so **foolish**? After **beginning with the Spirit**, are you now trying to attain your goal by **human effort**? Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because **you [do works of] the law**, or because **you believe what you heard**?

In a pointed series of rhetorical questions, Paul severely challenges the false teaching in Galatia. Notice the contrasts Paul makes:

Good	Foolish / bewitched
<i>Spirit received by believing what you heard (that Jesus was crucified)</i>	<i>Believing Spirit received by works of the law</i>
<i>Beginning with the Spirit</i>	<i>Trying to attain heaven by human effort²⁴</i>
<i>God’s power shown because you believe</i>	<i>Believing God’s power shown because you do works of the law</i>

Paul is plainly contrasting “human effort” with faith. He seems to be using “human effort” as a virtual synonym for “observing the law.” And human effort is much broader than animal sacrifice and such.

²⁴ Literally, “flesh.” But the NIV is a sound translation, as Paul is contrasting what God does through the Spirit to what we do in the flesh.

Paul next takes his readers back to the Genesis account of Abraham, the father of all Jews—and the spiritual father of all Christians. He reminds us that long before Abraham was circumcised, he was saved by his faith.

(Gal. 3:6-12, 14) Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was **credited to him as righteousness.**” Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would **justify the Gentiles by faith**, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” So **those who have faith are blessed** along with Abraham, the man of faith.

All who **rely on [works of] the law** are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to **do everything written in the Book of the Law.**” Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.” The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, “The man who does these things will live by them.” ...

He redeemed us in order that the **blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus**, so that **by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.**

Let’s continue building our chart—

Good	Foolish / bewitched / cursed
Spirit received by believing what you heard (that Jesus was crucified)	Believing Spirit received by works of the law
Beginning with the Spirit	Trying to attain heaven by human effort
God’s power shown because you believe	Believing God’s power shown because you do works of the law
<i>Belief credited as righteousness</i>	<i>Rely on [works of] the law</i>
<i>Gentiles justified [saved] by faith; those with faith blessed</i>	<i>Under a curse</i>
<i>Gentiles receive the blessing given to Abraham (faith credited as righteousness); Receive the Spirit by faith</i>	<i>Must do everything written in the Book of the Law (the Law of Moses)</i>

Honestly read, Paul’s distinction is not between old law versus a new and improved Christian law; it’s between—

observing law and trying to attain	grace and the Spirit received by
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heaven through human effort	faith in the gospel
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Paul doesn't condemn law keeping or human effort. He condemns trying to get to heaven by law keeping or human effort. He points out that the blessings the Galatians had received—salvation and the Holy Spirit—were received by faith when they were saved. Implicitly, Paul argues that the system that got them saved is the same system that will keep them saved. The gospel is entirely sufficient to save not only the lost *but also the saved*.²⁵ After all, Paul is writing to people who've been saved!

On the other hand, faith, as Paul declared in chapter 2, does not condone sin: “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.” Paul doesn't yet fully reconcile the issue of living for God as a Christian while being saved by faith and not by works until late in chapter 5. We'll get there.

Now for chapter 5:1-3. This is the crux of the matter.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that **if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all**. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.

Paul begins in the severest of tones. Those who let themselves be circumcised are without Christ. This surely means that they'll lose their souls. Yet circumcision is not immoral. In fact, it was commanded by God from the time of Abraham until Christ. How bad could it be?

Paul then explains why circumcision causes one to lose his soul. It's because if you allow yourself to be circumcised to be saved, you are obligated to obey the whole law to be saved. No one can obey the whole law, and so anyone who takes on such an obligation has effectively damned himself.

Now notice that the language repeats the thoughts of Paul when he rebuked Peter as described at the end of chapter 2 (vv. 15-16)—

“We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because **by observing the law no one will be justified**.”

As in chapter 5, Paul's point in his conversation with Peter is that no one can be justified (saved) by law keeping. Why? Because no one is capable of keeping the entire

²⁵ Baptism is not under discussion when one refers to “faith only,” of course. The Scriptures never treat baptism as a “work” or as having any intrinsic merit. In fact, baptism is something done by others to you, not by you. There are those who use “faith only” to argue against the necessity of baptism, but they argue in error as the Scriptures never place baptism and faith in opposition. Baptism is a gift that is received; it is not a work. Notice that baptism is always spoken of in the passive voice. The lost don't *do* baptism—they are baptized.

law. The problem thus is that we must make a choice. Either seek salvation through law keeping or by faith. There is no middle ground. There is no mixing of the two.

Paul continues in verse 5:4,

You who are trying to be justified by law have been **alienated from Christ**; you have **fallen away from grace**.

Now this may be the most frightening verse in the Bible for a member of the Churches of Christ. If we choose foolishly and elect salvation by law (or faith plus works, which is the same thing) rather than faith, we will be alienated from Christ and we'll fall away from grace. Notice that the Galatians did not reject faith or grace, at least not as we tend to think. They certainly still believed in Jesus and still looked to Jesus for grace. But they added a command to the gospel that wasn't a part of the gospel. They taught: hear, believe, repent, confess, be baptized, *and* get circumcised. So it appears that adding a command, even a morally neutral command, to the gospel destroys the power of the gospel. It's faith or it's law. *It can't be some of both.*

Paul declares the true gospel in contrast to the Galatians' false gospel in verses 5 and 6—

But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. **The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.**²⁶

We expect to be saved (hope) because of our faith, which has allowed us to receive the Holy Spirit. Circumcision just doesn't matter. The reason it doesn't matter is that it's not part of the gospel. Paul declares the gospel to be simply “faith expressing itself through love.” This is just another way of saying “faith plus repentance,” because the love of which Paul speaks is an active love that causes us to serve one another. Or maybe it's better put by saying that repenting means committing to live a life of Christian love.

We skip to verses 13-15—

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. **The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”** If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

²⁶ In the Greek, “counts” (*ischuo*) is implied from the preceding sentence. It is thus the same verb translated in the NIV as “has any value,” or “availeth” in the KJV. Zodhiates defines *ischuo* as “to have strength, ability, power, both physical and moral.” As to Gal. 5:6, he translates “to have efficacy, to avail, have force and value.” *The Complete New Testament Word Study Dictionary* (Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, Inc., 1992). Thus, Paul says only faith working through love can accomplish anything, and the “anything” he has in mind is plainly salvation.

Paul reiterates his previous point. Not only is love “the only thing that counts,” but love sums up the *entire* law. But love is not just how we feel or what we believe. It’s also what we do. To honor this teaching, we must “serve one another in love.” Notice that it’s not enough to serve one another because we are commanded to do so. Our service must be motivated by love for one another.

So Paul draws a clear contrast. We can either seek salvation through Christ, meaning the gospel, faith, and repentance (which encompasses love); or else we can seek salvation through law keeping. And the great danger is that if we add even one commandment to the gospel as a condition to being or staying saved—we’ve *voided* the gospel. The gospel will not withstand any mixing with law or works. Of course, works do come into the picture. But only as a consequence of being saved, not as necessary to being or staying saved.

Paul next turns his attention to explaining how our salvation can be based on faith and not works and yet Christians be expected to live righteous lives. Consider verses 5:15-18—

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

Paul has mentioned the Spirit several times before, but now he begins to explain just how the Spirit fits into the gospel equation. A Christian has two natures, a sinful nature that he wishes to put to death, having repented, and a Spirit-ual nature. Now Paul has already reminded us that we received the Spirit when we first believed. Receipt of the Holy Spirit is part of the saving event (Acts 2:38, for example). The Spirit works in our hearts to desire what Jesus wants us to desire—to make our repentance fully realized. But we never *fully* put our sinful nature to death. And so although we want to be true to our repentance, we still sometimes slip and do what our sinful nature desires.

Paul then declares that if we “are led by the Spirit” we are not “under law.” Now this is indeed a remarkable thing. To the extent the Spirit has effectively changed my heart and defeated my sinful side, law is no longer needed—I don’t need rules when I already want to do the right thing. God changes my heart, through the Spirit, so that I want to do what’s right. I become a loving person. And so, there is no longer a need to be commanded to love. I love because it is my nature to love. I enjoy being a Christian and living the Christian life. I find joy in serving my fellow man.

Let’s go to Galatians 5:19-21—

The [works] of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul’s next point is that it should be obvious what sin is. It’s any action that contradicts the command to love one another. It’s basic immorality. And it’s anything that contradicts the unity of Christians: selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy.

Notice that Paul does not include “false doctrine” in his list. He’s not worried about such matters. Rather, these are the kinds of behavior that indicate an unrepentant heart, a heart not motivated by love for one’s fellowman. It’s not honest mistakes about how to worship or who can be an elder. It’s being hurtful to others.

This is all the more remarkable given that Galatians is written to contradict a false doctrine—the alleged necessity of circumcision as a condition to salvation. But Paul is saying, look, can’t you see that circumcision doesn’t matter—because it has nothing to do with loving or not loving? I’m no better or worse of a servant if I’m circumcised, and so circumcision can’t possibly matter.

Paul next describes what the Spirit does for a Christian (vv. 22-25)—

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Again, we’re surprised: “sound doctrine” doesn’t make the list. The fruit of the Spirit doesn’t address the name of the church, the form of organization, the pattern of worship, or any of the things that we’ve often considered as defining who is saved or lost. Rather, Paul says that the “mark” of the saved will be their loving attitudes—the nature of their hearts.

God says, “I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts” (Heb. 8:10), and the laws he writes are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control,” not a list of do’s and don’ts that remind of us of the Law of Moses.

What does Paul mean by “Against such things there is no law”? Surely, his thought is that if we “keep in step with the Spirit” by being the kind of persons that the Spirit leads us to be, we will be in compliance with God’s law, at least, the law that counts. And, of course, if we take Paul at his word, then loving our neighbor, through acts of service, fulfills the law.

Let’s look ahead to chapter 6:1-10—

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the **law of Christ**. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load. Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

This is the conclusion of the book. After we wrestle with all the history and theology, after we put distracting disputes behind us, what Paul tells us to do is love each other, and he gives us numerous examples of how to apply that command in practice.

Some have taken the phrase “the law of Christ” to somehow contradict all that has gone before and turn Christianity into an exercise in law-keeping. Of course, the “law” that Paul refers to is the command to love our neighbor and thus fulfill the law (Gal. 5:14 KJV). And, of course, Paul uses “law” ironically. He doesn’t mean that we can pick any Biblical inferences that are fashionable to argue over and declare as damned all who disobey them.

Thus, we have the third kind of acceptance that defines the gospel – we must accept Jesus as Son of God (faith), as Lord (repentance and love), and as Savior (hope). Hope? Yes, the New Testament use of “hope” is confidence that Jesus will keep his promises and save us in the end—*and* that we don’t have to rely on our own feeble works to get there.²⁷

Perhaps a chart would help:

²⁷ Rom. 5:1-2; 2 Cor. 3:11-12; Gal. 5:5; Eph. 1:13-21; Eph. 4:4; Col. 1:3-6,23,27; 1 Thes. 5:8-9; Tit. 3:4-7; 1 Pet. 1:13.

Requirements to be saved (on the occasion of baptism) and to stay saved	In other words	Accept Jesus as—	In other words	How one can fall away? — reject Jesus as—	In other words	In other words
Hear, believe, and confess the gospel	Faith	the Son of God	the Christ or Messiah	the Son of God	reject the faith	deny the gospel facts
	Hope	Savior	his works, not ours	Savior	attempt to be saved by one’s own works	add requirements to the gospel for one to be saved
Repent	Love	Lord	put to death the misdeeds of the body; live a life of loving service	Lord	deliberately continue to sin	rely on grace to excuse sin

The chart makes several things clear. First, we’ve been deficient in our teaching of the principles of Galatians. Although our traditional formulation of the plan of salvation is essentially correct, we never explicitly say that we are looking to Jesus for a free gift of salvation rather than embarking on an effort to earn some or all of it. We never explicitly commit to the Lordship of Jesus or to a life of love. Rather, all too often, we are selling our converts an insurance policy against hell rather than a new life of love, joy, and righteousness.

We now see one reason that Paul says love is the greatest among faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13). Love is the consequence of faith and hope, properly understood. It’s the greatest gift of all because it’s the gift that Jesus died to give. Love fulfills not only the law, as the Bible so frequently says—it fulfills the purpose for which we were saved (Eph. 2:8-10).

Now, a simpler version of the chart:

<i>To be saved</i>	<i>That is</i>	Baptism	<i>To fall away</i>	<i>That is</i>
<i>Accept Jesus as—</i>	<i>Have all of—</i>		<i>Reject Jesus as—</i>	<i>Lose any of—</i>
Son of God	Faith		Son of God	Faith
Savior	Hope		Savior	Hope
Lord	Love		Lord	Love

Discussion questions—

1. Is it fair for the author to refer to the local congregation’s disfellowshipping of the preacher as “hatred”? Why or why not?

2. Why did Paul write Galatians? What was he trying to accomplish? What was going on in Galatia that concerned him? How concerned was he? Why?

3. What teachings are like circumcision? Is there something especially evil about the practice of circumcision? If not, what is it about circumcision that so concerned Paul?

4. What penalty did those teaching circumcision risk? Why?

5. What penalty did those believing the teachers of circumcision risk? Why?

6. How does being circumcised contradict being free in Christ? How does it contradict salvation by faith? How does it contradict the work of the Spirit?

7. Paul says that “the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” As to those who have already been saved, is Paul speaking the literal truth or is he exaggerating?

8. When Paul warns his readers that if they keep on biting and devouring one another they will be destroyed by each other, what does he mean by “biting and devouring”? What does he mean by “destroyed”? Are we ever guilty of biting and devouring our brothers and sisters in Christ? How? Have you seen any destruction following biting and devouring?

9. How should we “serve one another in love”?

10. When Paul tells the Galatians how to live, why doesn’t he address the five acts of worship, the form of church organization, or the name of the church? Why speak only of the things he discusses in chapter 6? What do those things have in common?

CHAPTER 7

THE PART WHERE I HOPE I’M WRONG

I well remember being a member of an evangelistic Bible study group where we met weekly with several friends of ours to study the Bible with friends who hadn’t been saved. At one meeting, when no visitors were present, we asked each other how well we’d been doing in evangelizing our lost friends. One couple gave a hesitating response. They’d been studying with a Presbyterian friend of theirs, with a genuine faith, but who’d been wrongly taught about baptism. Eventually, he’d come to accept their teaching and he submitted to scriptural baptism. But they weren’t sure whether he’d been saved. You see, he refused to leave the Presbyterian Church. In fact, he insisted that he could be of much more use to God there as he had hundreds of friends in the Presbyterian Church whom he couldn’t in good conscience abandon because they needed to learn the truth of baptism.

Well, we were presented with a perfect example of a contradiction in our doctrine. On the one hand, we’d been taught that all that one must do to be saved is hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized. And yet we also were taught that to be saved you must join a congregation of a church that has a scriptural name, scriptural worship service, and scriptural organization. We struggled for weeks to decide if we should get credit for a conversion. Those who’d converted him ultimately concluded that they’d failed.

If you grew up in the Churches of Christ, the following chart is likely very familiar to you:

	Churches of Christ	Baptist Church	Methodist Church	Presbyterian Church
<i>Name</i>	Found in Scripture	Not found in Scripture	Not found in Scripture	Not found in Scripture
<i>Organization</i>	Plurality of elders as required by Scripture and plurality of deacons as required by Scripture	Not found in Scripture	Not found in Scripture	Not found in Scripture
<i>Worship</i>	Five acts as required by Scripture, including weekly communion and <i>a cappella</i> singing as required by Scripture	Not found in Scripture	Not found in Scripture	Not found in Scripture
<i>Founder</i>	Jesus Christ acting through the apostle Peter	Roger Williams	John Wesley	John Knox

We taught that the way you can tell which of the churches is the one true church described in the Bible is to look for “marks of the church.” These marks were those very items listed in the chart, and so it became clear that only one church has all the marks of the New Testament church, only one church is the New Testament church, and that being a member of any other church is to join the wrong church and so to be lost.²⁸ Indeed, plainly the lesson was that only those in the Churches of Christ, or the rare independent church that bore the identical marks, would go to heaven.

So what’s wrong with this? Well, first of all, it contradicts one of our fundamental teachings, which is that you cannot join a church. Rather, when you are saved, you are *added* to the only church that there is! And this is right, being the plain meaning of Acts 2:47.

²⁸ A classic work along these lines is Alvin Jennings, *Traditions of Men versus the Word of God* (Ft. Worth, Tex.: Star Bible Publications, 1973).

When someone *scripturally* hears, believes, repents, confesses, and is baptized in a Baptist Church by a Baptist pastor with a Baptist organ playing—that someone is added to the only church that there is—Christ’s church—by God himself. That person is saved. A baptism “takes” regardless of whether the “baptizer” is saved and regardless of whose baptistry it is.

Paul says that if you add *any* law to the gospel as a condition to salvation, then you’ve made yourself accountable for *every* law as a condition to salvation, and thereby you’ve fallen from grace. Thus, it’s perfectly all right to insist on worshipping *a cappella* as following the New Testament pattern. It’s okay to insist that *a cappella* music is mandated by Scripture and God. It’s not okay to declare that all who worship with an instrument are outside the church and therefore damned. It’s okay to insist on congregational autonomy, to teach it, to practice it, to believe it. It’s not okay to teach that those who believe or practice in non-autonomous church structures are damned for so doing. Understand that being wrong and being lost are two very different things, and we sometimes get them confused. If being wrong damns, then there is no grace and Christ died for nothing.

You see, in teaching that certain doctrines other than the gospel are essential to salvation, we’re effectively saying that to be saved, you not only must hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized, you must also join a congregation with a scriptural name, with a scriptural organization, and with a scriptural pattern of worship. Thus, if your home church has an elder who might not be properly qualified, or your church does something in worship that might lack authorization, you must change congregations or else lose your soul! I know Christians who have left their local congregation and take communion weekly at home rather than risk damnation by joining an unscriptural Church of Christ.

I fail to see how insisting on these rules as conditions to salvation is any different from insisting on circumcision as a condition to salvation. Either way, you’re insisting on obedience to a law in addition to the gospel. The gospel is meant to take us away from legalism, and the imposition of any rule as a requirement for salvation—even a single morally neutral rule—beyond the gospel is a return to legalism and damnation.

As the Churches of Christ have more than amply proven, legalism breeds division and bitterness. Which of all the divisions we’ve suffered has ever been fully healed?²⁹ Which fight proved to be worth the cost? What verse in Scripture more pointedly speaks to the Churches of Christ than Galatians 5:15?

If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

²⁹ While I know of no healed divisions, I do know of two that are healing. See Thomas A. Langford, “An Insider’s View of Non-Sunday School Churches of Christ,” *Restoration Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2003); Lindy Adams, “ICOC Posts Major Apology,” *Christian Chronicle* (March 25, 2003) <http://www.christianity.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0..PTID25485|CHID127205|CIID1538130.00.html>.

Does this mean that most members of the Churches of Christ are lost? It’s a fair question. And it’s not inconsistent for me to question the salvation of those who’ve added to the gospel while I simultaneously urge us not to condemn one another. After all, Paul is quite plain in declaring that adding to the gospel makes the gospel “no gospel at all” and that his readers have “fallen from grace” and have been “alienated from Christ.” In fact, Paul pronounces a curse on the false teachers—

(Gal. 1:9) As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

But nowhere does Scripture deny salvation to those who worship with an instrument, or speak in tongues, or create a missionary society. Such actions may indeed be unauthorized, but it’s an impermissible leap to go from “unauthorized” to “damned.” We should be silent where the Scriptures are silent.

Fortunately, Galatians does admit of a different interpretation. For example, in Galatians 3:26-27, Paul declares that his readers are “all sons of God.” In several verses, he calls his readers “brothers.” Perhaps the key verse is 5:10—

I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be.

Paul does not consider his readers lost—yet—but urges them with the strongest words and greatest passion possible to turn from an extraordinarily dangerous path. But Paul squarely condemns the false teachers, while declaring that his readers are in real jeopardy of hellfire if they don’t turn away from this error—

(Gal. 1:6-8) I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently, some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!

(Gal. 5:2) Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.

(Gal. 5:15) If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

Nowhere else does Paul write with such fervor, with such urgency, with such fear for his readers’ souls.

I am not qualified to judge the fate of those among us who teach modern equivalents of circumcision, and less so to judge those who’ve been deceived by such teachers. I only know that having become aware of the problem, I must speak out and call for repentance—urgently—desperately. Out of love, not condemnation—out of concern for souls.

It is not enough to be less legalistic than the church down the road. It’s not enough to be less legalistic than you used to be. There is only one gospel, and it won’t

admit of any additions at all. Nothing is required to *be* saved or to *stay* saved other than the gospel. Those who teach otherwise have been cursed by Paul in the most unambiguous terms. I pray daily for the souls of my brothers and sisters in the Churches of Christ. Please, let's stop biting and devouring each other and learn to accept one another just as Jesus accepted us.

A. Conclusion

Consider how the history of the 20th Century Churches of Christ would have been different had this teaching been widely accepted 100 years ago. We would not have split over instrumental music in 1906. Some churches would be instrumental and some would not, but we'd see one another as deeply loved brothers and sisters and would share a common fellowship. We may well still have disagreed over the one cup issue, premillennialism, institutional support for orphanages—and on and on, but we wouldn't have seen those matters as salvation issues. And so we wouldn't have divided over them. We surely would have found a way to accommodate one another's scruples. (For example, the congregation I grew up in, while favoring church support for orphanages, took up a second collection for just orphanages, to submit to those who felt orphanages should not be funded out of the congregational treasury.)

The Churches would have had a significantly different set of priorities. Rather than pounding pulpits to condemn the Church of Christ down the road, we'd have spent much more effort on evangelism and benevolence. We'd have enjoyed a vastly superior reputation in the community. And a better reputation would have made our evangelistic efforts far more effective. And who knows what impact we might have had on the greater community of believers. How many more souls would have been saved? I don't know, but I think the number is in the millions.

We are still in the dawn of the 21st Century. God willing, there's still plenty of time to make this the century we again turn the world upside down. The first step is to replace division with acceptance, condemnation with love, and rivalry with cooperation.

Yet I'm in agony of spirit, tortured by the thought of countless brothers and sisters destroyed by a perverted gospel. It's a harsh thought, I know, but I can't just wish Galatians out of the Bible. It's there and it's written in truly stark terms. I don't judge my fellows—it's not my place—but it has become my place to sound a warning.

And I ache for those who've been taught a desiccated gospel, parched of its beauty and glory by the imposition of a second Law of Moses, just as burdensome as the one Jesus died to destroy. I know so many people who've never felt saved because they've been taught a bad-news gospel, a Spirit-less spirituality, and an enslaving freedom.

I call on my fellow teachers and elders to repent, to teach the pure gospel, and to center your instruction on love and service—and to stop biting and devouring one another. Please.

(Gal. 5:1) It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Discussion questions—

1. The author seems to take an extreme view of Galatians. Is it really fair to read Galatians as threatening the salvation of all who've added additional requirements to be saved to the gospel?

2. Why does Paul refer to adding circumcision to the gospel as a condition to salvation as “another gospel”? Isn't it just the same gospel plus one more condition?

3. When is circumcision a “work” and when is it just a morally neutral health decision?

4. What doctrines have we in the Churches of Christ added to the gospel as additional conditions of salvation? Why have we done that?

5. Some argue that Galatians only condemns returning to the Law of Moses. Name some ways in which modern members of the Churches of Christ sometimes return to the Law of Moses. Which practices do we have to defend by using Old Testament passages?

7. How do you think the history of the Restoration Movement and the Churches of Christ have been different if the author's views had been taught throughout the 20th Century? Would this have been an improvement?

**PART II
EXTENDED REFLECTIONS ON LEGALISM**

CHAPTER 8

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

I’m sure that I’ve raised far more questions than I’ve answered. Here’s an effort to anticipate a few—

Q. If grace is broad enough to cover all doctrinal errors other than the gospel itself, then why even bother to try to get the other issues right? Why not worship any way we want? Or organize any way we want? What’s the point of Bible study?

A. The fact that grace covers sins does not make sin okay. In fact, Hebrews 10:26ff, discussed previously, quite plainly condemns those who deliberately continue to sin, who no longer make Jesus Lord. Therefore, if my study of Scripture causes me to conclude that churches should be led by elders, I must do precisely that, or else I’ve deliberately sinned. Moreover, if I truly love God and my neighbors, then I will study God’s Word diligently to know his will for my life. I cannot be willfully ignorant, as such an attitude would contradict making Jesus Lord of my life.

But when my study causes me to learn a new spiritual truth or correct a former error, I don’t pass from a lost state to a saved state. I was saved before I was corrected, and I remain saved after I’m corrected. I don’t study to earn my salvation. I study out of love—love for God and his word, as well as love for my fellow man.

The same principles hold true as to moral sin. I must accept God’s instructions on how to live a moral, righteous life, and repent when I find myself in error. But I can be confident that God’s grace will cover my weakness if I live a penitent life—even though I sometimes mess up and fail to do all that I’m supposed to. If this is not so, then what is the point of grace? Who can be saved?

We often make the mistake of assuming that, unlike our moral nature, our intellectual nature is perfectible, so that while we will always be to some degree a moral sinner and always need grace, our knowledge of Scripture and doctrine can be held to a standard of perfection. We think we just don’t need grace in the area of doctrine because we’ve gotten it entirely right. Having reached such a conclusion, we marvel that others don’t see what we so plainly comprehend, and thus question the motives of those who disagree with us. But our long history of disagreements and divisions clearly show that we are not nearly so intellectually perfect as we imagine. We need grace—especially in the area of doctrine.

Q. What about Nadab and Abihu? Uzzah? Ananias and Sapphira? Doesn’t God’s harsh treatment of these people teach us there’s no grace in the pattern of worship?

A. Of course not. We can’t take these examples and generalize a principle that contradicts the teachings of Paul, John, and Jesus himself. God occasionally makes an example of people who flout his laws to make a point—but the point is never that God is without grace, a truly horrendous thought. And we must make a distinction between those punished under the Law of Moses and the much greater grace enjoyed by Christians. Hence, it is only the Christians Ananias and Sapphira that need concern us—and they were guilty of a knowing, intentional plot to deceive the apostles (Acts 5:1-11). Only God can judge our hearts to determine when intentional sin reaches the point of deliberately

continuing to sin, but it is no stretch at all to see Ananias and Sapphira as condemned under the standard of Hebrews 10:26.

For that matter, the fact that God took their lives hardly means that they were damned. As God has the power to save or condemn, and he knows fully the consequences of his actions, he may have taken their lives to set an example without necessarily condemning their souls. When David sinned with Bathsheba, God punished him by taking the life of the son born of that union while still an innocent newborn (2 Sam. 12:14). Plainly, God’s taking someone’s life doesn’t prove that person to be lost.

In fact, if we look at the story of Nadab and Abihu more closely, we find that the account strongly supports the view argued for here. First, verse 9 strongly suggests that Nadab and Abihu were guilty of drunkenness, and this occasioned their mistake and offense. Adam Clarke says in his commentary on Leviticus,

The cabalistic commentator, Baal Hatturim, and others, have supposed from the introduction of this command here, that Aaron’s sons had sinned through excess of wine, and they had attempted to celebrate the Divine service in a state of inebriation.

Second, and more importantly, we must contrast this story with the immediately following account of Eleazar and Ithamar. These two men were appointed to replace Nadab and Abihu. However, in vv. 16-18, Moses finds that the two men had incorrectly handled the very next ceremony! Moses was very unhappy, to say the least.

Aaron defended their mistake:

(Lev. 10:19-20) Aaron replied to Moses, “Today they sacrificed their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD, but such things as this have happened to me. Would the LORD have been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering today?” 20 When Moses heard this, he was satisfied.

Aaron said that he too had made mistakes in the service. It was an accident. These things happen. And Eleazar and Ithamar were not punished.

As stated in G. J. Wenham, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, The Book of Leviticus*,³⁰ “This suggests, perhaps, that God is more gracious to those who make mistakes because they fear him than to those who carelessly and impudently enter his presence as Nadab and Abihu did.”

The fact that the two stories are immediately juxtaposed as they are in Leviticus 10 is intended to make a point, and the point is surely that God overlooks honest mistakes (among those in grace, of course) but does not overlook willful disobedience.³¹

Q. But our practices of a cappella singing and weekly communion are clearly the First Century pattern. How can God excuse anyone who rejects such clear evidence?

³⁰ (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co. 1979).

³¹ Thanks to Al Maxey for bringing this argument to my attention.

A. We have to believe that those who worship contrary to our understanding of Scripture are in error, but that does not demonstrate that they are *deliberately* continuing in sin. For this to be true, they’d have to actually know they are in error.

It is a huge mistake to question the motives of those who disagree with you. No one goes to church on Sunday and worships to the accompaniment of a piano or organ intending to be in rebellion to God. It is entirely possible for devout believers to honestly disagree on such matters. This doesn’t make them right. It does make them forgiven.

Q. This notion that I can be in error or sin and still be saved sounds suspiciously like Post-modernism. Aren’t you really denying that there is such a thing as absolute truth?

A. Being intellectually humble does not require me to deny the knowability of truth. Acknowledging that I might be wrong in one area or another or that I don’t have all the answers hardly means I don’t believe that I’m right in some areas or that I don’t have some of the answers.

I’m very familiar with the teachings and errors of Post-modern thought.³² What I propose is nothing of the sort. The whole point of the foregoing essay is to contend for knowable truths found in Scripture. And among these truths is the fact that God will forgive the penitent believer who turns to him for salvation. This is not anything like Post-modernism.

Q. Doesn’t 2 John 9 clearly demonstrate that God damns those in doctrinal error?

A. No. Consider this verse’s context—

(2 John 1:1-11) The elder, To the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the **truth**—and not I only, but also all who know the **truth**— 2 because of the **truth**, which lives in us and will be with us forever: 3 Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, will be with us in **truth** and love. 4 It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the **truth**, just as the Father commanded us.

5 And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we **love** one another. 6 And this is **love**: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in **love**.

7 Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge **Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh**, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. 8 Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded

³² I commend to the serious student D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), for an excellent and very thorough study of the area.

fully. *9* Anyone who **runs ahead** and does not continue in the **teaching of Christ** does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. *10* If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. *11* Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.

We must consider the meaning of “runs ahead” in verse 8. Actually, the NIV mistranslates. The KJV is more accurate in saying “transgresseth.” Moreover, the phrase “transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ” condemns much more than false teaching. It condemns failing to “abide” or live in the doctrine of Christ. Hence, the lesson is on living the doctrine of Christ, not just teaching it.

Literally read, out of context, this seems to mean that ANY transgression damns. This, of course, contradicts grace, which just can’t be.

There are several possible interpretations. One is that if I incorrectly understand anything that Jesus taught, I’m wicked and should be disfellowshipped. But if this is so, we are held to an awfully high, even impossible, standard. Who can claim to perfectly understand everything that Jesus taught?

Some go a step further and assume that John condemns all who teach any error on any point at all. Hence, if I get the hats-in-the-building issue wrong (1 Corinthians 11), I’m damned, along with all foolish enough to have followed my false teaching—whether I bind where God doesn’t bind or loose where God doesn’t loose. And yet, who would presume to get every single doctrine exactly right? Do we seriously think that being in error on Easter or on whether Sunday is the Christian Sabbath damns? If not, show me where in 2 John he makes a distinction between error that damns and error covered by grace.

A better view is one that uses the text to interpret what John says in context. Up to this point, John has discussed three doctrines: truth, love, and faith. Faith (verse 7) is faith in Jesus, not faith in every doctrine. He’s quite plain on that point. The meaning of “love” in verses 5 and 6 is obvious enough, as well.

What is truth in verses 1 through 4? It’s not clear. Is it every true thing in the Bible? This can’t be, or John would deny grace. When John asserts that his readers “know the truth,” is he referring to all doctrine? or to the gospel of Jesus? Obviously, he can’t assume his readers know everything there is to know. Only an inspired writer could even come close to such a claim. But if “truth” means the gospel, he can make the assertion with confidence, because he’s writing to Christians. The only thing we can save for sure that all Christians know is the gospel!

To test this theory, turn to John’s Gospel, that is verbally remarkably similar to 1, 2, and 3 John. What is “truth” in John?

(John 1:17) For the law was given through Moses; grace and **truth** came through Jesus Christ.

Truth is in contrast to law and is closely tied to grace (also v. 14).

(John 5:33) “You have sent to John and he has testified to the **truth.**”

In context, Jesus is talking about the fact that he was sent by God.

(John 8:32-36) Then you will know the **truth**, and the **truth** will set you free.”

33 They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”

Jesus replied, “I tell you the **truth**, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

The “truth” that sets free is clearly forgiveness of sins by the grace received through the work of Jesus.

(John 15:26) “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of **truth** who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.”

The Spirit is the “Spirit of truth” because he testifies about Jesus.

(John 7:18) “He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of **truth**; there is nothing false about him.”

Working to honor Jesus makes you a “man of truth.”

(John 14:6) Jesus answered, “I am the way and the **truth** and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Jesus himself is the truth!

“Truth” is the truth of the gospel, the truth about Jesus, the truth about grace, the truth that frees from law.

In 2 John, John explains that that walking in this truth is about faith and love (in parallel to the major themes of 1 John) as well as righteousness (also parallel). Hence, the teaching (or doctrine) of Jesus is simply the truth previously referred to, especially the fact that Jesus came in the flesh.

This interpretation present no contradiction to grace, gives a clear demarcation between the doctrines that damn and those that don’t, and suits the context admirably. It’s consistent with the theology and vocabulary of John, 1 John, and 3 John.

Paul sometimes uses “truth” in the same sense—

(Gal. 2:5) We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the **truth** of the gospel might remain with you.

(Gal. 2:14) When I saw that they were not acting in line with the **truth** of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”

(Eph. 1:13) And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of **truth**, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,

(Eph. 4:21) Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the **truth** that is in Jesus.

(Col. 1:5-6) the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of **truth**, the gospel *6* that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its **truth**.

(2 Thes. 2:9-13) The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, *10* and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the **truth** and so be saved. *11* For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie *12* and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the **truth** but have delighted in wickedness. *13* But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the **truth**.

And these are just the most obvious examples. There are many others.

The author of Hebrews uses “truth” the same way—

(Heb 10:26-27) If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the **knowledge of the truth**, no sacrifice for sins is left, *27* but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Plainly, we received the knowledge of truth as part of becoming saved, not when we went to Bible class and mastered Christian theology.

9 Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the **teaching of Christ** does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

Therefore, as the “truth” is the gospel, the “teaching of Christ” is also the gospel about Jesus, the word of truth, the truth of the gospel, the truth that leads to grace. It’s what we hear, believe, and confess. It’s the content of faith.

Q. But isn’t worship a particularly important doctrine? Doesn’t God have the right to insist that we worship him as he requires? Doesn’t teaching the traditions of men as doctrines of God damn?

A. No, worship is not the most important command. Obviously, all God’s commands are important, but there is far more emphasis on love for our fellow Christians and concern for service, especially to the poor, orphans, widows, and aliens, than on how to worship. See, for example, Matthew 25:31-39 and James 1:27, which make concern for the needy of ultimate concern for Christians.

You are alluding to Matthew 15:9—

“They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”

Read out of context, this verse seems to say that anyone who worships in error, any error at all, worships in vain and is, therefore, lost.

Jesus was condemning the rule imposed by the Pharisees requiring Jews to wash their hands before eating. It was a good health practice, but it was wrong to teach it as a command of God. Therefore, Jesus condemned them for teaching good advice as though it were a law from God. The sin was in wrongly imposing a law that God doesn’t impose. It is not particularly about worship, as we think of worship, as it was about the rules for eating clean (or kosher) food.

And yet, as a rule, we don’t condemn those who impose laws that we don’t think God does. If a church makes its women wear hats to church, or won’t let them wear pants, or condemns the construction of a fellowship hall, or condemns the use of multiple cups or the Sunday School, we consider them in error but brothers. And yet they are, at least in my view, adding commands to the word of God, teaching human traditions as doctrines.

But I also believe that grace covers them if they remain baptized, penitent believers and don’t make these conditions of salvation. Otherwise, everyone who accidentally imposes a command that God does not is damned.

Of course, if anyone willfully arrogates to himself the authority to make up rules, well, he’s in big trouble. That is, after all, what the Pharisees were doing. They invented the hand washing rule, and perfectly well knew it wasn’t in the Law of Moses. They said,

(Matt. 15:2) “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”

Hence, they were quite aware that they were binding rules not made by God. This is not an example of an honest difference of opinion regarding the meaning of scripture. This was an effort to take on the authority of God to make rules.

Ironically enough, therefore, Matthew 15:9 doesn’t condemn those who make an honest mistake about how to worship God. It does condemn those who impose rules that God didn’t make full well knowing that they are going beyond what the Bible teaches.

Therefore, it is not safe to impose a rule that isn’t clearly imposed by scripture. Indeed, safety is found only in grace, not in making up rules.

Q. What about “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3 KJV)

A. This is a proverb, which hardly makes for definitive theology in contradiction to Paul. Besides, to walk together, we only need to agree on the destination and the way to take. The destination is heaven, and the way is Jesus.

Q. How does your teaching align with the seven ones taught in Ephesians 4?

A. Many Restoration Movement preachers have taught that the seven ones of Ephesians 4 define the boundaries of the Kingdom of Heaven. Rubel Shelley argued for the same

conclusion in his *I Just Want to Be a Christian*. Many others have made the same argument.

Jesus is called “Lord,” as this term subsumes the relationship of penitence and love of God and others, as well as his divinity.

Thus, we have God the Father, Jesus our Lord, and the Holy Spirit; and we have faith, hope, the church, and baptism. Penitence is found in the lordship of Jesus.

The only doctrine added by the seven ones to what has been taught thus far is the doctrine of the body, the church. We will address the fellowship of the church briefly in a later chapter, and demonstrate how the doctrine of the fellowship of the church aligns closely with the doctrines taught in Part I.

Discussion questions—

1. If God’s grace will cover our sins, then why concern ourselves with obeying God?
2. The author contends that we sometimes speak as though we are intellectually perfectible, at least in terms of doctrine. Is he right? What doctrines must we get right to go to heaven?
3. God killed Nadab and Abihu for offering “strange fire” as priests under the Law of Moses. Does this mean that we’ll be damned if we honestly err in how we worship God today?
4. God also killed Uzzah for touching the Ark of the Covenant contrary to the Law of Moses, although he was only intending to steady the Ark so it wouldn’t fall to the ground. Does this mean that innocent violations of God’s will in worship will result in death? Damnation? Was Uzzah damned?
5. Does the Bible require that we worship and organize ourselves as the church worshipped and organized in the First Century to go to heaven?
6. What is Post-modernism? Is the author guilty of teaching Post-modernism?
7. Consider 2 John 9 and Matthew 15:9. Does the author correctly interpret these?

CHAPTER 9 WHY IS LEGALISM SO WRONG?

Luther, like Augustine before him, experienced religious torment. When in the monastery he was plagued by the feeling of the wrath of God. This continued over years. As a monk he did everything he knew how to overcome this terror. Neither daily confession nor ascetic exercises helped. Luther, the monk, cried out to God for relief because he felt God was putting demands upon him that no human could fulfill. He suffered infernal terrors, after which his bones felt as if they had been burned to ashes. As he described it, in these moments of dread he saw not the slightest gleam of light.³³

What makes legalism so wrong that God might take his salvation away from a legalist? Let’s first remember how we’re using “legalism.” One is not a legalist for insisting on a law of God—even in error. Rather, one does not become a legalist until he makes a work other than obedience to the gospel (which is not really a work) a condition of salvation. If you and I disagree over whether Christians should celebrate Christmas, we disagree but neither of us is necessarily a legalist. However, if one of us denies the salvation of the other because of this disagreement, then he becomes a legalist.

In other words, a legalist insists that grace must either be replaced or supplemented by works. In the Churches of Christ, legalists insist that certain doctrines be held in addition to the gospel as a condition to salvation. Typically, the doctrines include how the congregational worship is conducted, how the church is organized, and the name of the church. Moreover, many add any number of additional doctrines to the list of doctrines beyond the reach of God’s grace. These essential doctrines are referred to as “marks of the church” or “tests of fellowship.”

There are basically two ways that we might respond to being taught a works-based salvation. First, we can be as Martin Luther was before he discovered grace. We can very honestly examine ourselves and conclude we plainly do not merit salvation. If so, we’d live our lives in constant fear of hellfire—a truly miserable condition.

But most of us, unable to bear the thought of damnation, respond to works-based salvation by rationalizing that we really aren’t all that bad, that we certainly aren’t as bad as the lost people who surround us, and we are actually better than most. Worse yet, we go looking for concrete evidence that we are indeed better than others. As we often can’t prove our superiority by our morality (are we really morally better than Mother Teresa? a better evangelist than Billy Graham?), we turn to doctrine and claim we in fact have an absolutely pure and perfect understanding of Scripture—at least the parts that really matter—and so we surely merit salvation.

³³ Quoted, with minor editorial corrections, from Alan G. Hefner, *The Mystica* (2002), http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/l/luther_martin%20.html.

Note the following quotation from a Church of Christ publication that is popular in this part of the country—

Fellowship is limited to those who walk in the light. *“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin”* (1 John 1:7). Also, to those who abide in truth, *“Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son”* (2 John 9).

Fellowship is prohibited to those who are in Biblical error. Error in the Bible is designated as “darkness.” *“And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them”* (Eph. 5:11).³⁴

As this very typical quotation demonstrates, many within the Churches of Christ insist on an absolutely correct understanding of *all* doctrinal issues for that person to be saved. If someone is in error on any point at all, he is damned and not to be associated with. Thus, *all* doctrine becomes a mark of the church or test of fellowship. I suppose that insisting on agreement on all doctrines avoids the embarrassment of having to defend why you insist on some doctrines and not others.

Now this kind of thinking presents at least two dangers. First, it makes us extremely intolerant of those who disagree with us on even the smallest doctrinal issue. Indeed, we feel duty-bound to warn and rebuke and ultimately disfellowship those who disagree with us, as their error will cost them their very souls!

Second, this thinking elevates doctrinal purity far above moral purity. And so, I may find myself completely ineffective at spreading the gospel, entirely unloving to other Christians, unwilling to help the poor, the widows, and the orphans, and yet feeling fully justified because I am right on the age of the earth and the penalty for divorce. I admit my failings are sin but praise God for forgiving my sins while he refuses to forgive the sins of others!

Legalism inevitably leads to the sin of division. After all, if I have to be right on every point of doctrine, and if I can’t treat those who disagree with me as saved, then I

³⁴ Italics in original. Steve Miller, “Fellowship in the New Testament Church,” vol. 11, no. 1, *Seek The Old Paths* (January 2000), <http://www.eastcorinth.org/stop100.htm>. The author misuses every Scripture cited. 1 John 1:7 does not use “light” to refer to doctrinal purity, but to the all-forgiving grace of God found in Christ. 1 John 1:8-10 states that all Christians are also sinners. Why would doctrinal sin be outside grace and moral sin within grace? 2 John 9, referring to the “doctrine of Christ,” does not refer to every single teaching in Scripture by or about Christ, as though doctrinal perfection were required to be saved. Rather, “doctrine of Christ” is better translated as the “doctrine about Christ,” that is, the gospel. This is clear from verse 7, which condemns those “who do not acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” Plainly, such people lack saving faith and will be condemned. Eph. 5:8-11 is not addressing doctrine, but rather “goodness, righteousness and truth” as opposed to things “done in secret,” that is, sin. We really can’t take a simple statement opposing sin and declare that it means that any and doctrinal error is outside grace but that grace can cover other kinds of sin.

soon find the church an awfully lonely place, as there will be very few who completely agree with me.

The divisions have often been hidden by the use of a common name, but every congregation knows the unofficial list of local Churches of Christ that don't recognize that congregation's salvation, that refuse cooperation, and that bitterly attack the others in their bulletins and from their pulpits. If we can't see this as evil, then we really haven't been reading our Bibles.

This is all in marked contrast to Jesus' teachings on the unity of believers. In fact, just before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed for the unity of all believers—

(John 17:20-23) “My prayer is not for [my apostles] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that **all of them may be one**, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us **so that the world may believe** that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, **that they may be one** as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to **complete unity to let the world know that you sent me** and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

One of Jesus' reasons for desiring unity among his followers was so the world would recognize us as his followers. He knew that division and discord would only make us look foolish to those we seek to convert.

Some contend that we'll one day achieve the unity that Jesus prayed for by all reaching the same conclusions on every single issue, and yet 2,000 years of history plainly disprove that notion. We are weak, fallible, fallen people who will never save ourselves, and so we need a Savior, a Savior who saves us despite our sin, our imperfections, and our foolishness—and who teaches us to love and accept all whom He has saved, even those other sinful, imperfect, and foolish Christians.

When Jesus came in the flesh, he confronted both Pharisees and Sadducees. The Sadducees were the “liberals” of the day, rejecting all teaching of the afterlife and blending Judaism with Grecian philosophy. Indeed, they were in many senses collaborators with the pagan Roman rulers of Palestine. Jesus condemned them, but He saved His strongest language for the Pharisees—the people who sought to diligently uphold the Law of Moses, who studied Scripture with zeal, and who insisted that the Sabbath and other practices commanded by God be followed. Indeed, many historians credit the Pharisees with having preserved the original Jewish faith against pagan corruption in the years between the Old and New Testaments! And so, why did Jesus condemn them?

(Luke 18:10-14) “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

It’s hardly obvious to our modern minds, but humility is of the essence to our salvation. How can we claim to have an absolutely perfect doctrinal understanding and practice and yet claim to be humble? Indeed, isn’t such a claim the very definition of arrogance? Isn’t it the very sin that condemned the Pharisees?

(1 Cor. 8:2) The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.

I speak with particular anger (and I hope it comes through) because of my experiences in the college town I live in. Census numbers reflect that about 5% of the population of Alabama consider themselves members of the Churches of Christ. If 5% of the students at the University of Alabama grew up in the Churches of Christ, that 5% would be 800 or more souls. And yet each year only about 300 admit to being in the Church on their registration forms (2%). And of those, only about 100 attend a local Church of Christ more than half a dozen times (often being those Sundays when their parents are in town!)

Did the atheistic university destroy these kids’ faiths? No. They *never* came to church. Not once. No school is so venal and corrupt that it steals kids’ faith in less than seven days! Did the local congregations fail to reach out to these children? Absolutely not. Great efforts go into trying to reach new students in town.

These kids didn’t come to Tuscaloosa to go to church. Most came to get *away* from church. I can’t count the number of people I know who tell me they grew up in the Church of Christ and have either been completely soured on religion or who have converted to some other group.

We are not even converting and retaining our own children! The statistics plainly support my personal experience. According to Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr., the Churches of Christ had a membership *decline* of 1.3% from 1990 to 2000.³⁵ And, of course, the -1.3% figure includes converts from outside the Churches of Christ as well as our own children. *Thus, we aren’t even converting enough from among the lost to replace those of our children who leave the church.*³⁶

³⁵ “The Growth and Decline Among the Churches of Christ,” *Gospel Advocate* (Feb. 2003), 21.

³⁶ This is true notwithstanding the astonishing article by Robert K. Oglesby, “The Sky Is Falling,” *Gospel Advocate* (Sept. 2005), 17. Oglesby points out that we’re doing much better than most other religious groups so things really just aren’t all that bad. But he fails to point out that most American denominations are shrinking dramatically. The goal is not just to do better than the Episcopalians! Surely we aren’t going to be satisfied with *negative* growth! It’s long past time to get over denial and honestly face our problems.

I suppose we can go on thumping our chests and proclaiming how proud we are that we have every nuance of doctrine exactly right—and taking great pride in that claim—or we can recognize that we have presided over an unmitigated disaster in bad theology and arrogance that is costing us our souls and our children.

Discussion questions—

1. Have you ever felt as the young Martin Luther felt in the story? Do you still feel that way? Why or why not? How do we feel justified before God?
2. How many of you know people who’ve left the Churches of Christ? What caused them to leave?
3. How many of your own children or children of your friends have left the Churches?
5. Why did Jesus condemn the Pharisees? Can you think of other verses where Jesus criticizes them? Was it just for hypocrisy or was it more?
6. Are we honoring Jesus’ prayer for unity today? Do those we seek to convert see us as a unified people?

CHAPTER 10 THE SIN OF PATTERNISM— OR HOW DID WE GET OURSELVES INTO THIS MESS?

When I was 12 or so, I remember listening to a sermon by our preacher and wondering—why are the Bible verses all jumbled up and out of order? Why not put all the verses on singing at church in one place? And all the verses on meeting on Sunday? And the verses on the Lord’s Supper? Why force people to read verses from a half dozen places and do a bunch of complicated reasoning to figure out what we have to do to go to heaven?

Many years later, I became engaged and our friends in college threw a shower for us. My friends got together and gave me several Bible study books, including—wonder of wonders!—a Nave’s Topical Bible. For the first time I had in my hands a book that takes all the verses in the Bible and re-arranges them topically!

It wasn’t but a few months later that I found myself with time to dig into some serious Bible study, and the Nave’s was clearly the place to start. I went looking under “Instrumental music” and found—nothing. And nothing under “Tests of fellowship” or “Marks of the church” or “A cappella singing” or “Pattern of worship” and on and on. Well, quite logically, I concluded that as Nave’s had been edited by a denominational editor, he’d missed these central doctrines. It was probably intentional, I thought.

Fortunately, I had also been given Cruden’s Unabridged Concordance, which indexed literally every word in the King James Version. And so, I again searched for all these terms. Now I grew up in a church that taught that we should “call Bible things by Bible names,” a very wise idea deriving from the teachings of Alexander Campbell himself. It never occurred to me that these terms weren’t in the Bible. We always used the Bible names for the concepts we discussed! But none of these terms were in the concordance. And this disturbed me greatly.

A. The “Declaration and Address”

The founding document of the Restoration Movement is generally considered Thomas Campbell’s “Declaration and Address.” This is a long and often difficult-to-follow document, but Campbell simplified things for his readers by summarizing his conclusions in several numbered propositions. Four of these are pertinent here—

6. That although inferences and deductions from scripture premises, when fairly inferred, may be truly called the doctrine of God’s holy word: yet are they not formally binding upon the consciences of christians farther than they perceive the connection, and evidently see that they are so; for their faith must not stand in the wisdom of men; but in the power and veracity of God—therefore **no such deduction can be made terms of communion**, but do properly belong to the after and progressive edification of the church. Hence it is evident that no such deductions or inferential truths ought to have any place in the church’s confession.

7. That although doctrinal exhibitions of the great system of divine truths, and defensive testimonies in opposition to prevailing errors, be highly expedient; and the more full and explicit they be, for those purposes, the better; yet, as these must be in a great measure the effect of human reasoning, and of course must contain many inferential truths, they ought not to be made terms of christian communion: unless we suppose, what is contrary to fact, that none have a right to the communion of the church, but such as possess a very clear and decisive judgment; or are come to a very high degree of doctrinal information; whereas **the church from the beginning did, and ever will, consist of little children and young men, as well as fathers.**

8. That as **it is not necessary that persons should have a particular knowledge or distinct apprehension of all divinely revealed truths in order to entitle them to a place in the church**; neither should they, for this purpose, be required to make a profession more extensive than their knowledge: but that, on the contrary, their having a due measure of scriptural self-knowledge respecting their lost and perishing condition by nature and practice; and of the way of salvation thro’ Jesus Christ, accompanied with a profession of their faith in, and obedience to him, in all things according to his word, is all that is absolutely necessary to qualify them for admission into his church.

9. That **all that are enabled, thro’ grace, to make such a profession [of faith in Jesus], and to manifest the reality of it in their tempers and conduct, should consider each other as the precious saints of God**, should love each other as brethren, children of the same family and father, temples of the same spirit, members of the same body, subjects of the same grace, objects of the same divine love, bought with the same price, and joint heirs of the same inheritance. Whom God hath thus joined together no man should dare to put asunder.

Proposition 6 tells us that we are not to deny fellowship or treat as lost those who disagree with us regarding inferences from the scriptures. Inferential truths are to be taught but not bound. Plainly, Thomas Campbell would never have condoned dividing over how to discern the silences of scriptures.

Proposition 7 reiterates the point. As immature Christians will be saved, we cannot insist on a high degree of theological understanding as a condition to fellowship. Statements of belief are useful as teaching aids but not as tests of fellowship—written or unwritten.

Propositions 8 and 9 says that a confession of faith and conduct that evidences a penitent heart is enough to demonstrate one’s saved state. (The Campbells reached their conclusions regarding baptism much later, and so baptism is not under consideration in this document.)

Later, Thomas Campbell states,

A manifest attachment to our Lord Jesus Christ in faith, holiness, and charity, was the original criterion of christian character—the distinguishing badge of our holy profession—the foundation and cement of christian unity.

In other words, the tests of fellowship are faith, holiness, and love, and nothing more.

But that all the members should have the same identical views of all divinely revealed truths; or that there should be no difference of opinion among them, appears to us morally impossible, all things considered.

It’s impossible, he concludes, that we all agree on all “divinely revealed truths.” Of course, some would call all divinely revealed truths “faith” and insist that we must agree on them all. Only faith in Jesus is “faith.”

Campbell continues—

Nor can we conceive, what desirable purpose such a unity of sentiment would serve; except to render useless some of those gracious, self-denying, and compassionate precepts of mutual sympathy and forbearance, which the word of God enjoins upon his people. Such, then, is the imperfection of our present state.—Would to God it might prove, as it ought, a just and humbling counterbalance to our pride! Then, indeed, we would judge one another no more about such matters. We would rather be conscientiously cautious to give no offence; to put no stumbling block, or occasion to fall, in our brother’s way. **We would then no longer exalt our own opinions and inferences to an equality with express revelation, by condemning and rejecting our brother, for differing with us in those things.**

Campbell concludes that uniformity is not only impossible, it’s not even desirable, as we must be loving enough to look past such things (among baptized, penitent believers, of course).

It’s astonishing, that many within the Churches of Christ have become exactly what Thomas Campbell condemned—people who condemn and judge each other based on inferences from scripture and matters other than the matters which save—faith, penitence, and baptism.

One final note: some of the most legalistic, Pharisaical sermons ever preached have quoted extensively from this same “Declaration and Address.” The confusion arises from Campbell’s pointed teachings urging Christians to worship and practice as the First Century church worshipped and practiced. He forcefully taught that a return to First Century practice would help unite the denominations.

However, he plainly and repeatedly argued that a return to First Century practice was not essential to salvation. Neither Thomas nor Alexander Campbell ever made First Century practices or even insistence on being silent where the Bible is silent a test of salvation. Rather, these teachings were enjoined for the purpose of realizing the practical unity of all Christians.

In other words, while we might recognize baptized, penitent believers who worship differently from us as fellow Christians, our unity would be imperfect if we couldn't worship together or work side by side in evangelism and other good works. Hence, First Century practice becomes common ground on which we can all agree.

Sadly, many of our Restoration Movement forebears ignored Propositions 6 through 9 and just assumed that a violation of the Campbells' teachings on how to worship or how to exegete scripture were salvation issues. Nothing could be further from the truth.

B. Faith and Opinion

It has been customary in the Churches of Christ since the time of Alexander Campbell to define fellowship based on the famous saying of Alexander Campbell's—

In faith, unity
In opinion, liberty
In all things, charity

It is my experience that many in the Churches define “faith” as anything addressed in scripture, and “opinion” as anything else. Hence, the doctrine of divorce and remarriage or the age of the earth becomes a matter of “faith” and hence not opinion. Thus, we must agree on these issues or else consider the other damned. Of course, most of our splits are precisely over the question of *whether* an issue is addressed in scripture! One side says its faith, the other says its opinion. By this reasoning, Campbell's slogan brings only division.

Of course, this definition of “faith” has several problems. The first is that this means we have to agree on everything the Bible says and every inference from the Bible or else break fellowship—and this very viewpoint has divided the Churches of Christ many, many times.

Second, it's just not what the Bible says “faith” is. Neither is it what Campbell meant to say. Campbell himself plainly meant by “opinion” anything that's not faith, and by faith, he meant faith in Jesus as the Christ and Lord, accessed through baptism.

This is very evident from his writings, especially his book of systematic theology *The Christian System*³⁷—

But the grandeur, sublimity, and beauty of the foundation of hope, and of ecclesiastical or social union, established by the author and founder of Christianity consisted in this, - that THE BELIEF OF ONE FACT, *and that upon the best evidence in the world, is all that is requisite, as far as faith goes, to salvation. The belief of this ONE FACT, and submission to ONE INSTITUTION expressive of*

³⁷ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* 100-102 (Cincinnati: H. S. Bosworth 1866; reprinted Salem, NH: Ayer Company, Publishers, Inc. 1988) (emphasis in original), pages 101-102. Emphasis is in the original, except **boldface**, which is the author's. 19th Century spelling and punctuation has not been modernized.

*it, is all that is required of Heaven to admission into the church. A Christian, as defined, not by Dr. Johnson, nor any creed-maker, but by one taught from Heaven, is one that believes this one fact, and has submitted to one institution, and whose deportment accords with the morality and virtue of the great Prophet. The one fact is expressed in a single proposition - that Jesus the Nazarene is the Messiah. ... The one institution is baptism into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Every such person is a disciple in the fullest sense of the word, the moment he has believed this one fact, upon the above evidence, and has submitted to the above-mentioned institution; and whether he believes the five points condemned, or the five points approved, by the Synod of Dort,³⁸ is not so much as to be asked of him; whether he holds any of the views of the Calvinists or Arminians,³⁹ Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, or Quakers, is never once to be asked of such persons, in order to admission into the Christian community called the church. The only doubt that can reasonably arise upon these points is, whether this *one fact*, in its nature and necessary results, can suffice to the salvation of the soul, and whether the open avowal of it, in the overt act of baptism, can be a sufficient recommendation of the persons so professing to the confidence and love of the brotherhood. As to the first of these, it is again and again asserted, in the clearest language, by the Lord himself, the apostles Peter, Paul, and John, that he that believes the testimony that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God, may overcome the world, has eternal life, and is, on the veracity of God, [freed] from his sins. This should settle the first point; for the witnesses agree that whosoever confesses that Jesus is the Christ, and is baptized, should be received into the church; and not an instance can be produced of any person being asked for any other faith, in order to admission, in the whole New Testament. The Saviour expressly declared to Peter that upon this fact, that he was the Messiah, the Son of God, he would *build his church*; and Paul has expressly declared that "other foundation can no man lay [for ecclesiastical union] than that JESUS IS THE CHRIST." The point is proved that we have assumed; and, this proved, every thing is established requisite to the union of all Christians upon a proper basis. ...*

Unity of opinion, expressed in subscription to voluminous dogmas imported from Geneva, Westminster, Edinburgh, or Rome,⁴⁰ is made the bond of union; and a difference in the tenth or ten-thousandth shade of opinion frequently becomes

³⁸ A meeting of clerics at which the five points of Calvinism were adopted.

³⁹ Arminians reject Calvinism. In this sense, the Churches of Christ are Arminian, as was Campbell.

⁴⁰ Headquarters, respectively, of Reformed, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Catholic Churches.

the actual cause of dismemberment or expulsion. The New Testament was not designed to occupy the same place in theological seminaries that the carcasses of malefactors are condemned to occupy in medical halls - first doomed to the gibbet, and then to the dissecting-knife of the spiritual anatomist. Christianity consists infinitely more in good works than in sound opinions; and, while it is a joyful truth, that he, that believes and is baptized shall be saved, it is equally true that he that says, "I know him, and keeps not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him."

I apologize for this long quotation, but it important to understand Campbell's thoughts and the vehemence with which he held them. The very essence of Campbell's plea was to stop dividing over anything other than faith and repentance. We've very badly misunderstood his teachings.

Another telling quotation from Campbell is—

But men cannot give up their opinions, and therefore, they can never unite, says one. We do not ask them to give up their opinions—we ask them only not to impose them upon others. Let them hold their opinions, but let them hold them as private property. **The faith is public property; opinions are, and always have been private property. Men have foolishly attempted to make the deductions of some great minds the common measure of all Christians.** Hence the deductions of a Luther, and a Calvin, and a Wesley, have been the rule and measure of all who coalesce under the names of these leaders. **It is cruel to excommunicate a man because of the imbecility of his intellect.**

In other words, the mere fact that man misunderstands some point or other of Scripture does not damn so long as he is man of faith in Jesus (including, of course, as Campbell always did, penitence and baptism).

Notice that Campbell considers the statements included in the Reformation creeds as “opinions,” although some of these statement are unquestionably true and agreed with by Campbell—and *all* the statements address points of Biblical interpretation. The contrast isn't between correct doctrine and false doctrine, it's between faith (including penitence) + baptism and everything else that might be garnered from the Bible. Certainly, Campbell had his on opinions on Calvinism, Arminianism, etc., and held his views firmly, but he distinguished those doctrines from the doctrines that save.

Hence, when Campbell spoke of “opinions,” he wasn't discussing the color of the meetinghouse foyer, he was discussing such issues are predestination, substitutionary atonement, and the Trinity. In fact, Campbell was very much an Arminian (as rejecting the five main points of Calvinism). Nonetheless, he refers to the rejection of predestination, etc. by the Arminians (including himself) as “opinions,” as he considered these to be matters other than faith.

You’ll recall that the Campbells actually initially split with the Presbyterian Church over their rejection of Calvinism, and yet Alexander Campbell declares both Calvinism and its opposite, Arminianism, to be “opinions.”

When Barton W. Stone and Raccoon John Smith had a unity meeting in Lexington, Kentucky, Campbell and Stone disagreed on many, many issues including the nature of the Trinity, the nature of atonement, whether Christians should treat the unimmersed as in full fellowship, whether ministers or congregations had the authority to ordain, and whether converts should be called Christians or Disciples of Christ. They chose to treat one another as brothers anyway. This plainly shows the meaning of “opinion” in Campbell’s thought.

It’s admittedly confusing for Campbell to use “opinion” to refer to matters that may be so well established by Scripture as to not be in any serious doubt, but this is how he used the word (perhaps its meaning was different in the early 19th Century). Doubtlessly, it has confused many of his readers over the years. I have had to spend a lot of time searching his writings to sort this out, but it is quite clear.⁴¹

Of course, Campbell’s use of “faith” as “faith in Jesus” is perfectly Biblical, and our modern use of “faith” as “any truth found in scripture” is just as wrong as can be. For example—

(Rom. 3:22-24) This righteousness from God comes through **faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe**. There is no difference, *23* for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, *24* and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

(Rom. 10:9-10) **That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.** *10* For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

If we use New Testament language, then “faith” can have but one meaning, and that is acceptance of Jesus as the Christ and as Lord, crucified and resurrected. Moreover, as Romans 10:9-10 plainly indicates, faith is not just mental assent to Jesus being the Messiah, it is also acceptance of his Lordship, meaning repentance. Hence, repentance is part of faith as Paul uses the word. Campbell and Paul agree.

Paul sees no contradiction in declaring us saved by faith and also insisting on baptism, as Galatians 3:26-27 indicates. Hence, Paul, like Campbell, and for that matter, Martin Luther, all agree that baptism is not a “work” and insistence on baptism is not to insist on a works salvation. Some Baptists make this argument, but it’s bad Bible, bad Protestant theology, and bad Restoration theology. (It’s the Calvinists who separate

⁴¹ Noah Webster’s 1857 dictionary defines “opinion” as “the judgment formed by the mind; notion; sentiment” and “opine” as “to think.” Meanwhile the current *American Heritage Dictionary* defines “opinion” as “A belief or conclusion held with confidence but not substantiated by positive knowledge or proof.” This is clearly not Campbell’s use of the word.

baptism from the moment of salvation, falsely claiming this is essential to preserve justification by faith.)

In Luther’s “Larger Catechism,” he explains,

For to be baptized in the name of God is to be baptized not by men, but by God Himself. Therefore although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own work. From this fact every one may himself readily infer that it is a far higher work than any work performed by a man or a saint. For what work greater than the work of God can we do? ...

Therefore it is pure wickedness and blasphemy of the devil that now our new spirits, to mock at Baptism, omit from it God's Word and institution, and look upon it in no other way than as water which is taken from the well, and then blather and say: How is a handful of water to help the soul? Aye, my friend, who does not know that water is water if tearing things asunder is what we are after? But how dare you thus interfere with God's order, and tear away the most precious treasure with which God has connected and enclosed it, and which He will not have separated? For the kernel in the water is God's Word or command and the name of God which is a treasure greater and nobler than heaven and earth.

Hence, even Luther, famous for his “faith only” teaching, considered baptism essential and by no means a contradiction to salvation by faith in Jesus and not works.

I quote Luther because (a) I like his reasoning and (b) many of our preachers have condemned Luther’s teaching, presuming that he taught against baptism because he taught salvation by faith, not works. It’s just not true.

Now, if “faith” in the New Testament is faith in Jesus, the benefits of which are appropriated through the institution of baptism, what is “opinion”? Plainly, everything else.

Hence, if we unite on faith (which included penitence and baptism) and grant liberty in opinion, that is, everything else, we find Campbell and this book very much aligned.

C. Restoration Roots of Legalism

Why is it that we have fallen so deeply into the sin of legalism? The early Restoration Movement was not legalistic at all. But even during the life of Alexander Campbell, his followers were beginning to condemn those who disagreed on minutiae of doctrine. The problem arises from our allowing the two leading principles of the Restoration Movement to contradict.

1. The foremost principle of the early Restoration Movement was the rejection of all creeds, declaring that we have “no creed but Christ.” In the early 19th Century, creeds not only defined the beliefs of a denomination but also defined who would be treated as a fellow Christian. Thus, when our forefathers rejected creeds, they were rejecting any standard for deciding who is a Christian other than Christ himself—meaning the gospel.

Indeed, Alexander Campbell declared that all that was required to make one a Christian is faith in the gospel facts and submission to the institution of baptism.

2. But another distinctive doctrine of the Movement was its insistence on a restoration of the First Century practices of the Christian church, sometimes known as the “New Testament pattern,” the “Old Paths,”⁴² or “the Ancient Order.” Thus, for example, weekly communion was practiced because that was the practice of the early church. Of course, many within the Movement insist on *a cappella* worship as this also was the First Century practice.⁴³

As stated in Thomas Campbell’s “Declaration and Address”—

the New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline and government of the New Testament church, and as perfect a rule for the particular duties of its members; as the Old Testament was for the worship discipline and government of the Old Testament church, and the particular duties of its members.

Now, the difficulty of these two principles is that Principle 2 can easily swallow Principle 1, and indeed, that’s exactly what happened. Soon, “no creed but Christ” became “no creed but the Bible,” and “no creed but the Bible” meant we only recognized as Christians those who agreed with our interpretation of the Bible—especially when it comes to church government and worship. But clearly if doctrinal perfection is required in organization and worship, then why not all other doctrine? And over time, we added more and more doctrines to the “pattern,” and Campbell’s simple faith + baptism became faith + baptism + worship according to the pattern + organization according to the pattern + every other doctrine that anyone chose to dispute over. Indeed, our “no creed but Christ” became “our creed or no Christ,” and we became guilty of the very creedalism that the Movement was founded to escape!

Our legalism has led to our becoming highly credal. Thus, many of those of us who remember this slogan often reinterpret it as meaning “We have no *written* creeds but the Bible,” which is neither true nor very impressive. And the only argument I’ve ever heard supporting this supposed virtue is that a written statement of doctrinal positions would either be the same as Scripture (and hence useless) or inconsistent with Scripture (and hence wicked). But how do we then explain the libraries of books on doctrine written by our brothers and sisters from all segments of the Churches, including the most legalistic? In his *Declaration and Address*, Thomas Campbell argued that written creeds are useful for education and training but not as standards for who is saved—

As to creeds and confessions, although we may appear to our brethren to oppose them, yet this is to be understood only in *so far* as they oppose the unity of the church, by containing sentiments not expressly revealed in the word of God; or, by the way of using them, become the instruments of a human or implicit faith: or,

⁴² Jer. 6:16: a call for the Israelites to return to God from idolatry.

⁴³ The instrumental music controversy barely touched the generation of Alexander Campbell and didn’t create division until decades after his death.

oppress the weak of God’s heritage: where they are liable to none of those objections, we have nothing against them. It is the *abuse* and not the *lawful use* of such compilations that we oppose.

Now there’s nothing at all wrong with insisting on First Century worship and organizational practices. Indeed, there is much wisdom, I believe, in this position. Yet we cannot make adherence to ancient patterns as important as the gospel or else we destroy the gospel.

Nothing more shows the distinction between our founding ideals and the present situation than the corruption of another early slogan of the Restoration Movement: “We are Christians only but not the only Christians.” This slogan was popular until quite recently, and it plainly reflected Campbell’s ideals (based on Jesus’ prayer in John 17 quoted earlier).

As stated in the “Declaration and Address”—

the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else as none else can be truly and properly called christians.

Now, however, the right wing of the Churches of Christ have expressly rejected this ideal and claim quite plainly that we are the *only* Christians.⁴⁴ Thus, only members of the Churches of Christ are going to heaven, and of them, only those few who get the authors’ preferred doctrines right.

D. Patternism

Now the essence of our traditional claim is that the New Testament established a “pattern” of worship, organization, and such that we must replicate perfectly to be the true church. Thus, we’re saved by believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized, but *stay* saved by being a member of a church that replicates the New Testament pattern of worship and organization.

Yet the New Testament very plainly rejects any notion that pattern-keeping might be the path to salvation. For example, the theme of Hebrews is the contrast between the old covenant of the Law of Moses and the new radically different covenant of Christ. Recall the passage from Jeremiah that prophesies the New Covenant given through Jesus, which forms the basis for the author’s discussion in chapter 8 and following:

(Heb. 8:10) This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their

⁴⁴ For example (among literally hundreds of articles and books), Thomas B. Warren, *Christians Only—and the Only Christians* (Jonesboro, Ark.: National Christian Press, Inc., 1984), and Bert Thompson, *Non-Denominational Christianity: Is Unity Possible?* (Montgomery, Ala.: Apologetics Press, 1984).

minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

The Hebrews author demonstrates the weakness of Old Testament worship and the necessity to replace it with something vastly superior as follows:

(Heb. 8:13-9:1) By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary.

Characteristic of the “old,” “obsolete,” and “aging” covenant are “regulations for worship” and an “earthly sanctuary”! The presence of regulations for how to worship is evidence of the inadequacy of the Law of Moses. The new worship derives from laws written on hearts (8:10), not fixed patterns that bind our hearts with regulations.

The writer then describes the old temple worship laws, in order to conclude—

(Heb. 9:10) They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

“External” is translated “carnal” in the King James Version. The Greek word is usually translated “fleshly” in the King James. Now it was God himself who commanded the regulations for the temple service. The practices weren’t fleshly because they were contrary to God’s will; they were fleshly because they were physical, made up of things here on earth and so cannot be perfect—hence, only a perfect temple, worshipped in perfectly, with a perfect sacrifice will do. No longer are we to try to emulate perfection by following a pattern, as patterns can only be imperfectly replicated—

(Heb. 9:11-14) When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle⁴⁵ that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.

God designed the tabernacle and oversaw its construction through the Holy Spirit, and yet the writer calls it “fleshly,” because as part of the creation, it is necessarily imperfect. The only perfect sanctuary is in heaven. Nothing man-made is good enough. Nothing that is a part of this fallen Creation is good enough. Rather, Christ perfected our salvation by achieving the only possible perfect sacrifice in the only perfect temple there can be!

⁴⁵ Under the Law of Moses, the center of worship was originally the tabernacle, literally a very elaborate tent at which sacrifices were made and ceremonies practiced. Under David the tabernacle was replaced with the temple in Jerusalem on Mount Zion. The Holy of Holies or Most Holy Place was originally in the tabernacle and later in the temple.

Now the Hebrews writer’s point is critical. How do we know that the Mosaic pattern is obsolete and inadequate? Because it’s imperfect. And how do we know that? Because it’s something humans do on earth and hence is necessarily imperfect. And how else? Because it is governed by “external regulations.” Rule-keeping, ritual, and pattern following cannot save. Indeed, such practices are supplanted by the perfection of the new covenant written on our hearts!

We cannot worship our way into heaven. We cannot perform any Sunday ritual that will satisfy God. But (praise God!) we don’t have to. Jesus has gone into the ultimate temple and presented the ultimate sacrifice so that we are freed from having to honor external regulations in an earthly sanctuary as a means to salvation.

After all, as the New Testament so frequently teaches, we cannot be perfect and so we can’t be saved by our works (even our doctrinal works!), and so we must be saved through the perfect work of Jesus in the perfect sanctuary where he followed the regulations perfectly.

Hebrews plainly refutes the very notion behind salvation through pattern-keeping—

(Heb. 8:5) [The priests under the Law of Moses] serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.”

The writer’s contrast is between “what is in heaven” and what is on earth. What is on earth is only a “copy and shadow” of heavenly perfection. And the point the Hebrews writer makes is that the very fact that the tabernacle was made according to a “pattern” shows that it’s only a copy, imperfect and insufficient. Only the original is good enough to save.

(Heb. 9:23-24) It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence.

The Most Holy Place in the temple was but a copy of the true Most Holy Place in heaven. The temple itself was but a copy of the temple in heaven. And the sacrifices offered by the priests were but copies of the only perfect sacrifice.

Copies are clearly inferior to the real thing and hence inadequate. But the NIV translation I just quoted conceals part of the lesson. The King James Version translates the word for “copies” more accurately—“patterns.”

(Heb. 9:23) *It was* therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the heavens should be purified with these; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.

“Patterns”! What could possibly be wrong with following a heavenly pattern? Everything. Flawed humans make copies from patterns, and seek to earn salvation by

replicating something that is perfect. It cannot be done. Pattern theology is necessarily a works-based theology. And if the Law of Moses was proven inadequate by its insistence on pattern-keeping, surely the same is true of any pattern-keeping. After all, the problem isn't the inadequacy of the pattern—the pattern has always been perfect—it's the inadequacy of humans to truly replicate the pattern!

I must address Philippians 3:17, “Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.” One might argue that this, and other similar passages, tell us that we are saved by pattern-keeping and that Paul's *teachings* are a pattern. But, of course, Paul does not contradict Hebrews! Rather than just assuming that the “pattern” is a pattern of worship or church organization, we should look at the context to determine what Paul has in mind. And, quite plainly, it is salvation by grace:

(Phil. 3:8b-9) I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

And it's humility in not believing that we've earned or even could earn our salvation, but having a desire to nonetheless strive to become more and more pleasing to God—

(Phil. 3:13b-15a) Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.

Paul certainly isn't teaching that the being saved is a matter of getting a pattern of worship or church organization exactly right.

I must digress only slightly to refer to a badly misused passage, Joshua 22:24, which declares, “Behold, the pattern!” (KJV). This passage has become something of a rallying cry for many in the rightward congregations of the Churches of Christ. Indeed, it is the theme of a book decrying much of what is written here.⁴⁶ But the passage itself proves the point of the Hebrews writer and contradicts the notion of basing salvation on following a pattern of worship.

Joshua led the Israelites in conquering the promised land. He divided the land among the Twelve Tribes, with some tribes—Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh—remaining on the east of the Jordan River, while the others divided the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea.

⁴⁶ Goebel Music, *Behold the Pattern!* (Pensacola, Fla.: Goebel Music Publications, 1991). See also Grady Scott, “Behold the Pattern,” http://www.churchesofchrist.net/authors/Grady_Scott/pattern.htm (1995). Scott quotes Heb. 8:5 for the proposition “This passage, as part of the great study of the book of Hebrews, teaches that there is a pattern for the work of the people of God.” Scott never again refers to Hebrews in his lesson outline, just assuming that Hebrews is approving the fact that Moses was following a pattern, rather than using that fact to prove the inadequacy of salvation through pattern keeping!

As the remaining tribes crossed the Jordan River, they discovered that that eastern three tribes had built an altar following the pattern of the tabernacle’s altar. They assumed that the eastern tribes intended to worship at their new altar rather than at the tabernacle with the rest of the tribes. This so contradicted the Law of Moses, which permitted but one tabernacle, that the nine tribes were ready to put the three eastern tribes to death!

The three eastern tribes defended themselves, saying,

(Josh. 22:27b-29) “[We wanted to be sure that] in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, ‘You have no share in the LORD.’

“And we said, ‘If they ever say this to us, or to our descendants, we will answer: Look at the replica [KJV: Behold the pattern] of the Lord’s altar, which our fathers built, not for burnt offerings and sacrifices, but as a witness between us and you.’

“Far be it from us to rebel against the LORD and turn away from him today by building an altar for burnt offerings, grain offerings and sacrifices, other than the altar of the LORD our God that stands before his tabernacle.”

The point of the passage is that the altar was a mere copy of the original—it followed a pattern—and therefore was inadequate and *could not be used!* It was only a reminder of the real thing. Had the eastern tribes intended to worship by following the pattern, they would have all been killed!

Therefore, if those of us who are a part of the Restoration Movement wish to truly restore New Testament Christianity, it is entirely right and good for us to follow First Century communion practices and the like—but we cannot impose such practices as requirements to be saved or else we would no longer be New Testament Christians. Indeed, if we do this, we preach “another gospel”!

E. Conclusion

Our Movement began as a reaction against the creedalism of the early 19th Century denominations. Two hundred years later, we became fervent creedalists. Ironic, isn’t it?

The mistake was in assuming that the desire to restore the practices of the First Century was the same as restoring the salvation of the First Century. But in the First Century, absolutely no one argued that *a cappella* singing, five acts of worship, or church autonomy were essential to salvation. And they are not.

Even today, we assume that something can’t be a law unless a violation of the law is damnable. And we’ve compounded this error by insisting on very questionable inferences as God-given laws. Thus, conclusions never expressly stated in Scripture are insisted on as the very essence of salvation.

But, of course, we have to be this way, as the grace we often teach is so parsimonious as to be worthless in the realm of doctrine. To feel safe in our salvation, we have to insist on any law that just *might* be true for fear of missing one of those that really

is true and so being lost. Thus, we are driven by fear toward creating more and more rules. As soon as some editor with a mailing list imagines a rule, we are afraid not to insist on it. After all, not only must we obey the rule, to go to heaven we have to believe the rule to be a rule. And so, our faith shifts from Jesus' power to save despite our weaknesses to our faith in the truth of a large body of doctrine and our ability to perfectly understand God's doctrinal will.

We have sinned and sinned greatly. It's time to repent.

Discussion questions—

1. Consider Campbell's use of "opinion." Give some examples of what he would call opinion and what he'd call "faith."
2. How would adopting Campbell's definitions affect the 21st Century Churches of Christ?
3. Do you agree with Campbell's teaching about faith and baptism? Are there any things you would add to those as requirements to be saved?
4. What are the two fundamental principles that define the Restoration Movement? Which is more important of the two? Or are they both the same? Which one or ones are found explicitly in Scripture?
5. Does the Bible require us to accept one another on the terms that Campbell suggested?
6. Does the Bible require us to worship, organize, and be named based on the First Century pattern? What if part of that pattern is not explicitly in the New Testament and has to be gathered from history written by uninspired writers? Are these salvation issues? What verses say they are or aren't?
7. Review the writer of Hebrews argument regarding patterns. What is Hebrews teaching us? Why does his inspired argument work?
8. Are we ever guilty of the obsolete approach to patterns that Hebrews criticizes?
9. Is there a lesson for today from the altar built by the three eastern Israelite tribes? If so, what?

PART III FELLOWSHIP AND DISFELLOWSHIP

We often speak of “fellowship” as recognition of someone as a fellow Christian. In this sense, we can be in fellowship with someone we hardly know. Of course, within a local congregation, “fellowship” includes actually relating to someone as a fellow Christian, that is, worshipping together, serving together, and even eating together.

The New Testament contains several passages that deal with disfellowshipping men and women from the church. Obviously, these passages should naturally fit together with our previous discussion regarding who is a member of the church, that is, who is saved.

Logically, we’d expect two kinds of limitations on fellowship. First, manifestly someone who has never been saved or who is plainly no longer saved cannot be accorded the privileges of a citizen of the Kingdom. On the other hand, some lost people are to be treated very nearly as the saved, because they are seeking God. These individuals are students or family members who are open to our plea, even if they’ve not yet accepted it. Not all lost people are to be treated as enemies.

However, some among the lost are outright enemies of God, seeking to draw the saved away from Jesus, to lead into temptation, or to sow division. We plainly must flee from such opponents of Jesus and warn others to do the same.

Another class we are to disfellowship are those who are saved but who are in jeopardy of losing their salvation. Generally, if a fellow believer is struggling with his faith or his penitence we should patiently and gently encourage him. However, there may come a point where sterner measures are called for, as we’ll discuss.

A. Those struggling to repent

In 2 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians we read of a withdrawal of fellowship for the purpose of encouraging repentance.

(2 Thes. 3:14-15) If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

Plainly, this form of disassociation is not to separate the lost from the saved, as the sinner is still our brother. Rather, the goal is to shame him into repentance. In other words, this is a remedy for a brother whose commitment to penitence is so weak that he is in danger of losing his soul

(1 Cor. 5:1-5) It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud!

Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? ...

When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus ... hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

Again, the goal is for the brother’s soul to be saved in the end. This can only happen if he repents. And the only response to penitence is forgiveness

(2 Cor. 2:6-8) The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.

As we learned earlier, one requirement for a Christian remaining saved is for him to remain true to his repentance. In those cases where the Christian refuses to repent, it may be necessary to withdraw fellowship as a form of “tough love.” If fear of damnation is not enough to encourage him to straighten out his life, perhaps fear of losing his friends and the comforts of the church will be enough.

(Matt. 18:15-17) “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’

“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

Jesus spoke this lesson immediately after telling the parable of the lost sheep, where the concern is that none of the 100 sheep be “lost.” Hence, the primary reference is to a sin that threatens damnation. The concern is therefore a failure to repent, and so the goal is repentance. And the attitude is love.

A few limitations—

- You cannot disfellowship someone not in fellowship (and you can be sued!)⁴⁷
- It doesn’t work unless the love and community of the congregation is so intense that losing it would be unbearable to the one being disciplined.
- Each of these passages deals with a sin the Christian knows to be a sin. None deals with an honest disagreement over doctrine (Romans 14 gives the rule for such disagreements.)

⁴⁷ American courts generally refuse to interfere with church discipline, as the First Amendment largely protects church internal affairs from governmental interference and because the person being disciplined has implicitly submitted to whatever forms of discipline are customary in that church. However, once the member has withdrawn from the congregation, church discipline is no longer internal and no longer consented to. Hence, an eldership can become subject to suit for invasion of privacy, slander, or outrage if the eldership attempts to discipline someone who no longer considers himself a member.

It would be absurd to disfellowship anyone guilty of any sin. No one would be left in the church to turn off the lights! Rather, this sort of discipline is limited to sins of such severity that Hebrews 10:26-27 puts the sinner’s soul in jeopardy.

Consider 1 Timothy 4:2, which teaches that a conscience can be “seared as with a hot iron” and no longer capable of being brought to repentance (Heb. 6:4-6, too). Therefore, it’s imperative that an eldership not wait too long.

Disfellowshipping too soon can lead to resentment and anger from other church members. Clearly, the church’s leaders must try personal pleas (as described in Matthew 18) and exhortation before disfellowshipping an impenitent member, but if the leaders wait too long, the member will have withdrawn from the church voluntarily, made other friends, and built up such a wall of psychological defenses that disfellowshipping will be futile.

The teachings we’ve just studied are commands. Pray that you are never faced with this situation, but when it arises, lovingly, gently, and patiently do what you have to do to rescue a soul in jeopardy of being irredeemably lost. God will never refuse to forgive, but a sinner can become so distant from God that he will never repent. Pray such a thing never happens on your watch!

B. Those no longer penitent

Plainly, people who are impenitent, living as unregenerate cannot be treated as though they are Christians. But this is for extreme cases. We often cannot tell who is struggling and who has abandoned Jesus altogether

(2 Tim. 3:2-5) People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

Fairly read, this passage has nothing to do with people who honestly disagree over use of the instrument in worship or whether a church may build a fellowship hall with church money. Rather, these sinners are plainly enemies of the faith—they deny the power of God!

Jesus warns us against the same problem.

(Matt. 7:15-17) “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.”

(Matt. 10:16) “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”

If there’s any doubt, we treat the sinner as a brother in need of correction, not an enemy to be ejected. After all, only God can truly know someone’s heart. We are

cautioned by the Parable of the Tares that we may have to wait until Judgment Day to know exactly who is truly saved and who is not. Sometimes that judgment is beyond our wisdom and we dare not risk treating a saved person as lost and casting him out of the Kingdom as though damned. Jesus paid too high of a price for us to treat souls so casually!

On the other hand, we can't be stupid. Enemies of the faith are to be expelled.

C. Those without faith

(2 John 1:7, 9-11) Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. ... Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.

As we've earlier discussed, this passage is all about the divinity of Jesus and the gospel (which is what we must believe and confess to be saved). Anyone who denies the faith is certainly appropriately excluded from the fellowship of the church.

D. Those guilty of legalism or creedalism

Another reason to disfellowship is denial of the doctrine of grace.

(Rom. 16:17) I urge you, brothers, to watch out for [KJV “mark”] those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.

Again, the meaning of “the teaching you have learned” must be gathered from the context. If we must “mark” all who disagree with us on any point of doctrine, we must mark most of our fellow elders and even our wives and children! Some pick and choose what “teaching” is based on what's a hot topic in the church periodicals. Clearly, this is not what Paul had in mind.

In fact, the “teaching you have learned” is plainly the teaching Paul just taught! The opposite of this teaching is to “cause divisions and put obstacles in your way.” Hence, Paul is referring to his teaching against divisions—which just happens to be the topic of the immediately preceding chapters 14-15.

Therefore, if we divide contrary to Romans 15:7 (“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you ...”), we are to be marked! Ironic?

Rather than casting out all who disagree with us on doctrines that are emotionally hot and tolerating disagreement on doctrines that don't stir the emotions, we are to be united based on faith, repentance, and baptism—and refusal to do this is a ground to be driven from the church!

Paul gives a similar instruction in Titus.

(Titus 3:9-11) But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

Who is “divisive”? Plainly, anyone who works to divide brother from brother. And who is a brother? Any baptized, penitent believer who is still a penitent believer.

If I demand that someone who uses an instrument be disfellowshipped even though he is a baptized, penitent believer and gives every evidence of being an honest follower of Jesus, am I a purifier? or a divider?

However, the division being condemned isn’t just over doctrine. It can also be caused by personalities, egos, jealousy, or any number of other sins. Regardless of the cause, fomenting division is repeatedly, strongly condemned.

E. Conclusions

We are instructed to disfellowship in these and only these cases:

- When a Christian fails to be penitent (is guilty of intentional sin), to shame him into the penitence necessary to protect his soul.
- When a former Christian lives an utterly impenitent life and so brings danger to the church.
- When a former Christian has given up his faith.
- When a Christian rejects the doctrine of grace in order to sow division or seeks to divide brother from brother for any other reason.

This list obviously closely parallels the understanding of grace we’ve covered in the preceding chapters. Fellowship is based on the elements of salvation we’ve discussed earlier, and loss of one of those elements can lead to being disfellowshipped.

The one exceptional case is someone not yet lost who is struggling with his penitence. Such a Christian is to be excluded, not because he’s lost, but to shame him into repentance. I would think the same logic would apply to someone who is struggling with his faith or who denies grace. It’s hard to imagine a case where someone could be shamed into faith in the same way that one might be shamed into repentance. On the other hand, someone struggling with imposing extra rules as conditions of salvation may well profit from being disfellowshipped—and far better to suffer the embarrassment of being disfellowshipped than to be lost!

Now, this list excludes some practices that have become quite common. First, an impenitent but still-saved Christian may only be disfellowshipped by his own congregation. The procedures for this are described in some detail, and they plainly do not involve an eldership disciplining another congregation’s members.

Second, only rarely may a congregation disfellowship another congregation when they disagree, for example, over how they spend church funds or how they conduct their worship services. It would be a most usual circumstance when a congregation’s decision on how to worship God would make that church so utterly impenitent that we could confidently declare its members lost in their sins.

Plainly, a disagreement over instrumental music or how often to take the Lord’s Supper would not rise to this level. On the other hand, if a church were to adopt ritual prostitution or child sacrifice, I think we could clearly consider them outside the Kingdom of Heaven. I suppose we could ponder this one long enough to figure exactly where the line is drawn, but the fact is that virtually no congregations of the Churches of Christ could be considered so impenitent as to be damned. Some are guilty of error, but they do what they do intending to honor God, and so they will stand, as promised in Romans 14.

Just so, I’ve never even heard of a Church of Christ congregation that is without saving faith. Occasionally a rumor circulates to this effect, but these are just about always (if not always) groundless, resulting from a dispute over something else entirely.

Obviously, however, some false teachings are particularly dangerous and must be dealt with. There are seminaries and universities that teach a form of Christianity that does, in fact, deny the faith and so destroy souls, but no Church of Christ-affiliated school fits in this category (yet). Those denominations that have such institutions are required to disassociate themselves entirely.

Division contrary to the grace of God is another example, and many of our congregations are in fact guilty of this sin. Many of our schools of preaching and universities teach this error, and most others tolerate it. Indeed, we have periodicals and entire publishing houses dedicated to dividing brother from brother.

We are told, however, not to honor this sin but to withdraw from it and mark those who are guilty of it. I’m deeply concerned that not only will these teachers, authors, and editors suffer condemnation for their wickedness, but so perhaps will those who are in a position to slow if not stop it, but who refuse protect the Lord’s sheep from this evil.

We should fear God, not editors, and God tells us to stand against dividers for all we are worth. It’s time we did so.

Discussion questions—

1. Distinguish fellowship in the sense the author uses the word from social fellowship. What is the nature of fellowship in the sense used here?
2. How might disfellowshipping an impenitent member bring him to repentance? In what circumstances would this not work?
3. What steps should be followed in disfellowshipping an impenitent member?
4. Have you ever known a church to disfellowship a member? Was it done in accordance with scripture? Did it work?
5. How can we distinguish an impenitent lost member from an impenitent member who is not yet lost? Does that distinction affect how we are to treat that member?

6. Have you ever known a church to disfellowship someone within their congregation for being divisive? Someone not within their congregation?

7. What’s the difference between being divisive and disagreeing with the elders on some point of doctrine? Or is there a difference?

8. How would the Churches of Christ be different if they were to adopt the author’s interpretation of the doctrine of fellowship? Would this be a good thing?

PART IV

FREEING OUR HERMENEUTICS FROM LEGALISM

Hermeneutics is the set of rules that we apply to interpret Scripture. While few Sunday School programs teach a course on hermeneutics, the fact is that we all carry around with us our own hermeneutics. And for most of us, our hermeneutics are invisible to ourselves. We pick up a Bible, read a verse, and just *know* what it means. However, we also find that other people often disagree with what is so clear to us. And they just *know* what they know as certainly as we do.

Why is it that we can read the same words as someone else and reach radically different conclusions as to what those words mean? It’s because we bring with us different assumptions and attitudes regarding how to understand what is written. We are often unaware of these assumptions and attitudes—we think we are being truly objective and yet they are there and they influence our reading.

Not surprisingly, our historic legalism has created legalistic hermeneutics within the Churches of Christ. Thus, before we read the first word of Scripture, we have already brought certain false presuppositions to the process. For example, traditionally, we in the Churches of Christ have looked at the Scriptures to tell what is authorized. But before we look at the Scriptures, we decide that the question is one of authority. But, you see, the Scriptures not only tell us the answer, they tell us the questions, and authority is not one of the questions addressed by the New Testament. It is, however, a doctrine invented by John Calvin and still taught by strict Calvinists.⁴⁸ You see, the Campbells and Stone were strict Calvinists by education, and although they rejected the Calvinistic view of salvation, they did continue in the mainstream of Calvinistic hermeneutical thought.⁴⁹

And we often worry about whether silences are prohibitions or permissive, and we invariably conclude that silences must be all one or the other, and so the silences must be prohibitions. Yet we go on building our church buildings, as to which Scriptures are silent, attending youth rallies (silent), building gyms (silent), supporting Christian colleges (silent), supporting orphanages (silent on orphanages but mandatory on caring

⁴⁸ The idea that authority for an act of worship, church organization, church name, etc. is required is taken from John Calvin. Among Calvinists the doctrine is called the Regulative Principle. See, *e.g.*, John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:344-345. See, generally, Brian Schwertley, *Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship* (Lansing, Mich., 2000). <<http://www.reformed.com/pub/sola.htm>>.

⁴⁹ The Churches of Christ inherited other Calvinistic tendencies. Our preference for modest, unadorned buildings, often without steeples or stained glass, comes straight from the iconoclasm of the Calvinistic tradition. Our practice of centering services on the sermon, rather than the Lord’s Supper or prayer, for example, is Calvinistic, too. Calvin loved to preach! On the other hand, our practice of pointing the entire service toward an invitation to be extended immediately after the sermon is from 19th Century Frontier Revivalism, particularly the methods of Methodist Charles Finney, whose work was closely followed by Stone. Obviously, the Calvinists and Methodists are capable of teaching scriptural truths, and none of these practices are wrong by virtue of their origins. Indeed, our offering of “the invitation” is perfectly legitimate, but there’s no evidence that First Century preachers did it this way.

for orphans), using song leaders (silent), hymn books (silent), insisting on three services per week (silent), disfellowshipping those outside our own congregation (really, really silent), conducting baptisms during the assembly (baptisms are certainly authorized, but nowhere do we read of baptisms during the assembly), conducting Sunday School classes (silent), insisting that communion be served by only men (silent—nothing in Scriptures keeps women from silently passing food and drink while standing up), and on and on and on.

Indeed, every branch of the Restoration Movement, not matter how right winged, inevitably declares some silences filled by expedience, meaning human wisdom guided by godly principles. It’s just that we disagree as to which silences are prohibitions and which permit expedience.

And just where is it the Bible talks in terms of silences? I entirely agree with the old maxim, “We speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where the Bible is silent.” What it means is that if the Bible is silent, I have to be silent. Saying nothing is not the same thing as pronouncing a prohibition. Rather, if scripture is silent on church periodicals, then they are neither prohibited nor permitted by the silence. Instead, we must look at other principles to reach a conclusion: is this practice consistent with love? (some periodicals certainly are not); is this consistent with grace? (again, some are not); is this practice immoral—perhaps due to slander or gossip? (again, some are very immoral). There’s no silence on these questions, and they are quite sufficient to prohibit some but not all periodicals, even though the question of periodicals is nowhere found in Scripture.

We’d all be much better off arguing about what the Bible says rather than what it doesn’t say. It says quite enough to guide us to heaven, and if we don’t believe that, we truly have a low view of inspiration, don’t we?

Rather, for now I want to share the insights regarding hermeneutics that I’ve had as a result of studying the Bible itself, especially from Galatians and 1 Corinthians. In fact, my goal is to read Paul’s epistles to ask what hermeneutics did he bring to his own study of Scripture and writings? If I can glean a bit of Paul’s own principles of interpretation, then I’ve surely made a major step toward a truly sound hermeneutic. This is far better than consulting Calvin and his disciples. It’s far better than just assuming that Alexander Campbell, when he followed Calvinistic hermeneutics, was right.

One final note. There are important hermeneutical principles that I won’t be covering that are not specific to Scriptures or spirituality. For example, no one seriously questions the importance of the historical-critical method, which just means considering Scripture in literary and historical context. But this is also true of the *Iliad*, the *Tale of Two Cities*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. Just so, we must treat poetry as poetry, history as history, and proverbs as proverbs. And we shouldn’t forget that prose is often rich in figures of speech that must be read figuratively. Such principles as these are important and well covered in other works. Rather, for our present purposes, I’m looking for hermeneutics that are peculiar to the Bible.

**A. First Principle:
Some Biblical principles are more important than others,
and the gospel is most important.**

This contradicts the view of some that the Scriptures are hermeneutically flat, that is, that all commands are as important as the others, and all violations are thus equally damning.

It’s really easy to reach this conclusion. The Scriptures say it plainly—

(1 Cor. 15:1-6) Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this **gospel** you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of **first importance**: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.

Paul says that the gospel is of first importance. Therefore, some principles are more important than others, and therefore, the gospel is of first importance. And if you’ve read the preceding chapters of this book, the reason for that should be obvious. Accepting the gospel saves. Rejecting it damns. What could be more important than that?

Now, once this principle is accepted, we are forced to construct some sort of hierarchy of Biblical principles: which ones are more important than others? And the previous discussions should simplify that process quite a bit.

First, those doctrines that bear on how to become saved and how to stay saved are most important, as they carry the highest penalty for error—damnation. Parts I and II of this book focus on those principles.

Second, questions of how best to live as a Christian, that is, living a love-driven Christian ethic, must be next, as the New Testament writings, the Gospels and the Epistles, spend so much time on Christian living. And because we know the centrality of love. In fact, living a life of love is so central to the Christian message that in Matthew 25 Jesus pictures the dead being judged on Judgment Day based on who cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and those in prison.

Third, questions of how to organize a church, conduct the assembly, and such must be of even lesser importance, as the Scriptures hardly address these questions at all. There is quite a bit on the role of elders, but hardly anything at all on what deacons are to do. There are verses that mention Christians singing, but no explicit command to gather to sing. Indeed, were it not for uninspired early Christian writings, we would struggle to know from just the New Testament how the early Christians conducted their assemblies or organized their churches. You won’t find a book addressing the instrumental music question that doesn’t quote from Justin Martyr and other uninspired early church leaders.

Congregational autonomy is nowhere discussed, only implied from the history we find in Acts, and not without exception.⁵⁰

Now I don't intend to assemble an elaborate structure of priorities, as the Scriptures don't do so. I simply observe that our teaching ought to reflect the priorities of the New Testament writers. If *a cappella* singing was worth two verses out of thousands in the First Century, then the same importance should prevail in our teaching and preaching today.

Sadly, our priorities tend to focus on those doctrines that distinguish us from other Protestant denominations. Hence, *a cappella* singing and weekly observance of the Lord's Supper are of very high importance in our teaching. I understand why that is, but question whether we should give such short shrift to other doctrines which entire epistles are dedicated to while focusing so intently on doctrines that, together, are built on four or five verses? I just don't think God will be pleased if we get the frequency of the Lord's Supper right while entirely missing the point of Galatians, of Romans, or of Hebrews.

**B. Second Principle:
None of the Bible can be well understood until
the overarching story of the Bible is well understood.**

This is more than just understanding the literary context of the Bible. Rather, we have to understand the Bible narrative in terms of the big picture.⁵¹ What is God telling us about himself and what he did and is doing? Why is God acting in human time and history as he has? If we get the big picture right, then the details will be much easier to sort out.

To borrow from Thomas Olbricht, “The focal point in Scripture is the mighty loving action of God in his created universe and on behalf of man, who is made in his image.”⁵² In other words, sometimes what we teach our third graders is more important than what we teach our adults.

The big picture runs along these lines—

- God created the heavens and the earth. We know that, of course, but we sometimes forget what it means. God is a person. God created as an act of his freewill.

⁵⁰ The congregations founded by Paul were certainly subject to his oversight—but he was an apostle, an office that no longer exists. On the other hand, the council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) answered doctrinal questions put to them by the church in Antioch. Apostles sat on the council, but so did the local elders (v. 6). On the other-other hand, Paul did not feel bound by their instructions, as the council required the Gentiles to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols (v. 20), and Paul did not require his converts to do so (1 Cor. 8). At the least, we see congregations discussing with one another important doctrinal issues in cooperation, mutual respect, and an evident desire for unity without a rigid hierarchy imposing uniformity.

⁵¹ It's fashionable to refer to this as a story, which is okay I suppose, but some might think that “story” suggests a myth. Hence, when it's not too awkward, I speak of a “narrative.” It really happened.

⁵² *Hearing God's Voice* (Abilene: ACU Press 1996).

And he made man, male and female, for no reason other than love. And man is made in God’s own image, which means at least that we have a moral nature.⁵³

- Adam and Eve lived in a sinless world until they ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, contrary to God’s command. As a result, Adam and Eve became mortal and God cursed the world. This is called the Fall of Man and results in man having the nature that we now see. Man was created to be sinless but due to his now corrupt nature, he continually does what he knows is wrong, even if he wants to do right. In fact, the entire universe has become imperfect and corrupted. We will discuss this some more when we get to the Sixth Principle.

- God called Abraham, and Abraham accepted God’s call. God credited Abraham’s faith as righteousness, which is good because Abraham was far from a perfect man, but he was a man of faith who tried to honor God with his obedience. God and Abraham had a truly “personal relationship” as God communicated with Abraham through conversation, not law. God told Abraham that the world would be blessed through one of his descendents—one of the first of many prophecies of the coming of Jesus. God blessed Abraham’s descendents—Isaac, Jacob (later known as Israel), and his twelve sons. The descendants of Israel became the twelve tribes of the Israelites.

- The Israelites lived in Egypt for centuries until a pharaoh enslaved them. A member of pharaoh’s household, an Israelite named Moses, called on the pharaoh to free the Israelites. After God brought ten plagues on the Egyptians, the pharaoh allowed the Israelites to leave.

- Moses led the Israelites on a 40-year journey to the Promised Land, Palestine. God performed many mighty miracles during this journey to protect and preserve his chosen people.

- On Mt. Sinai God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and, later, the entire Law of Moses, revealing both God’s ethical standards as well as a theocratic system for the governance of the Israelites. Although God spoke through law, he also spoke personally with Moses, much as one man speaks to another.

- Under the leadership of Joshua, the Israelites conquered Palestine. Again, God perform many miracles to make this possible, most famously taking down the walls of Jericho.

- Originally, the Israelites had no formal government other than elders in the cities and priests serving at the tabernacle, but God raised up mighty leaders (judges) as they were needed, including Deborah, Gideon, and Samson.

- At the request of the people, God appointed Saul as king over the twelve tribes. God handed Saul many victories over the enemies of Israel, but Saul became arrogant. As a result, God appointed David as the new king.

⁵³ Gen.1. This principle does not require a particular view as to the age of the earth. Whether God made the earth in seven literal days about 6,000 years ago or in the Big Bang 14 billion years ago, he made it, and he made it from nothing.

- David was “a man after God’s own heart.” David moved the seat of government to Jerusalem, wrote many of the Psalms, and God worked mightily through him. However, David sinned by committing adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his 30 mighty warriors, Uriah. David had Uriah killed to cover up his sin with Bathsheba, who’d become pregnant. God’s prophet Nathan confronted David, David confessed his sin and repented, and God forgave the sin itself and allowed David to remain as king. However, God punished David by taking the life of his child and visiting other sorrows on him.

- After David, his second son by Bathsheba, Solomon, ruled Israel with wisdom given by God and built the temple in Jerusalem on Mt. Zion. This became the new center of Israelite worship.

- After Solomon, the kingdom of Israel split north and south, with the southern tribes being ruled by descendants of David and Solomon. The northern tribes were ruled by several dynasties. God raised up many prophets from among the southern tribes to preach God’s message to his chosen people and urge repentance. The prophets prophesied the coming of the Messiah in remarkable detail. “Messiah” means anointed, and refers to a king in the lineage of David. The Messiah was prophesied to usher in a golden age among God’s people.

- As punishment for their sins, God allowed the northern tribes to be defeated by the Assyrians and taken into captivity never to return.

- Years later, as punishment for their sins, God allowed the southern tribes to be defeated by the Babylonians and removed to Babylon. Jeremiah prophesied from Jerusalem during the conquests by the Babylonians. In Babylon, God did amazing miracles through Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and raised up Ezekiel as a prophet, all to encourage his people in Babylon to remain loyal to God. Daniel and Ezekiel further prophesied the coming of the Messiah.

- Seventy years later, after the Persians had conquered the Babylonians, the Persians allowed some of the Israelites to return to Palestine under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra. They rebuilt the temple and the walls of Jerusalem and reestablished the worship of God. God sent prophets, Zechariah and Malachi, to encourage the people and to call them again to repentance. The prophets also promised the coming of the Messiah.

- Nearly 500 years later, in accordance with prophecy, God raised up John the Baptist to prepare the way for the Messiah. John baptized in the Jordan River for the remission of sins.

- The Holy Spirit caused Mary, a virgin and descendant of David, to conceive and bear Jesus, the Messiah. The Greek word for Messiah is *Christos* or Christ. Jesus was born and lived a life exactly as predicted by the prophets centuries earlier.

- John baptized Jesus, and God declared Jesus “my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”

- Jesus spent three years in Palestine preaching and performing wondrous miracles, calling for repentance and preparation for the coming Kingdom of Heaven.

Jewish leaders caused the Roman authorities who ruled Palestine to kill Jesus by crucifixion. He was buried and raised on the third day, as prophesied. Soon thereafter, he ascended to heaven. In allowing himself to be sacrificed, Jesus carried the sins of the world so that God could forgive those sins—as Isaiah had clearly prophesied.

- Jesus trained a group of apostles (literally, ambassadors) to carry on his work. On the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after his death, one of the apostles, Peter, was empowered to preach the gospel in Jerusalem by the Holy Spirit. More than 3,000 of the Jews were converted, baptized, and became the first Christians. The apostles performed many miracles to confirm the words they spoke, and many more were converted.

- From heaven, Jesus called Paul to become an apostle to the Gentiles, and Paul, the other apostles, and other missionaries carried the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Paul wrote many letters that became part of the New Testament.

- Those who received the gospel received the Holy Spirit and lived lives emulating Jesus, doing works of service and spreading the gospel as they had opportunity.

- God showed the apostle John a vision of God’s victories over his enemies and the eternal reward of his people in heaven, resulting in the writing of Revelation.

I have obviously simplified this a bit, and this is likely a bit simplistic for many of my readers, but notice how little attention we tend to pay to the Old Testament part of the story in our adult classes and preaching, assuming our listeners learned all this as children, which is no longer necessarily true. In fact, if we are an evangelistic community, many of our members won’t know this material.

And notice how many times the New Testament writers refer to part of this narrative to teach New Testament doctrine. In fact, it’s interesting that, when Paul writes a letter to a Gentile congregation, he feels free to teach lessons backed by the Old Testament narrative. Plainly, the early church taught their new members the story. And notice how many times I’ve had to refer to portions of this narrative to argue my case in this book. I mean, I love quoting from Hebrews 8, where the writer quotes from Jeremiah.

And so, what does this mean to us? How is this hermeneutics?

First, it shows us what’s important. Why choose Abraham and his descendents? Because God needed to send his Son to die for us, and for this to happen, the whole story had to happen. The story is about the Fall and then Redemption through Jesus. And God worked his plan over the course of human history to lead to a culmination in Jesus and the cross.

Why have a Law of Moses? To teach us God’s ethical requirements for us—how to live morally—but also to show us that we can’t actually meet those requirements, and so we need a Savior.

Why all the prophets? To prove that Jesus was and is divine, the Son of God, and that God is sovereign. God doesn’t just predict the future, he is outside time and so not bound by time. Isn’t it remarkable that Jeremiah (and others) could write Christian theology hundreds of years before Jesus?

And the Scriptures repeatedly teach us that the reason for all this is my sin. And yours. Not sin as some generalized concept, but the very particular sins of very particular people. Jesus didn't just die to generate a pot full of grace to sprinkle on us centuries later. Jesus died to take away my sins. Every sin I've committed or will commit hung on the cross, killing God's own Son. Now this violates cause and effect as we experience it, as my sins were not yet committed when Jesus died. But remember, God is outside time, and so my sin really was hung on that cross. Indeed, every time I sin, I hang one more burden on the bleeding back of Jesus my Savior.⁵⁴

Also, the story of the fall and redemption of mankind helps us understand God's plan for men and women, as we will discuss later. In fact, one reason so many get this wrong is because they don't correctly understand the Fall of Man.

And this means that the Old Testament matters. It's not a dead book in a dead language. God's relationship to his people has changed, and the rituals and theocracy of the Law of Moses are gone, but the God of the Old Testament remains the God of the New Testament, and we should spend much more time in the first two-thirds of the Bible. But (God help us!) let's never return to law as the means of our salvation! It's already been tried, and it didn't work.

Indeed, one reason God spent centuries of history dealing with the Israelites as his chosen people was to show us that salvation by works has been tried, and despite numerous direct interventions by God in Israel's history and the pleadings of the prophets, the system failed, leading ultimately to the arrogance and hypocrisy of the Pharisees that were so condemned by Jesus.

The story teaches us that the new covenant cannot be like the old. It's not just a refinement of the old system. It's not better laws and better enforcement. It's freedom from law.⁵⁵

C. Third Principle: God is sovereign (and man is not).

How can I understand the gospel if I don't understand who God is, what he has done, and that we mortals are all fallen creatures lost in our sins? This is why, for example, Paul begins the great book of Romans with a discussion of principles that teach that we have all fallen short of the glory of God (culminating in Romans 3:23). If we misunderstand that, we misunderstand everything.

And as I've argued before, we do misunderstand that, because we arrogantly assume that our intellect is not fallen. We are humans in the flesh but virtual *gods* in the intellect! Surely this sounds wicked. It is. Those who believe this don't really understand Genesis 3 or Romans 1-3, among many other passages.

Gary Collier concludes—

⁵⁴ Rom. 5:16; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 2:24.

⁵⁵ Rom. 7:3-4; 8:1-2.

[Jesus] wants people who are forgiving and kind, people who *understand* God’s law by looking at God! In fact, he said that when his followers understand his new message about the kingdom of heaven, then they will know how to read Scriptures!⁵⁶

A similar conclusion is suggested by Richard Hughes—

[T]he apocalyptic perspective focuses on God’s mighty deeds, culminating in his final triumph over all the earth. The focus here is on God: what he has already done for us and what he will do in the future. ...

[T]he apocalyptic perspective inevitably focuses on great biblical themes that stand as corollaries to the one theme that is central to all of Scripture: the sovereignty of God. What are those themes? Creation. Redemption. Discipleship. Salvation.⁵⁷

By “apocalyptic” Hughes means that our view of Scripture should focus on the spiritual rather than the material—God, Jesus, and the Cross rather than ourselves. It’s not about my genius or intellect or education—it’s about what God has done for me through his Son.

And so we have to bring to the study a certain attitude: humility. We have to appreciate that God is infinitely smarter and subtler than we can begin to comprehend. The very notion of understanding all of God’s will perfectly in all its magnificence should strike us as patently ridiculous. Plainly, God intends for us to know enough to become and stay saved and serve him effectively. Beyond that, how important can it be?

God is not a rulebook—he’s a person with free will. I’ve grown to hate the cliché “putting God in a box,” but it makes the point. You cannot understand God by wondering about prohibitive silences. Rather, you learn how to fill in those supposed silences by knowing God as a person, a person who so loves that world that he gave us Jesus to die for our sins.

And so we have to be God-centered in our thinking—by “God” meaning the entire Godhead. Thus, our faith is in Jesus. It is definitely not faith in “salvation by grace” or in “we speak where the Bible speaks.” *Jesus* saves, not theology, doctrine, or what have you.

Obviously, salvation by grace matters, but we should better think of it as “salvation given by God.” This is why in some of the charts shown earlier I try to express things in terms of our relationship to Christ. We don’t just “believe,” we “accept Jesus as the Son of God.” In one sense, the two say exactly the same thing, but in reality, one is about what I do and which doctrine I hold, and the other is about how I relate to a real person.

⁵⁶ *The Forgotten Treasure* (West Monroe, La.: 1993), 171.

⁵⁷ *Reclaiming a Heritage* (Abilene: ACU Press 2002), 80-81.

Just think of it. Our entire “plan of salvation”—hear, believe, repent, confess, be baptized—does not mention God, Jesus, or the Cross! Whom do we believe? What do we believe? Into whom am I baptized? Why repent? Because I have to do it to go to heaven? Or because having learned of the incredible sacrifice of the very Son of God, I’m shamed in my sinful ways, and I desperately want to become what He wants me to be?

Now, as you’ve surely guessed by now, I’m an extremely left-brained person, and talking like this is hard for me. But we have to admit, accept, and even revel in the emotional side of our salvation—of our relationship with the Creator and his Son. We are an emotional people, and so our emotions have to be reconciled just as does our intellect. Hence, this has to be about persons—what God, a person, did to create the universe and us in it, how Adam and Eve sinned, and how the person God, with incredibly undeserved love, gave his only begotten Son so that people who in no way deserve salvation can have salvation (John 3:16). And how we now have an amazing relationship with God, who actually lives within us through his Spirit just to be closer to us.

We must bring to our study of the Scriptures a humility in tune with the heart of God. “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (Jas. 4:10).

This is not some vaporous abstraction—it’s the essence of understanding. In fact, this is surely the greatest weakness of Church of Christ hermeneutics—we think that the Bible is a book of riddles that we are to solve, and having solved them, we believe we have accomplished something that makes us superior to other believers.

In the Churches of Christ, we have taken great pride in having the right answers, the right pattern, the right plan. Thus, while the other churches may have bigger buildings, on better streets, in better neighborhoods, we’ve had the Old Paths. We know the truth while we pretended the “denominations” were willfully ignoring the truth, indeed, were intentionally teaching lies. The sense of superiority has been palpable. We have been a proud people! It’s always fun to have someone to look down on.

But godly people don’t look down on others. If I happen to know something someone else doesn’t, it is only because it has been *given* to me, and as a result, I am called to teach, but not to feel superior. Indeed, the truth is that only God is sovereign and only God is righteous. And if I make it to heaven, it’s because of a gift I’ve been given, not because of anything I have accomplished.

D. Fourth Principle:
The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.
(faith element)

In Galatians 5, at the apex of his argument, after four chapters of elaborate explication, Paul declares a profound principle—one that the reader is to understand as being just as true as can be: “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” This faith-love principle is stated this way to make clear that circumcision is nothing and hence cannot be a condition of salvation. Why is it nothing? Because it has nothing to do with faith or love. Plain and simple.

Now we have to study Paul (and the rest of Scripture) to put some meat on the bones of these few words, but we can’t explain them away or treat them as a mere

rhetorical flourish. They are true—so true that those who ignored them were declared alienated from Christ! That’s quite enough to get my attention!

So what is the faith element? Well, it’s what we’ve already studied at length. It’s the gospel. It’s how we’re saved. And how we’re saved profoundly influences how we are to live our lives as saved people.

I’ll offer a series of examples from 1 Corinthians, as it is a very practical book that deals with several problems in the church at Corinth.

(1 Cor. 1:11-13) My brothers, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?

When Paul is confronted with a church divided over personalities, and perhaps disagreements over doctrine, Paul answers by reminding his readers that only Jesus was crucified for them and that they were baptized into only one person: Christ. And as Christ is not divided, neither may they be divided.

Notice that Paul’s argument is centered on Christ as a person—not a recitation of rules. And that he concludes that the terms on which the Corinthians were saved define how they are to live. They were saved by one person into one person and thus must remain one.

In another passage, Paul explains how our salvation impacts our sexual conduct—

(1 Cor. 6:15) Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!

The fact that we have been added to the one body of Christ means that our bodies must be kept holy. If Jesus is holy, then we, as part of Jesus, must also be holy! Paul could have said that there’s a law against fornication, but he chose instead to reason from the essence of the gospel.

When Paul is asked whether the Corinthians may eat food sacrificed to idols, he again turns to the gospel for guidance—

(1 Cor. 8:4-6) So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

Paul’s argument has two elements. First, remember the sovereignty of God. How can there be idols when God is the One True God and Jesus is the One True Lord? Second, when we were saved we committed to live “for” God and “through” Jesus. Thus,

idols are nothing at all and so food sacrificed to them has been sacrificed to nothing at all. It's just not a problem.

But while God's absolute sovereignty gives us freedom, the commitment we made when we were saved sometimes limits what we are free to do—

(1 Cor. 8:7,10-11) But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ... For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.

You see, as the gospel declares, Christ died not only for me but also for you. Therefore, your salvation is just as important as mine. Therefore, my freedom never extends so far that I may interfere with the salvation of another Christian. Hence, I may have to decline to eat certain foods if my eating could tempt my brother to sin.

We now shift briefly to a verse in Colossians—

(Col. 3:11) Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Why are there no distinctions between races and social classes? Because “Christ is all,” that is, sovereign, and because Christ “is in all.” All are saved on the same terms and thus we should treat them all the same. If God treats them the same, so should we. Indeed, when we are saved, we are added to the same body, indwelt by the same Spirit, and become one. Fleshly distinctions thus disappear.

And this inevitably forces us to face up to a passage in Galatians that we have judiciously skipped until now—

(Gal. 3:26-28) You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Why is there neither “male nor female”? Not what do we wish the answer to be, but what is the reason *Paul* gives? Plainly, “for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Just as was true in Colossians, as we have all been accepted by God on exactly the same terms and added to exactly the same one body, as we have all been “clothed with Christ,” we are one and thus God makes no distinctions based on matters extrinsic to the gospel.

It has often been argued that this passage is only addressing the terms of salvation, so that after we are saved, there are indeed gender distinctions. But for this to be so, the terms of our salvation—the very gospel—cannot determine how we live as Christians after we've been saved, and yet plainly it does. Indeed, the fact that the terms

of the gospel dictate what it means to live the Christian life is one of the most fundamental of all Biblical principles.⁵⁸

Many other examples can be given. The point is that when Paul is asked a question, he doesn't pull out a rulebook and tell us what the rule is. He doesn't tell what is authorized or not. He doesn't speak about silences. Rather, he reminds us of the sovereignty of God and the gospel. He returns us to the terms on which we are saved—and then tells us how these terms apply to our particular facts by assuming that surely we realize that how we were saved tells us how to live.

**E. Fifth Principle:
The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.
(love element)**

The application should be obvious by now. Love and faith are the “interstitial doctrines,” that is, they fill in all the gaps. There are no gaps. No silences. No missing authority. It's all there in two words.

Maybe a reminder of some fundamentals will help us hang flesh on this element. What is it that a congregation of the Lord Jesus is supposed to do? Believe and love is the answer. And so, how do they do this. Well, first they love each other (John 13:35), but they must also love those outside the congregation.

Again, they first love their fellow Christians. The gospel tells us that God loves us all and made us his adopted children, and so we must love one another as brothers and sisters in the same family. And just as is true in our earthly families, we may not much like each other, but we still love each other and we stand up for each other.

The church—the body of Christ—is, of course, much larger than any one congregation. We are to love the entire body of Christ. And so, there should be inter-congregational fellowships of some sort, just as your own family has the occasional family reunion or Thanksgiving dinner. Congregational autonomy is well and good, but autonomy can never divide brother from brother. After all, the family of God is forever. Even if I outlive all my earthly family and friends, I have a worldwide family that has to take me in.⁵⁹ It's a wonderful thought—never being lonely.

Of course, God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son for anyone who would believe in him (John 3:16). And God plainly wants all to be saved. Therefore, my gospel teaches me that I must want the same thing. And if that is true, I will zealously work to save the lost of the world as I have opportunity. Indeed, I'll go out of my way to make opportunity. Love demands no less.

⁵⁸ A much more thorough discussion may be found in the author's *Buried Talents*. I am aware of the verses that would give many readers pause. We will discuss more of this as we go.

⁵⁹ “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.” from Robert Frost, “Death of the Hired Man” (1914).

But my brothers and sisters—and the lost—have needs other than Jesus, and if we’re to be like the Jesus we read about in the Gospels, then we must have compassion for the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, and even those in prison. Again, love compels us. Therefore, while we certainly should share the gospel with the poor, we help them because they need our help and because we have Christ-like compassion on them, not just in order to save them.

Suddenly, the Sermon on the Mount becomes not a rule book but a vision of the heart of God. And we find the Gospels to be rich with examples of how to live a life of faith and love—and how to think and feel and do as Jesus did. In fact, we become less interested in doctrine (which remains important) and more interested in ethics. That is, if we really enjoy living a life of love, then the Sunday assembly becomes an opportunity to be with those whom I love and to be equipped to better express my love the rest of the week, rather than the drudgery of rule keeping. We become less concerned with five acts of worship and instead are overwhelmed with a desire to be spurred on toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24).

It’s time for another example. Let’s apply our principles to divorce and remarriage. Hardly the only passage, but a central one, is taken from the Sermon on the Mount—

(Matt. 5:27-32) “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.”

It’s hard to imagine a more controversial passage in current Church of Christ thinking. Many churches have split over disagreed interpretations of this one. I will not attempt a complete exposition—just a few observations.

First, this part of the Sermon on the Mount is a series of contrasts between the Law of Moses as it was understood with the Law of Moses as it should have been understood. Jesus is not legislating. How could he? He came to free us from law, not to impose new laws!

Indeed, we really have to let Jesus speak for himself—

(Matt. 5:17-18) “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

Jesus explains exactly what he is intending to do. He is not abolishing the ethical requirements of the Law of Moses—rather he is calling on his disciples to live as Moses should have always been understood.

Thus, Jesus comments on the Seventh Commandment, pointing out that his listeners all know not to commit adultery. But Jesus explains that the command is broader than just the sex act itself. If you’re married, don’t flirt with other women, don’t be infatuated with other women, don’t look at other women as sex objects, keep your thoughts pure.

Does the Seventh Commandment really teach this? Well, of course it does. How can I be free of adultery unless I am free of the things that lead to adultery? And doesn’t the command really mean that I should be faithful to my wife, and if that is so, how can I be faithful and lust after other women?

You see, Jesus calls us to a much broader view of ethics than mere rules. If we take the trouble to understand the purpose and heart behind the command, then we much better understand how to fulfill the command. And in so doing, we avoid being hyperliteral. We understand that we don’t really have to gouge out our eyes or cut off our hands. Those aren’t literal commands. They are figures of speech, and we are sure of that because we know that love truly requires us to keep our thoughts pure in order to keep our actions pure, but love doesn’t require us to maim ourselves. Hence, the love principle helps us see what the true scope of the teaching is and protects us from a Pharisaic interpretation.

Just so, in Deuteronomy 24, the Law of Moses plainly permits divorce and gives a procedure for divorce—the husband gives his former wife a document evidencing the divorce, which in turn allows her to remarry. However, the Jews had concluded that therefore divorce is not a sin. But Jesus declares that it is! How do we know? Because divorcing my wife is not a loving act. It’s not hard to see really. Jesus is not legislating a new rule; rather, he is telling us how to understand the rules that were already there.

As a result, we cannot expect to find a complete theology of divorce in this passage. Jesus is not trying to give all the answers—he’s trying to show his listeners that they have entirely missed the point of the Law of Moses. It’s not just a bunch of arbitrary rules to be obeyed—it’s about understanding the heart of God.

And just how can I know that these verses can only be parsed through the lens of love? Because Jesus says so.

(Matt. 7:12) So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

It is, of course, the Golden Rule, which we correctly paraphrase as “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” The King James Version is more accurate. Rather than “this sums up the Law and the Prophets” it translates “this **is** the law and the prophets.” What is really the Law of Moses? The Golden Rule. What is the Golden Rule? Love.

If in Jesus’ discussion on divorce he is interpreting the Law of Moses, and if the Law of Moses “is” the Golden Rule, then Jesus’ teaching on divorce must be simply the Golden Rule as applied in the context of marriage. There is no other possibility. And, if

we take Paul seriously when he repeatedly declares that the entire law is summed up in “love thy neighbor,” then we can be confident that we are reading truly.

Now I’ve not attempted a complete exposition of the Bible’s teachings on divorce, but I hope you see that whatever ethical interpretation some preacher or scholar might suggest must meet this test to be true: is the proposed interpretation not only consistent with the Golden Rule but also driven as a *necessary consequence* of the Golden Rule? If we have to suppose new laws and concepts in addition to love, we are on very questionable ground.⁶⁰

Now the result of all this is a huge simplification of Christianity. These principles are grounded in the most profound of all concepts—the gospel (hope), faith, love, the sovereignty of God—but they aren’t hard. You don’t need a Masters in Divinity to understand them. And you don’t need to carry around a library of books helping you explain away half the Bible. Rather, the Bible starts to make remarkable sense.

Of course, it takes practice and discipline to change from a legalistic mindset to a faith- and love-based mindset. And a good way to get there from here is to read Paul. Each time Paul makes an argument, look not so much at the answer he reaches but how he reaches the answer. What premises does Paul argue from? How does he apply faith, hope, and love to answer practical problems, even if he doesn’t use exactly those words?

And then ponder all the controversies that we’ve battled over during the 20th Century. Take, for example, orphanages. Does the Bible contain express language authorizing a church-supported orphanage? We’ve said no. Some have said the silence is a prohibition and others say the silence permits support as a matter of expedience. How foolish we’ve been! The Bible says to love and that congregations are to be made up of loving people who prove that they belong to Jesus by the intensity of their love. Jesus did countless miracles of healing because he had compassion for hurting people. And Jesus loved children.

Is caring for orphans loving? Does it violate the gospel? Faith? God’s sovereignty? Or does it demonstrate the fulfillment of God’s Kingdom through the body of Christ to help heal a hurting, fallen world? Doesn’t helping orphans in fact fulfill the very purpose of the entire story of God’s intervention in human history? It’s not a hard question. And then, why would we suppose that God has limited the authority of a church to do his will?

F. Sixth Principle:

Genesis 1 and 2 establish God’s model in matters of sex and marriage.

Genesis 1 and 2 show us man and woman in a sinless, ideal relationship. These chapters show us the creation of sex in a sinless world. The Biblical view of sexuality is defined by these passages. Homosexuality, fornication, and adultery are therefore wrong because they violate the sinless ideal for marriage in Genesis 2. Divorce is wrong for the

⁶⁰ I offer a much more complete interpretation of the several divorce passages in *But If You Do Marry ...*

same reason. Therefore, although homosexuality may well result in a loving relationship, it is always wrong as homosexual conduct is always contrary to the sinless perfection of Eden.

These chapters are also the basis for the Bible’s teachings on the relationships between husbands and wives within a marriage. Moreover, these are the teachings on which the New Testament’s doctrine of the role of women in the church is built.

In a number of places, Paul refers to the Creation accounts as the basis for his teachings regarding women.⁶¹ Sometimes he refers simply to the “Law,” but we understand that Jews refer to the first five books of the Old Testament as the Law—not just the Law of Moses (found primarily in Leviticus and Deuteronomy). As there is nothing in the Law of Moses commanding that women be subject or even submissive to men, we take it that Paul is referring to the Creation accounts.

Because of this, the key to finding the truth of such matters is Genesis 1-3. We must first look to Genesis and find out what God’s plan for men and women really is. Only then can we look to Paul’s references to these accounts and determine the point that Paul was intending to make. We read the Genesis accounts for the truths that are in them. And we rigorously apply those truths to every passage that deals with men and women.

Because all the lessons of Genesis 1 and 2 are so needed by the 21st Century Church, I will spend some extra time explaining how I understand them.

1. Genesis 1.

We study Genesis 1:26-28 first—

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

This passage describes God’s final creative act, occurring on the Sixth Day. What does it tell us about men and women?

1. Both are created in God’s image.
2. Both have the rule over the Creation.
3. God made man male and female.
4. Man (that is, male and female) is to be fruitful.

⁶¹ See 1 Cor. 11:8-9; 1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:13-14.

So far as can be told from this passage, there is no distinction between men and women. The passage deals with the authority of man (male and female) to rule God’s Creation, but does not give the male authority to rule the female. Not only is the female not declared to be inferior to the male, both are declared to be made in God’s image.

2. *Genesis 2.*

Genesis 2 contains a more detailed account of the creation of woman.

(Gen. 2:16-25) And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found.

So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Now, what does this teach us about males and females?

1. The male is incomplete and inadequate by himself. It is “not good” for him to be alone. Indeed, the only creation declared “not good” is Adam—until God’s creation of Eve, completing the creation of man.

2. Neither God Himself, who walked with Adam in the Garden, nor any of the animals were helpers suitable for Adam. The lesson is that man’s helper could neither be superior (God Himself) nor inferior (an animal), but rather must be flesh of his flesh.

3. God chose to make woman out of a rib. First, this teaches us that woman and man are the same flesh. God certainly could have made woman from scratch, just as he did man. But God chose to teach a lesson by making her from the identical material as Adam—Adam himself. The Jewish rabbis have taught since before the time of Christ that God’s choice of a rib is also significant. God did not make woman from Adam’s head, as though she were to rule over him, or from his feet, as though to be in subjection to him,

but from his side, to be close to him. We frequently teach this lesson in our wedding ceremonies.

Moreover, the ideal of “one flesh” is eternal as well. In the case of Adam and Eve, it means that the two were of literally identical flesh. But for us, it must mean that the husband is required by God to recognize his wife as a part of himself. He must love her as though her body were his body. He cannot treat her as an inferior or as a part of his domain.

5. Adam called Eve “woman” because she “was taken out of man.” In the Hebrew, the words for “woman” and for “man”—“*adam*” and “*adamah*”—are very similar, and Adam’s choice indicates and emphasizes the similarity between man and woman. After Eve was made, Adam referred to her as *ishshah* (woman or wife) and to himself as *ish* (man or husband) (Gen. 2:23). Again, the similarity of the names indicates their unity and similarity. In fact, Eve wasn’t called “Eve” until after the Fall (Gen. 3:20), with the new dissimilarity of the names indicating the new barrier between husbands and wives.

6. God made man before woman. Some argue that woman is subordinate to man because Adam was made before Eve. But cows and birds were made before man, and yet man (male and female) is plainly given rule over all that was created before them (Gen. 1:26). Being made second does not in and of itself indicate subordination. Rather, the lesson is that the male was incomplete—not good—until the female completed the Creation. In other words, the Creation order is from incompleteness toward increasing completeness.

7. God made woman to be a suitable helper. This concept is far too important to be passed over lightly. Many consider this verse the linchpin of their argument regarding the submission of women to men. It is, they contend, God’s designation of Eve as a helper that makes women subordinate to men for all time.

3. What Does “Helper” Really Mean?

The word translated “helper” is the Hebrew word *‘ezer*. In the vast majority of cases, *‘ezer* refers to God Himself.⁶² Indeed, God as *‘ezer* is a central element of God’s relationship with His people.

Obviously, God’s calling Eve *‘ezer* does not mean that Eve is subordinate to Adam or that women are subordinate to men. On the other hand, calling Eve “helper” certainly means that Eve was Adam’s complement. She completed what was lacking in Adam. But there is no basis in the Scriptures to find subordination or a principle of male leadership in this word.

Perhaps our difficulty in interpreting *‘ezer* can be better seen by noticing how we use “helper” in English. We speak of “mother’s little helper,” a “plumber’s helper,” being

⁶² All refer to God unless otherwise noted: Exo. 18:4; Deu. 33:7,26,29; Psa. 20:2, 33:20, 70:5, 89:19 (refers to God giving David strength (help)), 115:9-11, 121:1,2,8, 146:5; Isa. 30:5 (Egypt is not a helper like God); Ezek. 12:14 (a general’s staff); Dan. 11:34 (King of the North gives “a little help”); Hos. 13:9.

a “good helper.” In current English, “helper” carries the connotation of a subordinate—even a child.⁶³ Thus, if I were drowning, I’d call out, “Help!” But I wouldn’t refer to the person who rescued me as my “helper.” My rescuer truly helped me, but calling him “helper” would be too condescending—even belittling.

But these thoughts are utterly foreign to the Hebrew *‘ezer*. There is no condescension in the Hebrew word at all, so that “helper” (or “help meet,” as in the King James Version) is truly a clumsy translation. In other verses, *‘ezer* is used in the sense of “rescuer” or “liberator.” The word is also used in the sense of “one who fights alongside against a common foe.” “Comrade” or “ally” would come close to the sense in many contexts. Thus, the psalmist often sings that God is Israel’s help—not a mere helper—but an ally so powerful that Israel must prevail. “Complement” is the best translation I can come up with, as it indicates neither inferiority, superiority, or even equality and is true to the Hebrew.

Now *‘ezer* does have a deeper significance. God’s declaring Eve as complement means that God gave Eve a special role in relationship to the man. She is to complete, finish, and make God’s creation of man good. Clearly, therefore, a wife may not, consistent with her God-given role, belittle her husband or injure his reputation. Neither may she act as an independent agent, free of concerns for the impact of her behavior on her husband. She must act as part of a greater whole.

4. *The Curses of Eve, Adam, and Mankind.*

The subordination of women began not in Genesis 2 but in Genesis 3.

To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. *Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.*”

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ “cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

Eve. God tells Eve that her pain in childbearing will greatly increase. The significance of this cannot be understated. Until very recently, there was a very high death rate in childbearing. The pain of childbearing before modern antibiotics, sanitation, Cesarean sections, and such was many times greater than it is now.

⁶³ *Roget’s International Thesaurus* 5th ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 919, lists “subordinate” as the first choice for synonyms for “helper.” The *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1993) lists as synonyms of “helper” aid, assistant, supporter, backer, auxiliary, and ally. Of these, only “ally” does not connote inferiority.

God next curses the woman by causing her husband to rule over her. Notice these things—

1. This was a change. If Adam already had the rule over Eve in sinless Eden, why did God say He was doing this to her because of her sin? Thus, nothing in Genesis 1 or 2 can support an argument for male rule.

2. God states that *husbands* rule over *wives*—under His curse. He does not curse all women with being under the rule of all men.

3. God also states that the wife’s desire will be for her husband. This curse has been interpreted many different ways.

a. Some suggest that this refers to sexual desire, the idea being that the woman cannot avoid the pain of childbearing due to her sexual desires. But this makes sexual desire by a wife for a husband a curse, which is clearly not God’s plan. Moreover, Adam and Eve were commanded on the Sixth Day to be fruitful and multiply. Sex was a part of the plan from the beginning and is not a result of sin.

b. Others suggest that wives are cursed with wanting to do their husband’s will. But this suggestion fails for lack of evidence.

c. A third group suggests an interpretation based on the close similarity of the language of the curse to Genesis 4:7—

“If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”

In the King James Version, this verse says that “unto thee shall be [sin’s] desire, and thou shalt rule over him.” The NIV translators have paraphrased this passage to interpret “unto thee shall be his desire” to mean “it desires to have you.” Thus, in Genesis 3, the virtually identical phrasing, only a few verses away, must mean that woman’s desire for her husband is her desire to rule her husband. God is saying that although the wife may want to rule her husband, under his curse, the husband will rule the wife.⁶⁴

A result of Adam’s and Eve’s sin is strife in marriage. Both husbands and wives will want to be in charge, but in the ordinary case, the husband will succeed in ruling over his wife. And certainly the last several thousand years have proven this to be very true indeed.

Adam. God next curses Adam for his sin. Adam will be required to earn a living by the sweat of his brow, and the ground will produce thistles and thorns.

⁶⁴ Rick R. Marrs, “In the Beginning: Male and Female (Gen 1-3)” in *II Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity* (Carroll D. Osburn, ed., Joplin, Mo.: College Press Publ., 1995), 30 n. 78. Although Marrs acknowledges the strength of this argument, he rejects it as it presupposes a hierarchical view of chapter 2. *Ibid.*, 31. However, it seems that Marrs may not adequately recognize the disconnect between chapter 2 and the curse of chapter 3 caused by sin. It’s appropriate that the husband’s rule be countered by the wife’s desire for rule, as this curse then creates the antithesis of the unity described in chapter 2.

Mankind. Finally, God makes man mortal. We all die because of the sin of Adam and Eve.

5. *The Meaning of the Curses.*

Genesis 3 is known to students of the Bible as the Fall of Man. It is the account of the first sin and marks the beginning of the separation of man from God. It is exactly this separation that Jesus died to cure. Man sinned, both male and female, and therefore death came into the world. Jesus came to earth to undo the curse. Paul explains this in Romans—

(Rom. 5:12-18) Therefore, just as *sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men*, because all sinned—for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. ... For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. *Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.*

But the Fall of Man affected much more than our own mortality and our relationship with God. The entire Creation was corrupted by man’s sin.

(Rom. 8:20-23) *For the creation was subjected to frustration*, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

We see, therefore, that the curses pronounced in Genesis 3 are only examples of the complete corruption of the Creation. Everything decays. Nothing is permanent. All that is living will die. This corruption affects our marriages, our work, our childbearing, our relationships with God, and everything made.

(Eph. 4:22-24) You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being *corrupted* by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

(1 Pet. 1:22-23) Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of *perishable* seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

(2 Pet. 1:4) Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the *corruption* in the world caused by evil desires.

The italicized word in each quoted passage is from the same Greek root as “decay” found in Romans 8:22. Because of sin, Paul says in Romans that we are in bondage to decay (or corruption, or perishability). He then says in Ephesians that we had been corrupt before our salvation, but our new self is to be like God (that is, not corrupted by sin). Peter tells us in 1 Peter that by being saved we have relinquished our perishable, fleshly nature (that is, our corrupted nature) and replaced it with an imperishable nature. In 2 Peter he tells us that God gives each of us a part of his divine nature (the Holy Spirit, immortality) that allows us to escape the corruption of the world. But we know from Romans and 1 Corinthians that the corruption of the world came from the curse in Genesis 3, which followed the entry of sin into the world. Thus, we are instructed to *escape* these curses, not to impose them on one another!

We are all going to keep sinning, but we are still bound to our Lord to try to stop and to rid ourselves of sin so far as it is within our abilities.

(1 Cor. 15:21-26) For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. *The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

We see in 1 Corinthians that death, which came through Adam, is Christ’s enemy and will be the last enemy destroyed. Moreover, we see that Paul describes the corruption of Creation as the enemy of God.

Therefore, we must understand that the curses pronounced in Genesis 3 are curses and not commands—far from it. They are evidence of the decay and corruption produced by sin and the frustration Creation has been subjected to while awaiting the end of time. How then can we command our women members to obey a “command” that is not a command but a description of the consequences of sin?

This argument will surely be hard for many readers to accept, but it becomes much clearer when we consider the other curses. The man is cursed to work by the sweat of his brow. Does this mean that air conditioning is a sin, because it is contrary to God’s eternal design? Are anti-perspirants wrong? Is it wrong to use herbicides and pre-emergents to prevent the growth of weeds? Didn’t God intend that we work the fields by hand to rid them of weeds? Must all men work in the fields? Is office work a sin?

Is it a sin to use anesthesia to relieve the pain of childbearing? Or is that also part of God’s eternal plan? For that matter, why should we resist any of the world’s corruption? God corrupted it, who are we to oppose it?

I read with horror the description of the fate of Eufame MacLayne
 Eufame was a woman living in 16th century Scotland,

pregnant with twins. Her labor was complicated and very painful, and during it she requested painkilling herbs to help her deliver her babies. Births had high mortality rates in those days, but Eufame and her twins were able to come out of it alive. Unfortunately, word got out that Eufame had used painkillers. Painkillers were forbidden, said the church leaders, for it was God’s law that women suffer in childbirth. Therefore, the babies were taken from this new mother, and she was tied to a stake and burned.⁶⁵

We are quite properly repelled at the thought of punishing a laboring woman for taking painkillers. We instinctively know that pain in childbirth is a curse, not a command, and a curse that we are free to overcome. But we can’t consistently reject the views of the 16th Century Scottish church and at the same time insist that Genesis 3:16 commands husbands to rule over their wives.

Adam and Eve corrupted the world, not God, and we are God’s children charged with working to undo the curse. We do this by bringing others to Jesus to escape the curse of death, by alleviating suffering, by struggling against the corruption of this world any way we can—and this certainly includes doing so within our marriages. We are compelled as Christians to work to rid our marriages of sin, including the quest for dominion over our spouse, and to rid our churches of sin as well.

At this point, many readers will wonder how this interpretation of Genesis can be reconciled with New Testament passages on the role of women. We certainly don’t believe that Paul or any other Bible author contradicts the lessons of Genesis 1, 2, and 3. But the meaning of the curses pronounced in Genesis 3 is plain. They simply are not commands, and should not be taught as commands. If the curse of a husband’s dominion over his wife is a command, then so are the other curses, and we should deny our wives painkillers in childbirth. We can’t have it both ways. Because Genesis 3 is a curse on Creation when we study the Fall of Man, it is a curse when we study the role of women.

6. Conclusion.

I’ve perhaps spent too much space in explaining my understanding of Genesis 1-3, but the impact of these verses is far greater than just the current controversy regarding the role of women. In fact, Genesis 1 and 2 give the model for godly sexual conduct. Hence, adultery, fornication, bestiality, and homosexuality are all wrong because they violate Genesis 1 and 2—which define sinless sex—even if the premarital or homosexual sex is a very loving relationship.

Of course, Genesis 1 and 2 occurred in a sinless world and so set the pattern for husbands and wives. Hence, when the Scriptures discuss divorce, they refer to Genesis 1

⁶⁵ Jo-Ann Tsang (1996), <http://falcon.cc.ukans.edu/~luthien/fem/fem8.html>, quoting Gundry, P. “Why We’re Here” in *Women, Authority, and the Bible* (Alvera Mickelson, ed., Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press, 1986).

and 2. And we’ve often missed the point because we’ve so often misread these important passages.

As Jesus declares in Matthew 19, God meant for husbands and wives to be one flesh, and so divorce is always a sin. However, so is the dominance of women by men or wives by husbands. To have truly healthy marriages (and churches), we have to return to the sinless ideal of Genesis 1 and 2 and stop defending what we do and teach from Genesis 3.

One other thought. Nothing in Genesis justifies hatred of homosexuals. I mean, we should no more despise a sexually active homosexual couple than a sexually active unmarried couple. Both violate Genesis 1 and 2 and God’s will, but neither is inherently more evil than the other.

Now I strongly object to the recent efforts of many to change Western culture to accept homosexuality as equivalent to heterosexuality, but I also object to the effort to accept sex between unmarried heterosexuals as equivalent to sex between husband and wife. It’s just that we’ve already lost the culture war against “shacking up,” while the cultural battle regarding homosexuality is still being fought. But despite the fact that the media and church periodicals are pounding the battle drums on homosexuality, homosexuals remain people who are fallen and who need to be loved and brought into God’s grace.

Unfortunately, the Christian community has lost much of its credibility when we claim to love the sinner and hate the sin, as we long stood silent while homosexuals were, quite literally, brutalized, beaten, and treated as less than human. We are, however, slowly coming to a more balanced, gracious attitude. I am still touched by the reaction of a local Church of Christ when their long-time preacher, a married man, was arrested for homosexual solicitation, resulting in a much-discussed newspaper story.

The preacher resigned and, the next Sunday, came forward in the assembly to confess his sin. Virtually the entire congregation came up afterwards, showered him with hugs and love. Several members said, “You were there when my husband and I were near divorce, and we’re not about to desert you now.” Forgiveness. Love. Grace. Hope. Christianity lived as Jesus lived. The preacher remains a member of that church to this day.

It is a very sad commentary on the Churches that we have often allowed our worldliness to hold us back on cultural issues when we should have been at the forefront. We were—and remain—slow to racially integrate our churches. During the civil rights struggles of the 1960’s, most of the Churches were segregationist in practice if not in doctrine. We reflected the Southern culture in which we lived. There were notable exceptions, going back to even pre-Civil War times, but we did not comport ourselves well on the race issue. No one could seriously argue that we treated our black brothers and sisters as called for by the gospel and by love. And yet, Genesis 1 and 2 plainly teach that all men are children of Adam and Eve, made and loved by God.

This hardly means that we should now go running after every fashionable social issue—just that we can’t trust our culture to guide our doctrine. We have to live as

strangers in a strange land and be true to our principles, even when society rejects us for doing so.

**G. Seventh Principle:
Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are given
to teach us about our relationship with God and each other.**

This is the last principle we will discuss in any detail. There are more, of course, but these strike me as the most important, and seven seems like a good biblical number.

I was not expecting to find this as an important principle, but as I read Paul’s arguments in particular, I am struck at how many times he refers to baptism or the Lord’s Supper as instructive for our behavior in other contexts. Paul argues *from* these while we argue *about* these. Surely this fact alone tells us how far removed we are from the apostolic mindset.

An obvious example of Paul’s use of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as instructive in other contexts relates to the division among the Christians in Corinth—

(1 Cor. 1:12-15) What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name.

(1 Cor. 10:16-17) Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

In both passages we see Paul accepting baptism or the Lord’s Supper as normative for all Christians—not an optional practice that some may or may not accept—and thus available to build arguments from.

In both cases, Paul builds a case for unity from these two distinctive institutions (Alexander Campbell’s term). We are all baptized into Christ, and thus we all belong to one person who is not divided. Therefore, we cannot let ourselves be divided. We all share in the cup and loaf of communion, and so, again, we are an indivisible one.

Hence, these practices have meanings much deeper and richer than just the commands to be baptized and to take communion. Indeed, they’re barely even about commands. If we don’t see the larger truths behind the commands, then mere obedience to the commands is of little consequence. God has no interest in seeing us get wet for the sake of wetness! And eating some bread and drinking a sip of grape juice is hardly valuable for its own sake. It’s not much of a meal. Rather, the fact that we take a common meal with our brothers and sisters reminds us of the community we’ve been added to and all that Jesus did for us so that we could be part of that community.

However, neither baptism nor communion is a “work” as neither has intrinsic merit. We are not more moral because of taking communion or submitting to baptism, and we can’t chew and sip our way into heaven.

The Churches of Christ, however, have incomplete theologies of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We tend to see them in terms of something to be obedient to rather than an opportunity to participate in what they symbolize. We take great pride in honoring these practices as they did in the First Century—which is a very good thing—but we fail to give them the full significance that they had in the First Century.

For example, our persistence in division plainly denies the unity that both symbolize. And many of us deny the full power of the grace that both evidence. For example,

(Rom. 6:4-8,23) We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will **certainly** also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that **we will also live with him**.

... For the wages of sin is death, but the **gift** of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6, which is all one discussion, deals primarily with Christian ethics, living a life freed from sin because of the meaning of our baptism. But intrinsic to that message is the fact that our baptism shows us that we will live again just as Jesus lived again. Our salvation is a matter of confidence in the final result because of our confidence in what God did for Jesus in the resurrection, and our certainty that we share in the resurrection is amply evidenced by baptism. Indeed, just as baptism was given freely, so is eternal life. If it’s a gift, then we can’t earn it! We all earn damnation, but we’re given salvation.

H. Conclusion and an Example

These principles I suggest are formed in the very heart of Christianity. I could multiply examples, but I hope the point is made. This is how inspired men reason about God and his Kingdom, and so this is how we should reason as well.

Let me offer a lengthy example from 1 Corinthians 14 of how I see all this working together. This chapter tellingly contrasts how Paul reasons compared to how we’ve traditionally reasoned.

When the Corinthian church presented Paul with an assembly in which members spoke in tongues, prophesied, and often acted irresponsibly, Paul explained how to tell what is appropriate conduct in the assembly—

(1 Cor. 14:2-5) For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he

utters mysteries with his spirit. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their **strengthening, encouragement and comfort**. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies **edifies** the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be **edified**.

Paul doesn't ask whether prophecy or speaking in tongues is authorized or one of the approved five acts of worship. He doesn't wonder whether the Scriptures are silent on tongues in the assembly. He only asks whether they edify (build up) the church or otherwise strengthen, encourage, or comfort the church. He later explains that tongue speaking is permitted if a translator is present, as the translator makes the tongue speaking edifying. Otherwise, it is not. Hence, tongue speaking is not inherently authorized or unauthorized. The test is edification, and so if it edifies, it is authorized.

Well, if Paul meant what he said when he stated that “the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” and that the entire law is fulfilled by “Love your neighbor,” then this is precisely the outcome that we'd expect. Pragmatically speaking, does the proposed act accomplish our loving purpose in assembling as Christians? If it edifies, strengthens, encourages, comforts, or in other words, spurs on toward love and good works (Heb. 10:24), then it does what God called Christians to assemble to do, and so it's authorized.

Now, there's one more standard we read about in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25—

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”

Our assemblies must respect the needs of the unbelieving visitor. If we are to be a loving people, then we will certainly love the lost, and so we won't do things in the assembly that drive such people from God. Rather, we will conduct ourselves in such a manner that even the lost will see the presence of God, because the gospel and love for our lost neighbors demand nothing less.

Finally, as Paul is concluding his discussion on worship, almost as an afterthought, he states,

(1 Cor. 14:33b-35) As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

Traditionally, we've interpreted this verse by figuring that Paul's reference to “the Law” is a reference to Genesis 3:16, which declares that husbands are to rule their wives. However, once we get the overarching narrative right, we realize that Genesis 3:16 is a

part of a curse on Creation, resulting from sin, which Jesus died to help us overcome. Genesis 3:16 is hardly a sound basis for Christian conduct.

Failing that, we tend to say, “It’s just a rule,” and then try to obey it. But the “just a rule” approach contradicts the essence of the gospel. Jesus died to save us from law, not to enact a whole new set of laws. Fortunately, we have some more tools in our hermeneutical tool belt to ascertain what Paul is really saying here.

First, requiring women to be silent in Christian assemblies has nothing to do with the overarching story or the gospel. As Galatians 3:26 plainly teaches, arbitrary gender distinctions contradict the gospel.

Second, this conclusion is hardly driven by God’s sovereignty. Certainly God has the authority to make this or any other rule he chooses, but this is not consistent with the personality of God as revealed in other Scriptures. God himself appointed Deborah as a judge in Israel—she commanded the leader of the Lord’s armies and settled disputes among the people. She was hardly silent. Just so, Anna was a prophetess who told people about Jesus in the temple courts. She wasn’t required to be silent. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul teaches lessons about women who were praying and prophesying in the assembly. It’s hard to imagine someone prophesying silently! And 1 Corinthians 12 teaches that the Spirit gives each Christian gifts as he wills and that God expects those gifts to be exercised. Thus, what we know of God from other passages strongly suggests that appropriately gifted women be allowed to speak in the assembly, as was plainly happening in 1 Corinthians 11.

The lessons we learn from baptism and the Lord’s Supper all point toward unity and acceptance, not toward drawing an artificial distinction based on gender. Women are equally invited to the baptism and the communion table.

Faith hardly supports silencing women. Women are equally invited to accept the gospel and receive the identical blessing from the gospel as men.

And so we come to love. What would be a loving reason that a woman might be urged to be silent in the assembly? Let’s remember, Paul’s entire discussion is not the issuance of a series of arbitrary laws but careful reasoning from the simple principle that it’s okay to do what edifies and not okay to do that which doesn’t. Surely, Paul is saying that at that time and in that place, women speaking does not edify. And we notice the reason that Paul gives: women speaking is “disgraceful”! This is not about permanent rules of right and wrong but what in the local culture might disgrace the church. Surely, loving women would not want to bring disgrace to the congregation. But is it inherently disgraceful for a woman to speak? Plainly not, based on my experience. I’ve heard far more disgraceful things said by men in church than by women, actually.

And Paul gives a subtle but important clue as to why their conduct was considered disgraceful. “If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home” Paul doesn’t suggest that the women ask the speaker in private or outside

the meeting room, but that they ask their “own” husbands and then at home. Clearly, the shame was in a woman inquiring of another woman’s husband.⁶⁶

By reading as I have suggested, we can get very far in our interpretation long before we have to turn to the commentaries and history books for help. In fact, if we have the mind of Christ, then we should instinctively know that God doesn’t despise or look down on women—whom he created. And if we realize that Paul is driven by applying love to the facts at hand, we are forced to look for a loving interpretation. This approach completely disallows the “it’s just a rule” approach. It’s not just a rule—it’s an example of how sometimes women must give up their freedom found in the gospel out of love for the lost.

So now we can look at the history books and see what might drive this disgrace. Osburn quotes the Grecian historian Plutarch, a near contemporary of Paul: “Not only the arm but the voice of a modest woman ought to be kept from the public, and she should feel shame at being heard, as at being stripped. . . . She should speak either to, or through, her husband.”⁶⁷ Plainly, in the local culture, it was considered scandalous for a married woman to speak in public—especially to the husband of another woman. To have done so, then, would have violated the wife’s obligation to her husband as a suitable helper (or complement) by shaming him—a very unloving (not to mention unhelpful) thing. And a visitor, unaware of the new relationship between men and women granted in the gospel, would have been scandalized.

This interpretation is thus consistent with the great principles of the Bible—indeed, it is a necessary consequence of them as applied in First Century Corinth. This interpretation makes sense from a spiritual standpoint.

And this is not surprising. We aren’t trying to explain away the passage. Rather we realize that the passage cannot contradict the essential nature of God and will not be just an arbitrary rule to be obeyed for fear of hell.

Notice that we were on notice that the traditional interpretation—that women may never speak in the assembly—couldn’t be right long before we searched history or the commentaries for guidance. That interpretation has to be wrong because it diminishes God’s creation of women in his own image and as the completion of man. Plainly, one lesson of the creation of Eve in Genesis is that “it is not good for the man to be alone.” Why should it be good for men to be alone in church and nowhere else?

The Bible does not use silence as an interpretive principle, nor authority, nor five acts of worship, nor tests of fellowship, nor marks of the church, nor binding examples. Nothing is just a rule. God is never arbitrary. Rather, the teachings of the New Testament follow logically and sensibly from a few simple premises, and the New Testament makes no secret of this. In fact, the Scriptures themselves tell us how they are to be read

⁶⁶ The “own” is missing in the KJV but plainly present in the Greek.

⁶⁷ Plutarch, *Conjugal Precepts* 31, quoted by Carroll D. Osburn, *Women in the Church—Refocusing the Discussion* (Abilene, Tex.: Restoration Perspectives, 1994).

And so, let’s reason as they reasoned in the First Century. Indeed, what would be the point of claiming to be the First Century church restored if don’t read and interpret Scripture and reason about God’s inspired Word as they did in the First Century?

Discussion questions—

1. Are hermeneutics really important? Reflect on the Bible lessons you’ve been taught over the years. How have hermeneutics, implicit or explicit, influenced your interpretation of Scripture?

2. Compare the author’s approach to hermeneutics with the traditional Church of Christ hermeneutics focusing on (i) commands, inferences, and binding examples, (ii) requirement of authority, (iii) prohibitive silences, (iv) authority from expedience, and (v) five acts of worship. Which approach is truer to the heart of Christ? Which approach derives more from the Scriptures themselves? Which approach is easier to apply?

3. Have our traditional hermeneutics been consistent with a correct understanding of Spirit and grace, faith and love?

4. What did Paul mean when he declared the gospel “of first importance”?

5. Does “the story” of the Bible provide a helpful starting point for Bible study? Does the author’s “simplistic” outline of the story bring any fresh insights to you?

6. What does the author mean by referring to God as “sovereign”? Why do you suppose his caption says “and we’re not”? Do we ever act as though we are sovereign? Has this ever affected our interpretation of Scripture?

7. Do the faith and love approaches help you understand any particular Scriptures better?

8. What lessons can we learn from the institutions of baptism and the Lord’s Supper?

9. The author’s discussion of Genesis 1-3 is rather lengthy and detailed. Do you really think that these verses are the basis for the sexual and marriage standards found in the New Testament? How do these chapters address homosexuality? Fornication?

EPILOGUE

WHAT IS TRUTH?

This is hard stuff. It took me years to get comfortable enough with my thoughts on Galatians to share them. And I can't tell you how many times I've rewritten the material on hermeneutics. How can the honest reader be certain that I've told the truth? I'll suggest a few tests to apply, and maybe they'll help.

A. The “Know Thy Enemy” Test

Does the author really understand the arguments of his opponents? Has he taken the trouble to read their works and even quote and cite them in footnotes? And does he stereotype and caricature his opponents or does he try to really understand them?

I routinely read the writings of those who disagree with me. I look for works by the smartest, most articulate of my opponents. And I check them to see if I can answer all their arguments and whether my understanding more nearly fits the verses and words than do theirs. I've not had space to answer all the opposing arguments in this book. That would be an incredibly tedious exercise, and so I've just given a few examples of how I answer what other writers say. But believe me, I've done my homework, I can argue the other side as well as my adversaries, and I know why their positions are wrong.

I hope the effort shows, and hope I've been honest in reporting my opponents' views. Of course, there are virtually infinite variations in positions, and I can hardly report them all. And so, I tend to refer to those who are more extreme. Unfortunately, those at the extreme right increasingly speak for more of our number.

B. The Crossword Puzzle Test.

When you are trying to understand something complicated, it's hard to hold it all in your head at once. The temptation is to focus on something simple that you really understand, something familiar, and ignore the rest. Thus, when we study presidential candidates, it's next to impossible to know everything they stand for. And so we tend to pick based on political party, whether he seems like a regular guy, whether he seems to care, or even how he looks. It's the way we are. However, it's a pitiful way to pick a president. It's an even worse way to interpret the Bible.

I've said a lot, and some of it may be wrong. But don't judge based on some bit of my text that you happen to feel strongly about. Rather, think of Biblical truth as like a crossword puzzle. There are a great many Bible questions that you might think of as blanks to complete in a puzzle. And just as is true in a crossword puzzle, the answer to one question affects your answer to several other questions. But once you get one question right, several other questions suddenly become much easier to answer.

In many crossword puzzles, the key is to find one or two really long words. When you finally get one of these words that run the width of the puzzle, you sometimes realize that there's a corner of the puzzle that you totally missed. You had a 6 by 6 grid completely filled out and you felt just brilliant for having it solved, only to learn that your new long word doesn't match any of your earlier answers. You have to start the 6 by 6

grid all over. You’re simultaneously thrilled at finding the long word and angry at having to re-solve a part of the puzzle that you’d spent hours on. But the next time you try it, the 6 by 6 grid is a lot easier than the first time, and you realize that you were really rationalizing some of your earlier answers.

Just so, in a complex body of truth, some truths are more important—longer—than others and affect just about all the other truths. God’s sovereignty, faith, hope, and love are “long” teachings. If you get them wrong, all the rest is rationalization. But if you get them right, the other blanks get much easier to fill in. It may take you a while to learn to rethink how you were approaching the clues, but soon enough your answers come as fast as you can write.

I can only speak for myself. As I worked through the verses and prepared the materials for this book, I increasingly found that I understood more and more verses and had to explain away fewer and fewer verses. I could pick up a random New Testament passage and it would make sense without my having to pick up a commentary. In fact, each new passage glowed with new insights and enriched my prior understanding. The hardest part of writing this was deciding where to stop!

But before I started, there were countless passages that I just couldn’t fit into my view of the Bible. I was constantly turning to commentaries, not to understand verses, but to have them rationalized away. And I couldn’t remember the rationalizations any longer than I held the commentary.

Those old passages that I had tried to explain away are now some of my favorites. Verses that were utter nonsense at the beginning are now portals into the mind of Christ. And now I read the Bible because of the utter joy it gives me—not out of duty or discipline.

And so, here’s a test: do my teachings help answer lots of questions? Do they explain verses rather than explaining them away? Do I honestly confront what the verses say or do I assume to be true what I only wish to be true? Does it all fit together as a consistent whole? And, again, do these teachings bring you closer to the mind of Christ?

You shouldn’t much care if I’ve been true to our Restoration heritage (I have been to most of it but not all of it), whether preacher so-and-so agrees, or whether someone has called such things “liberal” or “heresy.” The only thing that matters is, first, whether the teachings match the great themes of the Bible, and second, whether they match the particular chapters and verses. And maybe there are some passages that don’t seem to match up to you, but the real test is whether my explanation matches the themes and verses *better* than my opponents’.

After all, those who disagree must withstand the very same scrutiny that I do. No one is to be *presumed* true. The Scriptures say to test the spirits (1 John 4:1-2), and I urge that you do just that. Test me. Test those who disagree. And use the same standard each time.

Now, I know I’ve not answered all the questions. Occasionally I refer you to another book to help fill in some blanks. But then, I don’t claim to have all the answers.

C. Ockham’s Razor

How do we choose between competing theories when we are trying to explain an observation? Which one is better?

Our choices of scientific theories are often guided by “Ockham’s razor”, or the doctrine of simplicity. This principle is named after William of Ockham who said in the 14th century “It is vain to do with more what can be done with fewer,” which we take to mean: “Why assume that things are complex if a simple theory can explain all of the observations?” We scientists are guided by a deeply held conviction that there exist very simple laws, which we can discover, governing the behavior of much of the universe. Things are simple, we feel, if only we can look at them in the right way.

—David Harry Grinspoon.⁶⁸

Nature has a simplicity and therefore a great beauty.

—Richard Feynman.⁶⁹

It is more important to have beauty in one’s equations than to have them fit experiment It seems that if one is working from the point of view of getting beauty in one’s equations, and if one has really a sound insight, one is on a sure line of progress.

—Paul Dirac.⁷⁰

The beauty in the laws of physics is the fantastic simplicity that they have What is the ultimate mathematical machinery behind it? That’s surely the most beautiful of all.

—J. A. Wheeler.⁷¹

In our search for ultimate truth, we have to spend just a little time looking at the rest of God’s self-revelation. God reveals his nature not only in Scripture but also in the Creation. And the more we learn about Creation, the more we see something of the essential nature of God.

(Job 12:7-9) “But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it

⁶⁸ <http://faculty.washington.edu/jpurdy/465/ockham.html>. Excerpted from *Venus Revealed* (Perseus Press, 1998). Grinspoon is a planetary scientist. The book is a scientific tome about the planet Venus. William of Ockham (or Occam) was a medieval monk who is often credited with “the law of parsimony,” that is, the simplest answer is usually the correct one. This is considered a foundational principle of modern science.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Paul Davies, *God & the New Physics* (New York: Touchstone 1983), 218.

⁷⁰ Paul Dirac, “The evolution of the physicist’s picture of nature,” *Scientific American* (May 1963).

⁷¹ Quoted in P. Buckley & F. D. Peat, *A Question of Physics: Conversations in Physics & Biology* (MIT Press 1983), 60.

will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this?”

(Rom. 1:18-20) The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

I could quote many other verses all to the effect that God reveals his nature through his Creation. Now, as we believe that God created the universe from nothing, and created *all* of it, and didn’t just influence its creation, then the more fundamental our understanding of nature, the closer we get to the heart of God himself.

Thus, it is hardly surprising that mathematicians, physicists, astronomers, and cosmologists find themselves in awe of the beauty, elegance, and simplicity of the laws that undergird all of nature. And this is so much true that some of the most successful scientists in history, from Newton, to Einstein, to Hawkings, actually consider beauty, elegance, and simplicity to be hallmarks of ultimate truth—even more important than experimental evidence! Indeed, more than one atheistic scientist has been persuaded that a personal intelligence must be behind the universe because of the beauty and subtlety of it all.⁷²

So what does this have to do with Biblical truth? Everything. You see, we learn from nature that nothing is “just because.” Rather, as Isaac Newton first observed, planets don’t revolve around the sun “just because,” but due to a remarkably elegant set of simple laws of motion and gravity. And with this observation began all of science. Science was invented by the rejection of the “just because” idea and the acceptance that there must be simple, beautiful answers beneath what we see.

And if this is the nature of God in his creation, then it is also his nature when he reveals himself to accomplish our salvation. We don’t assemble on Sundays “just because”—we assemble to encourage one another to maintain our commitment to the Lordship of Jesus, because it’s hard to live as spiritual people in a carnal world. We meet to be reminded of the gospel, because the gospel tells us how to live, how to relate to one another, how to view ourselves and the world. We meet because we love each other and want to be with each other.

We teach the lost about Jesus because hell is real and our hearts ache for the countless lost souls of this world. If we were never commanded to teach the world about Jesus, we’d do it anyway, because we know what would happen to the lost if we didn’t and we can’t help but be people of compassion.

⁷² For example, Paul Davies, *The Mind of God* (New York: Touchstone, 1992). This is a marvelous book of great depth and insight but not for the mathematically faint of heart.

Our treatment of women is driven by respect for the very image of God impressed on all of us, by the gifts given to each of us by Spirit, and the acceptance of women through the gospel on the very same terms as men.

Try as we might, it's just not complicated. There are just a few simple precepts that drive everything, and when we view them with spiritual eyes, we see incredible beauty, elegance, and simplicity. The hard part—the complicated part—is ridding ourselves of our earthly preconceptions that it's about guilt, law, and our own accomplishment. It's hard to drive out arrogance. It's hard to accept a gift when we want to earn our salvation. It's hard to accept our utter unworthiness. It's hard not to feel superior to our fellowman. It's great fun to feel superior. But it's complete joy to feel accepted as we really are, not as we pretend to be.

Am I writing the truth? How can we tell when the Bible seems so complicated? Ask this: does my teaching derive from a simple, elegant, beautiful core set of elemental truths from which all else derives? Or is it a long list of arbitrary “just because” rules?

God is not a trickster, burying secretly coded laws and rules in his Scriptures so that he can trap the unwary. Rather, God speaks plainly to those with spiritual minds. To make it all abundantly clear, he gave us Jesus, who embodied all the truths of Christianity. Faith, hope, and love. Father, Son, and Spirit. The church. Baptism. The Lord's Supper. Male and female. Simple, elegant, beautiful.

D. Foremost and Hardest Test.

The Gospel of John speaks much about truth and in a way that is very significant for this study. Indeed, truth forms an oft-overlooked theme of the book. Take these verses, for example—

(John 3:5) Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”

(John 4:23-24) “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

(John 6:47) “I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life.”

(John 8:32) “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

(John 14:6) Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

(John 16:13) “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.”

(John 18:37-38) “You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

“What is truth?” Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him.”

If this were a red-letter Bible, nearly every word would be in red. In Jesus’ vocabulary, “truth” is that he is the Son of God, that he is the only path to salvation, and that knowing this truth will set you free. Truth is not just anything that is logically true—it is the truth about Jesus and how salvation comes through him. Truth is the gospel.

Have I written the truth? Not just logical truth, but real, supernatural, God-given truth? Does what I write derive from Jesus and his nature? Is it about faith in the Truth Giver? Is it testimony about Jesus? Is it from God?

So far as I’m concerned, this is the only test of Biblical truth that matters.

Theologies that rely on faith in doctrine rather than faith in the person Jesus are error. Theologies that rely on knowledge of propositions rather than knowledge of God are error. Doctrines and knowledge matter, but only to the extent they point to God and Jesus, and they are error if they stand between us and God.

I hope you’ve been benefited by this. I especially hope that I’ve helped you share in the joy that only God gives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Guin grew up in northwest Alabama where he learned both the joys and tribulations of the Churches of Christ first hand. He attended David Lipscomb College (now University) in Nashville, majoring in mathematics. At Lipscomb he met, wooed, and married his wife Denise.

After college, Jay attended the University of Alabama Law School in Tuscaloosa, where he began attending the University Church of Christ. He was graduated in 1975. After clerking for a federal judge for a year, Jay returned to Tuscaloosa (and the University Church of Christ) to practice law, founding his own firm, Tanner & Guin, in 1984.

Jay has been very active in church, as a deacon and in leading the effort to merge his congregation with the Alberta Church of Christ, the relocation of the congregation, and two major building programs.

During this time, Jay has for many years led the congregation’s adult education program and taught virtually every Sunday morning (and many Wednesday nights) for 25 years. Jay wrote *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace* in 1994. Jay became an elder in 2003.

Jay and Denise have four sons, two of whom are students at Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas.

Nothing in this book represents the official or received position of the eldership of the University Church of Christ—Jay speaks for himself only.