

The Gospel of the Kingdom:

For Those With Ears to Hear

Neil Girard



Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church.

Table of Contents

Introduction	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/00intro.pdf
Section I: The Big Picture	
1. Kingdom Now?	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/01kn.pdf
2. Through the Looking Glass	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/02ttl.pdf
3. Why Do We Meet	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/03wdwm.pdf
4. Simplicity in Christ	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/04sic.pdf
5. Saints or Sinners	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/05sors.pdf
6. The Standard of Perfection	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/06tsop.pdf
7. The Call for Unity	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/07tcfu.pdf
8. Kingdom or Church?	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/08koc.pdf
9. Come Out From Among Them	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/09cofat.pdf
Section II: The King Is Here	
10. The Kingdom of God Is at Hand	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/10tkogiah.pdf
11. Presenting the King	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/11pkt.pdf
12. Opening Spiritual Ears	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/12ose.pdf
13. The Voice of Strangers	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/13tvos.pdf
14. Strong Delusion	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/14strongdel.pdf
15. The Right Answer	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/15tra.pdf
16. A Picture of the Kingdom	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/16apotk.pdf
17. Friends of the King	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/17fotk.pdf
18. Enemies of the King	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/18eotk.pdf
Section III: Choosing Sides	
19. The Keys of the Kingdom	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/19tkotk.pdf
20. The Message of the Kingdom	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/20motk.pdf
21. The Eternal Gospel	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/21teg.pdf
22. The Two Step Gospel	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/22tsg.pdf
23. The Test of Obedience	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/23testofobed.pdf
24. Who Is My Neighbor?	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/24wimn.pdf
25. In the Way	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/25itw.pdf
26. The True Tabernacle	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/26truetab.pdf
27. What Do You Seek?	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/27wdys.pdf
Section IV: Pressing On	
28. Provision, Power and Presumption	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/28ppap.pdf
29. Whose Kingdom Is It Anyway?	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/29wkia.pdf
30. Pressing Into the Kingdom	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/30pik.pdf
31. The Kingdom Is the Key	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/31tkitk.pdf
32. Still Close at Hand	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/32scah.pdf
33. Ephesians: Paul's Time Capsule	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/33eptc.pdf
34. Follow Me	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/34fm.pdf
35. Furthering the Kingdom	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/35ftk.pdf
36. Triumphant Overcoming	http://paidionbooks.org/girrard/tgotk/36to.pdf

Introduction

Some years ago I encountered an anonymously quoted observation:

“Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church.”

Over the years, I have written many articles and published them on the paidionbooks.org website that have explored this observation. After the Lord put it on my heart to compile these articles into a book, I discovered that this observation was made by a French Roman Catholic priest named Alfred Loisy (1857-1940) who was excommunicated by the Roman Catholic “Church” in 1908.

Other than this one observation, Loisy’s life, history and theology has absolutely nothing to do with this book in any way. Rather, this book is an exploration of the New Testament as viewed through the “focal lens” of the kingdom of God, a focal lens that exposes the fallacies and deceptions that have crept in and been incorporated into our ideas and practices about seeking and following Christ and God. These writings are not merely intellectual teachings derived from the study of the New Testament but are spiritual truths as opened up and revealed by the Spirit of truth.

This book explores the characteristics of the three entities Loisy’s observation brings into view: the kingdom of God, the ekklesia and the “church.” That is:

- Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, *but*
- the ekklesia took the preeminence, and *then*
- “church” replaced ekklesia.

If we gain any clearer understanding of this huge picture, then we will be in a better condition to truly co-labor with Christ and God in furthering *His* kingdom.

If this book has any purpose it would be for the liberation of the sons of the kingdom from

- the traditions of men and the doctrines of demons,
- the perceived need to practice things that in reality are merely false religion,
- the false notion that we have no other options than to either submit or rebel against the “church” (when we can just forsake it and be true ekklesia),
- the dual streams of power that attend so many of those who seek God in the context of “church.”

Any book that attempts to be any kind of “definitive work” on the kingdom of God faces some very serious obstacles and large difficulties:

- First, is the book to be a “tour guide” to the vast country that is the kingdom of God, a spiritual realm that incorporates “mountaintops,” “valleys,” “rivers,” “oceans,” “plains,” and “desert wildernesses.” The kingdom of God resists being reduced to mere definitions and simple formulas but instead can only be experienced by obediently following the King.

- Second, is the book to be a “practical guide” to participating in the kingdom of God, a “manifesto” as it were? The New Testament is already God’s “manifesto” and no part of it can be safely cut away and remain a true representation of the kingdom of God. The genuine seeker of truth is encouraged to spend more time reading the Scriptures (as illumined by the Spirit of truth and not just by one’s soulish or carnal intellect) than any book, even this one!

- Third, is the book to be merely an intellectual’s “defense” of the kingdom of God in contrast to other, especially “church,” “theology.” Such a defense must include elements of church history, doctrinal and theological standings as well as spiritual enlightenment and revelation – subjects many readers are woefully and inadequately prepared to delve into. Make no mistake – the gospel of the kingdom is the core message of the New Testament and it will withstand all the human and demonic assaults and criticisms against it, no matter what title or position the critic and opponent of the truth has taken unto him or herself. But such a work could become a tome in and of itself.

- Fourth, is the book to be a historical treatise of how the kingdom of God was changed first into ekklesia and then into “church”? This would require diving deeply into church history, a subject many people rightly find very confusing and even repulsive to their faith in Christ and God.

- Fifth, in a day and age when most people seem to want to deny the depths of the human “disease” of sin and carnality and demand simple remedies and superficial instructions, is it even possible to write a book of such depth that is still palatable to many, even spiritual, current-day readers?

- And sixth, is it even possible to compile all these things into one book (other than the New Testament!)?

This book is my effort to do something of all of these things simultaneously and still place before you, the reader, a valuable resource of kingdom views and their Scriptural basis.

The many Scripture references from which the ideas of this book are drawn are provided for two reasons:

- 1) so that those unfamiliar with the New Testament can readily find the source and

2) so that those who think themselves familiar with the Scriptures might look again and seek the Spirit of truth as to whether they have only read and understood these verses through merely soulish or carnal eyes.

If you find this tedious or distracting, please know that my motive is to work against the overall Scriptural and spiritual ignorance that seems to prevail in many places.

The gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all people. (Mt. 24:14) This book is merely a precursor to the fullness of what is coming. It is my fervent prayer and desire, beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, that this book will prove a useful tool in your further explorations into this realm that is your spiritual right and inheritance.

In His love,

Neil Girrard
January , 2016

Section I: The Big Picture

1. Kingdom Now?

There are some, like the Pharisees of old, who foolishly believe that there could be no kingdom of God on earth unless Messiah personally and physically sits on a throne in Jerusalem. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees, saying, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.” (Lk. 17:20-21) Those who insist on having a Messiah on a throne in Jerusalem before they will embrace the kingdom of God will one day find they have ultimately bowed to Satan. (2 Ths. 2:4)

There are others who, in complete contrast yet equally foolishly, believe it is their responsibility to “build the kingdom” and have it in such a state of readiness that the Messiah need only return and take over the “reins of their government.” Such as these will undoubtedly and excitedly turn over these “reins” to anyone who seems to match their expectations and who seems to be, at least to them, the “right” Messiah and these will also ultimately bow down and serve Satan thinking they are serving God. (Jn. 16:2)

When we examine the New Testament, we find that these views, as foolish as they are in their extremities, have elements of truth embedded within their tangled webs of deception and over-emphasis on particular points. Jesus plainly taught His disciples to pray (Lk. 11:1-2) and plainly told His disciples to routinely and regularly pray that God’s kingdom, His will, would come on earth as it is in heaven. (Mt. 6:10, Lk. 11:2) Those “theologians” who would split “the fine hairs” between the will of God and the kingdom of God in this instruction have lost sight of what a kingdom is, a definition that can be found in any common dictionary – a realm or region where the will and wishes *of the king* are performed by the subjects and citizens of that realm or region.

Loisy’s is an accurate and important observation to make – that Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God but it was the “church” that came into prominence. When Jesus came, He did not discuss the “church.” In the first place, “church” is an English word that did not come into existence until some 1500 years after He was gone! But even the word that is poorly translated as “church” (Greek *ekklesia* [1577]) is not likely to have been used by Jesus. Consider that the Greek word *ekklesia* is found in only *one* gospel, occurring only *three* times in *two* verses (Mt. 16:18, 18:17) and on this scant basis, some “theologians” have made ridiculous statements that “the church” is therefore a dominant theme in Matthew’s gospel! But the reality is that there is no evidence anywhere that Jesus ever spoke any Greek. Perhaps He knew a few simple words and phrases but as one sent only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 15:24), Greek studies would not likely have been very high in His priorities. (also see Jn. 7:15) When Jesus said these two sayings as recorded in Matthew, He almost certainly spoke them in Aramaic and probably used a word that would be more accurately translated as “temple,” a picture Paul later used as well. (1 Cor. 3:16-17, etc.) It’s not really a bad thing that Matthew did as there are valid applications here but it’s just not an historically accurate thing.

But we must recognize that it is *Matthew* (unless we want to assign it to some very early copyist, a theory for which there is no proof) who inserted *ekklesia* into Christ’s teachings here – just as it is Paul, Luke, the writer of Hebrews, James and John – *in their letters* (“epistles”) and not in their gospels – who made moderate, even limited usage of the word *ekklesia*, a word which appears only some 112 times in the Greek New Testament from Acts to Revelation. We do not, however, need to presume or invent any sinister or conspiratorial motive behind this

insertion. Ekklesia indeed contains many parallel insights and is a beautiful, although incomplete, picture of what Christ is building in His people. And because “ekklesia” (which would devolve into “church”) was a word which would be subject to change and thus deception, perhaps Christ simply avoided it entirely, leaving it to His followers to bring the word into usage. However it came into usage, the ekklesia is the *people* called out of this world’s darkness, transferred or conveyed into the kingdom of light so as to attend to the affairs and needs of Christ’s kingdom (Col. 1:13) and the kingdom of God is that realm where Christ is actually and literally obeyed as King, Lord and Master. From these two definitions it is easy to see how they overlap, consisting of the same people and yet having very distinct emphases. And we are also able to see how our obedience to God is the very means by which the kingdom of God comes into our lives. (again see Mt. 6:10)

It is this simplicity of the gospel of the kingdom of God that has been lost because the “church,” instead of the kingdom, came into being and took the prominence and preeminence that did not belong to it. The “church” as we know it today is simply the latest expression of the Great Prostitute, Mystery Babylon or one of her prostitute daughters. The “pastor” and all the pagan Greek customs that infiltrated into Christianity in the 2nd and 3rd centuries and that are still routinely practiced today is simply the abominations that attend these “women.” (see Rev. 17:5)

Christ is returning for a bride who is “a glorious ekklesia, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, holy and without blemish.” (Eph. 5:27) He is *not* coming for a prostitute who is disgusting in her filth and abominations. Anyone who is immersed in and involved with the latter can expect to receive the judgments of God. (Rev. 18:4) It is the *kingdom* and not the “church” (not even the ekklesia – the Greek word misrendered in English as “church”) which we must be diligent to enter into (Acts 14:22) and any expression of genuine ekklesia must truly service the kingdom of God – and not the kingdom or fiefdom of some man – or else it is only a counterfeit work of men and demons.

In addition, we also know that God’s kingdom is *spiritual*. Paul wrote, “The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 14:17) Paul also wrote, “The kingdom of God is not in word but in power.” (1 Cor. 4:20) The kingdom of God, quite simply, is that realm where Christ is truly obeyed and served as King – this obedience being characterized by acts and works of righteousness, peace and joy initiated, instigated and accomplished in obedient cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Any gathering of men who merely talk about righteousness, peace and joy or who utilize some other spirit to maintain a façade of these things is merely the counterfeit “church,” the apostasy that occurs before Christ’s return. (2 Ths. 2:3)

From all this we must conclude that Christ’s kingdom may, even *must*, be entered into now. The narrow path that leads to life (Mt. 7:14) is the way of obeying Christ the King as He is “the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.” (Heb. 5:9) Those who practice any form of “Christianity” that does not adhere to His literal and actual Kingship (which most “churches” do not but merely give Him lip service, a nominal title and a figurehead position) is simply a portion of the kingdoms of this world which lie under the control of the devil. (1 Jn. 5:19, Eph. 2:2)

One can – and should – study out the many aspects of the kingdom of God as written in the New Testament but unless the Spirit of truth guides the seeker and the seeker submits to the rule of Christ as King, all such research will be fruitless, deceptive and even dangerous to the soul. Knowledge of this subject, especially when the kingdom truths are used to support and

justify “church” errors and deceptions, will cause one to believe all manner of lies and distortions as the misguided seeker is propelled down the broad road that leads to destruction. (Mt. 7:13)

The kingdom of God is not to be measured in miles nor can it be represented on a map. It is a spiritual condition that is unlike any that the world can concoct, manufacture or imagine. It is a kingdom of light and love (Col. 1:13), a kingdom of truth (Jn. 18:37) and goodness. (Tit. 2:14) The King is Himself “the way, the truth, and the life” and “no one comes to the Father [the Most High Creator-God] except through Him.” (Jn. 14:6) To be in the kingdom of God is to be on a spiritual journey where one works, prays and trusts to be “doing it” better than yesterday, that is, working, praying and trusting to listen and obey better tomorrow than yesterday or even today, a journey that leads to ever-increasing abundant and eternal life. To be a citizen of the kingdom of God is to simply live as spiritual children of light in a dark and perverse world. (Eph. 5:8-10, Phlp. 2:15)

When we address the question of “God’s kingdom now,” we must recognize that it is indeed the current reality which we must seek first and foremost. (Mt. 6:33) Yet we must also recognize that the visible “ministries” that men can build and are building are *not* likely to be the kingdom of God but are instead most likely only the kingdom or fiefdom of some mere man. The kingdom of God is invisible to the human eye and its movements and activities are most comparable to the wind. (Jn. 3:8) So while we must seek and even strive to enter this invisible spiritual kingdom, we must also take care that we are not deceived by frauds and charlatans who twist and distort and use these intangible qualities to gain followers for themselves. You, the reader, are alone responsible for where your life goes – and you alone will reap the rewards of judgment for what you do.

“Without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (Heb. 12:14) “Those who perish [do so] because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.” (2 Ths. 2:10) “God ‘will render to each one according to his deeds’: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness – indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek (Gentile); but glory, honor and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.” (Rom. 2:6-11)

These clear-cut lines are found readily in the New Testament even as they are blurred, neglected, rejected and even denied at many “churches” and in many “ministries” of mere men. Yet they remain as the standard by which God views every man. Truth, righteousness, love, all the attributes and characteristics of God, must be progressively reproduced and demonstrated in our lives or else we are citizens and participants of the wrong kingdom. As Jesus warned His disciples regarding the sign of His return: “Take heed that no one deceives you.” (Mt. 24:4) Long ago men rose up preaching a distorted gospel and drew followers after themselves. (Acts 20:30) These men were called “bishops” and they were, and still are in many cases (especially under the more modernly palatable title “pastor” or, in other equally deceived circles, “apostle” or “prophet”) the leaders of the “church.” The call is now resounding to “cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1), to “Come out from among [the ‘Christian’ idolaters] and be separate,” to not touch what is unclean so that we may be received by the Lord. (2 Cor. 6:17, 1 Cor. 5:10-11)

Those who obey and persistently endure to the end are those who will be saved. (Mt. 24:13) And it is this gospel of the kingdom of God that “will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations” before the end of this age comes. (Mt. 24:14) The choice will be to

obey the gospel of the “church” or the gospel of the kingdom. One will result in death whereas the other will result in life. Choose wisely, dear reader – choose life. Bow now to the King of life, truth, love, light and goodness that you may live abundantly and eternally from this day forward. If you refuse to bow to the Lord of life, truth and love, then know that you are already bowed down to another lord and you are demonstrating your preference for death, lies, hate, darkness and evil – and you should not be surprised therefore that He will give you over to what you desire and prefer.

“This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (Jn. 3:19-21)

There is no darkness greater than the religions of men that prevent them from truly entering and vitally participating and functioning in God’s kingdom of light.

Let he who has ears hear.

2. Through the Looking Glass

When one looks into binoculars or a telescope, one can focus clearly on objects a great distance away and identify them with much accuracy. This can be a very useful tool under the right conditions – but how different life would be if one actually needed binoculars or a telescope, a “looking glass” if you will, in order just to see and function in life. If we could imagine such an existence, it would be an apt parable for life in the kingdom of God where, unless one is born again and acquires spiritual eyes and ears, one cannot accurately see or understand what is occurring in the spiritual realms. (Jn. 3:3, Mk. 4:12, 1 Cor. 2:14) Of course, this is only a limited parable – one’s spiritual sight is an integral part of one’s life in Christ whereas a looking glass is simply an external technology. Though it is routinely practiced in “churches” around the world as if it could be done, one simply cannot take Christ off and put Him back on just because it’s time to go to “church.” This only proves the high level of deceptions that so many “church”-ites are under.

But in this hypothetical environment that requires a looking glass in order to see and function, suppose that someone begins turning their looking glass around and then convinced everyone else that, since they could still see to some extent (that is, although nearby objects seem distant and distant objects are too tiny to identify), this is the way things should be. If we could imagine this kind of an existence, we have come closer to understanding the “church” in contrast to the ekklesia in the kingdom of God. Because most people come to know and to know about Christ and God in the context of some “church,” those who remain in that context remain convinced that this myopic view is the way things should be.

Now suppose that many generations later, someone who had lived all their life with the looking glass reversed were suddenly shown the right way to use the looking glass. What disorientation and confusion this person would experience as their senses adjusted to this much more accurate way to see. If we can imagine this transition, we have grasped onto a parable about the exodus, de-tox and wilderness period that occurs in the lives of almost all those who heed the call of God to “Come out and be separate” (in whatever form they perceive, grasp, hear, see or reach that conclusion – see 2 Cor. 6:17, 1 Cor. 5:10-11, Rev. 18:4) and leave the “church.”

Such a person, once he had gained something resembling equilibrium (it would seem that many do not and simply abandon both God and the “church” because they cannot recognize the much larger truths they saw in parts and pieces through their myopically reversed looking glass), would naturally have several questions: “How did this happen? Who did this? Why was this allowed to happen?”

The answers to these questions are all interwoven together but some simple concise answers can be given at least for those with eyes to see and ears to hear truth. As always, these answers must come from the words which God has left us so that we would seek and *find* Him. Let us begin by restating the question in terms the Bible uses.

How did we turn the “looking glass” around and become satisfied with this as the way things should be? That is, how did the people who claimed to follow Christ abandon (or at least neglect and alter) the concept and practice of *ekklesia* and embrace the concept of “church”?

If we wish to adhere strictly to the usage of Biblical phrases, then we ought to immediately jettison the word “church” as a legitimate description of the people who belong to Christ. “Church” is a 10th or 11th century *English* word – never once used by Jesus nor even by the so-called “church fathers”! – that does not convey the same meaning as the Greek word, *ekklesia*. [1577] If we look in an English dictionary, we find that “church,” especially in its Christian context, refers first to buildings, second to clergy, third to religious rites and practices and, *then* fourth and finally to people. The Greek word *ekklesia* refers only to *people*, people responsible for gathering to attend to the corporate issues of their own city, town or village. As we delve further into this, we discover that this is indeed quite representative of the whole question of “church” vs. *ekklesia* – three parts deception with one part truth! In spite of these facts, “church” is the word most often used to translate *ekklesia* in most English translations since the King James Version used it in 1611. William Tyndale, whose brilliant and gifted translations were used for some 90% of the King James Version, had used “congregation” as a more appropriate English word choice (which it is a better word choice although itself not a perfect choice either) but King James specifically and arbitrarily instructed his team of translators to keep “certain of the old words,” particularly “church.” This word choice haunts us to this day.

But if we can at least conceptually recognize that *ekklesia*, in whatever that ultimately means, represents *God’s* original intentions for His people under the New Covenant, and that “church,” in much of what that has come to mean, represents *man’s* subsequent adjustments, changes and substitutions to God’s original intentions, we can at least begin to think and talk about which is which. Indeed, as Loisy observed, it is very near the truth to say that Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God but it was the “church” which came into being!

A Process of Devolving

The people of Christ transformed from *ekklesia* to “church” because it “fell from its first love.” (Rev. 2:4) The first love of every Christian individual and corporate body should be love for Christ Himself. Individually this begins with the new birth (Jn. 3:3, 5) and, in a perfect world where no deception enters in and no stumbling blocks ever cause men to stumble, would progress smoothly through Peter’s steps to spiritual maturity:

“His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust – for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith goodness, to goodness knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 1:3-8)

This, in a nutshell, is the path every genuine believer’s growth toward spiritual maturity should be taking. Yet in our much less than perfect world and especially in the “church,” deception has entered in and stumbling blocks abound. There is no Scriptural truth – speaking here of the rightly divided word of truth that nestles perfectly into the whole counsel of God – that does not have one or more distortions, deception or contradiction competing for our belief in them. It is in this light that Jesus warned, “Take heed that no one deceives you” (Mt. 24:4), that Paul prophesied, “The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders” (2 Ths. 2:9), and Peter counseled, “Be sober, be vigilant (watchful); because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” (1 Pet. 5:8) The person whose faith is caught up in believing distortions, deceptions and contradictions of the rightly divided, whole counsel of God is one who has been taken captive by the devil so as to be his tool and weapon to accomplish his enmity against God’s kingdom. (see 2 Tim. 2:26) The devil’s most effective stratagem to date is “church” though it is by no means his only one.

In the external history, as men began to neglect their first love (living in Christ with Him as personal King and corporate Head over all things) they began to instead embrace rules and laws and philosophies and doctrines and “theology,” much of which contains a great deal of truth. But whatever truth is contained in these things was divorced from the Head because from the ranks of the elders, bishops rose up, preaching an impure form of the gospel and drew followers after themselves – precisely as Paul had prophesied they would. (Acts 20:30) Books were written, purportedly but fictitiously by the apostles (“...no lie is of the truth.” – 1 Jn. 2:21) that laid down instructions, directives, interpolations, commandments, canons and by-laws – in short, the first “church” manuals. A crisis of persecutions then arose and produced a great number of those who could not endure the tortures inflicted upon them and they bowed to the Roman emperor as God – these were called “the lapsed” because, it was held, their faith had lapsed under torture and this was held to be a most serious sin. The subsequent treatment of and the question of restoring the lapsed triggered at least six major schisms in the third and fourth centuries, issued in the outward, external rituals of penance (which cannot be found anywhere in the Bible) and established the bishop and the “church” as those who had the power to forgive sins and restore fallen sinners, and fixed the outward, visible authority structure of the “church” as the way things should be. The looking glasses were now securely fixed in their reversed position and would remain virtually untouched for over a thousand years.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century did much to show that the myopic view of the “church” was in error but it did little or nothing that effectively turned the looking glass back around. Catholic priests became Lutheran “pastors” but were still priests for all that.

Augustine's predestination became Calvin's predestination and stayed basically the same. The "church" retained its power structure patterned after the Roman empire and kept its buildings that were based on the Roman basilica or judgment hall. Many truths came to light in the Reformation and many souls entered into a deeper relation with Christ but the overall nature of the "church" and its hierarchy of clergy exalted over the laity remained concealed, unchallenged and unchanged. This incomplete work (Rev. 3:2) still plagues the people of Christ to this day.

For most people who claim to be followers of Christ, the looking glass remains fixed in the reversed position and seeing accurately what is in the mind of Christ is, quite simply, beyond their abilities. No amount of instruction, teaching, reproof, rebuke or even demonstration of power will convince them their myopic view is incorrect. Only the grace of God that leads men to repentance and surrender to God will cause them to submit to having the looking glass turned around. Then begins the exodus, de-tox and wilderness periods which are so very different and so much more uncomfortable and even painful than "church" and, quite frankly, many return to "church" or concoct their own version of it, often in their own living room. Those who know the "church" to be in error but who resurrect their own version of it in their own homes are quite often those who now call it "ekklesia."

This is the de-evolution process by which we have come to the point where we are at now. There are a growing number of people who have submitted to having their looking glass turned around, they have endured long periods of disorientation and readjustment as they have regained a measure of equilibrium and yet they still are looking for the focal point that would make all the Scriptures make sense. This focal point of all the Scriptures, one which is given lip service to at "church" but which contains surprising depths when one begins to practice it, is the King-ness of the Christ. It is precisely because Christ has never (or perhaps only very shortly or perhaps even better stated, only partially) been the literal and true King of all people who claim to be His that church history is the dismal, discouraging, disturbing subject that it is. The "church," in its blind zeal to preserve its demonically-inspired hierarchy, has too much invested in its real estate and the preeminence of its professional staff to ever change so there is simply not much hope for further reformation. Nor does Christ intend to reform the prostitute – she has been given time and opportunity and encouragement and prompting to repent and believe but she has refused to do so and will be judged appropriately in due time. (Rev. 2:21, 18:5) There is no other way to enter the kingdom of God and Christ than to repent, believe and obey (Mk. 1:14, Jn. 6:29, Heb. 5:9) and "As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord [Master, King], so walk in Him." (Col. 2:6) There is no remedy left for the idolatrous "church" – those who wish to survive need to "Come out and be separate."

But for the ekklesia, the people who have been called out (the literal meaning of the Greek word) of this world's darkness so as to be citizens of Christ's kingdom of light, there are some guiding principles we must return to. First and foremost we need to submit to the Lordship and Headship of Christ, personally and individually as well as corporately and completely. We do not need to worry about the overall structure of the ekklesia or the kingdom of Christ which *He* is building - *He* is more than able to attend to those kinds of details. (Mt. 16:18) If we can remember that the kingdom of Christ and God is that realm where Christ is obeyed, then we can pray for that realm to be manifested in our midst. (Mt. 6:10) When we find other believers committed to realizing, in real time, in real ways, the Lordship of Christ Jesus, then we can begin to pray together and perhaps even walk together in the unity of His Spirit by refusing to do anything that impacts the others without first gaining their approval and agreement. The people of Christ have suffered the worst departures from the will of God because the "church" insisted

on following the will of clergy-leaders or of its richest “tithers” or of the voting majority. The desires and wishes of the true Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, will be confirmed in unanimous agreement (one accord) of *all* those who are involved in or impacted by any given question of direction or practice.

The “church,” because it *is* the portion of the world in which the tares are allowed to reach maturity (see Mt. 13:38), has always rejected the idea that “the church” was to be only a society of saints. (This is a question we will examine in more detail in a later chapter.) Yet “saints only” is precisely what the ekklesia was always supposed to be – understanding “saints” in its original meaning of “those people set apart for God” and not in the corrupted popular notion of “perfected, sinless people,” a kind of person who does not, has not and never will exist on this planet! When we understand that the ekklesia does not include much of that which gathers in “church” buildings every week, the Headship of Christ confirmed by the unanimity of agreement upon a much more localized and focused question of specific issues, becomes much more envisionable because our looking glass has been turned around. The juggernauts that historically split the “church” become ridiculously simple – allow the Head to lead those truly impacted by any decision to come together in unanimous agreement as to what His will in the matter is. In this way it will be the responsibility of the King to preserve that which He is building and we do not have to strive and anxiously fight, ultimately dividing, defiling and even destroying the body of Christ, for our notion of how things should be. And in this way, we will clearly demonstrate that God truly is in our midst. (Jn. 17:23)

This *is* the gospel of the kingdom – the kingdom does not come with observation but is within you or in your midst (Lk. 17:20-21) When we begin to obey the King, we will find that we are a part of His kingdom and we will truly and progressively be involved in His genuine ekklesia – He will see to that! The first step to embarking on this grand adventure is to submit to having our looking glass turned around, endure the time of re-orientation (however short or long that may be) and begin anew to see things as He says they should be. And we must refuse to agree with or follow along with those who still look through their looking glass the wrong way and we must without compromise follow only after the Lamb wherever He leads us. (Rev. 14:4)

Let he who has ears hear.

3. Why Do We Meet

In one of the few places where the KJV actually uses the word “assembly” (instead of “church”) to translate the Greek word *ekklesia* [1577], Luke records, “Some [of those who had rushed into the theater] therefore cried one thing and some another, for the assembly (*ekklesia*) was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together.” (Acts 19:32) Demetrius the silversmith had stirred up the people and gathered the assembly to discuss what to do with Paul and the Christians (Acts 19:24-29) and the assembly was so confused that most of them did not even know why they had gathered. This is a perfect picture of the modern “church.” Few, if any, seem to remember or even know what the mission of the genuine ekklesia is.

Put simply, the ekklesia is to be spiritually able and equipped to attend to the issues and affairs of Christ’s kingdom of light. Thus, when we come together, the key item on the agenda is not to have a time of worship or to hold a Bible study or to hear a “sermon” that titillates our ears

(2 Tim. 4:3-4) but rather to, in some real way, further the kingdom of God in our midst. In practical terms, the ekklesia then should be focusing on:

- Hearing and doing the wishes and commands of the Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph. 1:22, etc.) The kingdom of God comes into our midst when we obey Christ and God through the leading of His Spirit. (Mt. 6:10, Rom. 8:14, etc.) Until the Lord is truly the Lord over any assembly, there is no possibility of furthering the kingdom of God. As valuable as corporate worship, Bible studies and spiritual messages may be, if they replace the headship of Christ over the assembly, they are out of order. He alone is to be the Administrator (Greek *leitourgos* [3011] director, “liturgy”) of the work performed in the sanctuary that is His people. (Heb. 8:2)
- Producing viable citizens for Christ’s kingdom. Discipleship is virtually a lost art in today’s apostate environment but it is a requirement for any kingdom that its citizens be taught to practice good citizenship according to its laws and ways. In Christ’s kingdom, the primary characteristics are called “the fruit of the Spirit” and they violate the law of no man’s land. (Gal. 5:22-23) These are produced, not by adherence to any list of do-s and don’t-s, but by learning to individually hear and obey the Lord. “My sheep hear My voice,” the Lord said, “and I know them, and they follow Me.” (Jn. 10:27) Those who do not hear His voice and do not follow and obey Him have no right to claim Him as either Lord or *Savior!*
- Meeting the needs of the people of Christ’s kingdom and even of this world. As any assembly practices the headship of Christ Jesus over their activities and as citizens of His kingdom are better equipped and prepared to shine light in their dark worlds, the needs of the people of the assembly and those they interact with will need to be addressed.

Peter wrote, “As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone serves, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet. 4:10-11) There are *two* kinds of gifting in view here – speaking and serving – and they are both vitally necessary for a healthy expression of the way of following Christ and God. Yet, the “church” meeting format caters almost exclusively to the speakers and virtually excludes the operation of those who are gifted primarily to serve. Service (actual work, productivity) in the kingdom of God is almost impossible to do at a meeting and it is in this light that meetings can rob the people and divert them from their mission to hear and obey God, disciple others and meet real needs.

These *three* things are the lost mission of the ekklesia. Too many think or act as if the whole purpose of assembling is to sing songs or to talk about the Bible or even just to have meetings so that we may know who each other are. Even the world’s business community knows that having too many meetings is counter-productive to actually getting any work done and that when meetings over-shadow productivity, the business is headed toward a disastrous end. The “church” is in its present straits because it has forsaken the true Head and has settled

into a tradition of holding dead meetings that produce nothing of the spiritual life of Christ and which meet no real needs of the people who attend the meetings. What little of Christ is experienced in most “church” meetings is not a function of the “church’s” methodology but a testimony of the transcendence of God who will meet anyone who sincerely and diligently seeks Him in whatever environment he or she is in.

When we learn again to “minister to the Lord” (Acts 13:2, etc.) in the sanctuary of His people (and not in the abominable “sanctuary” of the “church” building that is patterned after the judgment halls, “basilicas,” of the Roman empire), *then* we will see the kingdom of God flourishing in our midst. Until such time, we will continue to witness and experience the apostasy, the great falling away from the faith that must be called churchianity. (2 Ths. 2:3, Mt. 24:10) Those who would “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt. 13:43) must be true sons of the kingdom intent upon furthering their Father’s kingdom and cannot be mere “church”-ites confused as to why they have gathered together, thinking they have assembled to satisfy some purpose or agenda of their own. To further the kingdom of God in our midst is the real mission of the genuine ekklesia – all else is simply some man’s or some demon’s deceptive “church.” The time to choose which entity – the kingdom of God or this world – to which we will belong, is now.

Let he who has ears hear.

4. Simplicity in Christ

Paul wrote, “But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity that is in Christ.” (2 Cor. 11:3) This statement has perhaps never been as truly applicable to any portion of New Testament life than it is to that part which theologians call “ecclesiology” – the study of ekklesia form, structure and governance. With nearly two thousand years of varying and conflicting traditions surrounded by myriad layers of confusion, it is nearly impossible to peel back all the deceptive additions that Satan has piled upon the simple truths that Christ gave in the gospel. But the end of the age draws closer and final preparations to be spotless and blameless at His return requires that this simplicity be yet again revealed to those who would press on to be what He desires.

Ekklesia or “Church”

What is an ekklesia? What is a church? These questions are never easy to answer because so many have tried to use the term “church” to simultaneously include a local assembly, denominations and the spiritual assembly of all saints (holy ones, those set apart to Christ – a group of individuals whose identities are truly known only to the mind of Christ and God) from all times and all places. Let’s delve into the mess that “theologians” and Greek scholars and translators have made of it all.

First, the English word “church” is easily traced linguistically to the Greek word “kuriakon” [2960]. It is a word which means simply “belonging to a lord” (“lord” being the Greek word “kurios” [2962]) Simple enough so far – but hold on, rough waters lay directly ahead.

This Greek word “kuriakon” that evolved into (or through) the Scottish word “kirk” into the English word “church” is actually used twice in the original Greek New Testament. (1 Cor. 11:20, Rev. 1:10) Logically, then, one would expect to find the English word “church” used

only twice in the English New Testament. Surprisingly, however, we find the word “church” used **114 times** in the English King James New Testament! How do we (as charitably as possible) account for this huge discrepancy?

In the Greek New Testament, the word *ekklesia* [1577] was used frequently (115 times to be exact) in connection with the people of Christ. In the French language there is the word “eglise” and in Spanish there is the word “iglesia” but in English, for whatever reasons, there is no direct “descendent” or corollary to *ekklesia* as there obviously are in French and Spanish. So the KJV translators had to fish around for a word to translate “ekklesia” and the one they opted for was “church.” It is not to be overlooked, however, that King James, in his bias and desire to be and remain the head of the Anglican “church,” insisted that his translators use “certain of the old words,” particularly “church.”

Perhaps in early 1600, this was not the linguistic blunder it has now evolved into. But even then, “church” primarily meant “a building for special uses, particularly religious, particularly Christian.” The blunder here is that the New Testament writers, in deliberately using the word “ekklesia,” *never, ever* – not even once – had in mind a specialized building that housed and enabled rituals, litanies and hierarchical clergy. Not once. When the writers wanted to talk about such buildings, they certainly had several Greek words to choose from: a “temple” as a place for rituals of worship (*hieron* [2411]), a “temple” as a building in which God or a god dwells (*naos* [3485]), a “house” as a building belonging to a person or for a particular usage (*oikos* [3624]) or a “synagogue” as a religious lecture hall and school (*sunagoge* [4864]). All of these words are used extensively throughout the New Testament. But the New Testament writers chose to use *ekklesia* to describe the people of Christ.

When we turn to look at other English words that could have been used by the KJV translators, we do find words like “congregation” and “assembly.” That is, the meanings of these words easily carry something more of *ekklesia*’s meaning than does “church.” And indeed, “congregation” is now used in the New King James (to replace KJV “church” in Acts 7:38) and “assembly” is even used in the KJV itself to translate 3 instances of *ekklesia* (Acts 19:32, 39, 41) while “church” is even used 1 time where “temple” obviously belongs (Acts 19:37 – insightful studies in their own right!) But the KJV translators under King James’ direct orders opted for “church” and confusion that has roots that go beyond the Dark Ages has been upon the body of Christ’s followers ever since.

Ekklesia is “the called out ones.” It was the group of citizens of a particular place who were assembled or gathered to attend to the business or need of their place, their home city or town or village. The New Testament writers took this word from the realm of politics and applied it to the followers of Christ – in much the same way they had seized upon the word *agape* [25] and given it the transcendence we now routinely associate with God’s love for sinful, fallen mankind. *Ekklesia* then are the people of Christ who, having been called out of the kingdom of darkness and into Christ’s kingdom of light, are to assemble so as to attend to the business or need of His kingdom of light *in their own place* - be that a city, town, village or neighborhood. When we recall that the original believers met in homes (and not specialized buildings) as the *ekklesia*, we can gather that, as the numbers grew, more homes were met in and each group enjoyed a smaller focus. That is, when the believers were fewer in number, the scope of their activities would have been the whole city even though the population of the city might well be in the multiple thousands. But as the number of believers grew, so did the number of houses being used to assemble grow – and the city was then divided as to “jurisdiction” (use the term loosely!) by virtue of where the house was in which they met. This was no dry, legal,

power-hungry sectioning off of the city so as to rake in the most tithes and offerings but rather a living recognition of the personal and corporate responsibility for one's own place of residence and existence.

When we see this definition of "local ekklesia," we should be able to immediately see the damage done by the denominational commuter "church." It has pulled people out of their neighborhoods, separated them from their neighboring brothers and sisters in Christ (their rightful ekklesia) and built up not only physical distance but "theological" and ideological walls between them as well. The demonic steps in wherever possible to maintain these divisions as the people are separated into differing branches of the tree (which represent the kingdom of God) where the birds of the air (the demonic) make their nests (the denominations. – Mt. 13:32)

The Whole Building

Now if we can but recognize also that even ekklesia is not the end-all, be-all that the "church" has tried to make itself into, we will have come far in our pursuit of truth. That is, Jesus did not say, "Seek first the ekklesia..." but rather "Seek first the kingdom of God..." (Mt. 6:33) nor did He preach the "gospel of the ekklesia" – He preached "the gospel of the kingdom." "The kingdom of God is here among you. Repent!" was His and the apostles' message. (Mt. 4:17, Mk. 6:12, Lk. 9:2, etc.) Paul preached the same message to the Athenians: "God now *commands* all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30), and the Jews of Thessalonica accused the Christians there of proclaiming "another king – Jesus." (Acts 17:7) The emphasis of their preaching was not on "how to assemble" or even on "how to be the ekklesia" – this is evident from the scarcity of instructions on the subject throughout the New Testament (even 115 instances is not a hugely significant portion of the New Testament!) The emphasis is on Jesus, the King, who, by His Spirit, as He said He would do, **He** will build His ekklesia! (Mt. 16:18)

As *He* builds His ekklesia, we must also recognize we are more to Him than just a political assembly of His citizens. Paul wrote,

"Now, therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit." (Eph. 2:19-22)

Elsewhere, Paul also tells us, "...the ekklesia...is His body..." (Eph. 1:22-23, etc.) Peter adds that we are "a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Pet. 2:5) And John tells us that Jesus "has made us kings and priests to God..." (Rev. 1:5)

Let us review all the different aspects that make up this "whole building":

- fellow citizens indicating our attachment to the kingdom of heaven (Phlp. 3:20);
- saints – holy, set apart ones, set apart to the will of Christ and God;
- members of God's household or family;
- a holy temple (1 Cor. 3:17, 2 Cor. 6:16, etc.);
- a habitation or house, a *dwelling place* for God (Jn. 14:23, 1 Pet. 2:5);

- a holy, royal priesthood.

That is quite a list! Assembling together as ekklesia is only the tip of the iceberg!

The Mystery of the Kingdom of God

Jesus prayed,

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one; I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.” (Jn. 17:20-23)

Throughout church history, there have been efforts to walk in this oneness that Jesus speaks of here. The first label to be applied to all believers was “catholic” which means “universal.” More recently there has been what has been called the “ecumenical” movement. This is another term which, in its basic definition, simply means “general” or “universal.” The first word, catholic, was taken over by the first large-scale sect (the Roman Catholic “church”) and the second, ecumenical, was used to congeal together a federation of sects (denominations). No fundamental, long-term solutions here!

The problem now is that the English language only has so many words that represent the concept of “one category that includes all.” Many people reject being called catholic because of the instantaneous Romish connotations associated with it. Now many people don’t want to be instantly associated with the world-wide ecumenical movement because it embraces so many things that can only be called sinful. As an aside, we should do with the word “church” what we have done with “catholic” and “ecumenical” – discard it! All these words are now rendered useless, obsolete and even antagonistic to the Message they were once used to convey because, over time and with usage, the word has accumulated additional baggage that completely changes how the word is commonly perceived. This is all the more true as the end of the age approaches and we need to distinguish between the genuine ekklesia of Christ and the false, counterfeit, apostate “church” built on the spiritually numbing traditions of men and the lethally deceptive schemes and doctrines of demons.

As we look ahead, imagining and questing for what the bride of Christ might look like if she were free of all the deceptive “church” encrustations, we come to the question of what we would look and be like if we could simply let go of our human desire and “need” for labels. What label can truly cover all that we are in Christ anyway? We are kingdomists, Monarchists, saints, family, templets, homists, priests and kings all at the same time! Any label we take upon ourselves will cause us to have already set our sights lower than the heights from which our predecessors have fallen, the first love of simply walking closely and quietly with our Master wherever He leads. (Rev. 2:4-5) This *is* the overarching “thing” to which we are joined when we receive, experience and obey the new birth from above. Perhaps it is simply best to call this transcendent “thing” “the mystery of the kingdom of God.” (Mk. 4:11, etc.) Just don’t try to make a label out of it. Let us simply recognize that as a Biblical, spiritual mystery, we require divine revelation from God to rightly understand it. This is quite consistent with the Scriptures

and it will tend to preserve us from the error of thinking that because we have a word or label for it, we understand it to the full. The kingdom of God is indeed a vast expanse that cannot be fully known, explained or understood here in this land where we see only dimly and in part.

The mystery of the kingdom of God as it pertains to being ekklesia might best be stated as:

“A local ekklesia is the mystery of the kingdom of God manifested in a particular locality.”

In this light, we could as easily say that ekklesia is the intersection of the temporal and the eternal!

We will see how this can be so when we recall that God “gave [Christ] to be Head [Master, King, Lord, Absolute Ruler] over *all* things to the ekklesia...” (Eph. 1:22- emphasis added) When we stop thinking “big” (catering to the 99), we will begin to recognize that a locale (an ekklesia’s “jurisdiction” – again use that term lightly!) should be as small as possible, even 1 (the 100th sheep) if necessary, but certainly 2 or 3 (Mt. 18:20) should not be overlooked! As more believers are added to the number, the scope of each ekklesia should become smaller, thus making its impact deeper and longer lasting, as more ekklesias reach into their own city, town, village, neighborhood and street. More truly mature saints will become elders hosting and leading a home gathering and more “jurisdictions” (areas for work and influence) will be created. These elders and ekklesias will join together in submission to the directives of the one and only Head Christ Jesus and refuse to take corporate steps until there is unanimous agreement (one accord). *Then* we will be the answer to the prayer of Jesus for a unified body of followers!

So long as we blithely get in our cars and leave our locale (forsaking the real assembly to which we should be joined – Heb. 10:25 – and failing to discern what the body of Christ around us really is - 1 Cor. 11:29) so that we might join ourselves to a prostitute that drains our life in a building that saps our resources under the ear-scratching sermonizing of a man who lulls us to sleep, there is no hope of our ever being without spot or blemish. (see Phlp. 2:15, 2 Pet. 3:14) Rather, we will continue to be the counterfeit, the prostitute, the abomination.

Let he who has ears hear.

5. Saints or Sinners

What happens to a person when he places his faith in Jesus Christ is a question that, in some ways *cannot* be answered but, in other ways, must be *rightly* answered. That is, as time goes on after our conversion, what is it that we were and what is it that we have become? Nearly everyone who has truly experienced Christ and placed their faith in Him can name a date in which they changed – except perhaps those whose childhoods were so immersed in Christ that they no longer know the day but just know they have walked with Him since childhood. But this change, in the New Testament, is called conversion. (Mt. 18:3) Conversion is preceded by repentance (a change of mind and attitude and a turning of one’s life away from sin and self and toward God) and is accomplished by faith (a spiritual ability to believe, given to us by God – Eph. 2:8-9 - but set in motion by our sincere repentance). Conversion is also called a new birth from above. (Jn. 3:3, 5, 1 Pet. 1:23) Thus it is a birthing event, a planting of a seed (Jas. 1:21), that produces an infant and not an adult. A conversion experience that is genuine will go on in

time to result in diminished “works of the flesh” and increased “fruit of the Spirit.” (see Gal. 5:19-23)

Until we become spiritually mature, however, we will view the way of following Christ from a self-centered perspective and, though we can give mental and intellectual agreement to the idea that our conversion entails a transference or translation from darkness to light (Col. 1:13), we don’t really grasp all of the significance of what that means. And because the children of God are hunted by the devil (1 Pet. 5:8), the period of spiritual infancy and immaturity are the most opportune times for him to strike at any vulnerable, exposed child. The “fiery darts” with which the enemy strikes at us are deceptions which our faith (in Christ and in the truths which He has taught us) is able to block and extinguish. (Eph. 6:16, Jn. 8:44)

This is the simplicity that is in Christ and, if a person always obeyed Christ or never believed any deceptions, it could always remain this simple. (see 2 Cor. 11:3) But our enemy is exceedingly crafty and “while men slept” (Mt. 13:25), he laid several snares and initiated carefully concealed strategies of deception that cause unwary souls to disobey Christ and to disbelieve truth by believing a conflicting or competing distortion or deception. The devil’s work has been so extensive that today there is no Scriptural truth – referring here to a rightly divided word that nestles perfectly into the whole counsel of God – that does not have one or more corresponding and competing distortions. In fact, many of these distortions are the basis for the many sects (“denominations”) that abound today. It is no exaggeration to say that the people who claim to follow Christ have forfeited most, indeed almost all, of their birthrights in Christ by agreeing to one deception or another and thus they have placed themselves under the influence and power of the enemy of their souls.

So what *is* an individual after a genuine conversion? Before the conversion he is an unrepentant, unregenerate sinner, a natural man. (Eph. 4:17-19) After the conversion he is a new creation. (2 Cor. 5:17) Before his conversion, he was isolated and alone. But after his conversion, he is no longer merely an isolated and alone individual – he is joined in intimate unity with God (Father, Son and Spirit – Jn. 14:16, 23) and he is a member of Christ’s body. (1 Cor. 12:12-14) Such a one as this is called by the New Testament a *saint*, literally, one set apart for the use and purposes of God, a holy one.

Again, this is the simplicity that is in Christ. There are saints, spiritual new creations growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ and God, and there are sinners, unrepentant, natural, fallen men who have no desire or intention to surrender to God and obey His commands. But against this simplicity the devil counters with a deception – “saints” must now be sinlessly perfect “holy” people. Some “Christian” sects even worship and pray to such “saints,” choosing those who some years before had performed miracles or lived in “sinless perfection.” But *no one* is sinlessly perfect (1 Jn. 1:8) and this definition of the word *saint* is a lie! No one who is a sinner (in the original New Testament meaning of the word) can be a saint and no saint, apart from gross negligence and voluntary, willful departure from the faith, is again in the class of sinners.

We have proceeded quite far into a deep understanding of the way of following Christ and the astute observer will note that we have not once used the word “church.” How can this be? “Church” is the very centerpiece of modern “Christianity” with its “pastors,” “pulpits,” “pews,” “choirs” (or “worship teams”), “church” buildings, “tithes and offerings,” “Sunday school,” building programs, by-laws and denominational affiliations. But none of this is rightly found in the New Testament.

To answer this question, we must delve into some complexity. Just as the devil led some to redefine “saints,” so too has he used linguistic deception to enact his strategies and schemes against the children of God. Even in the simplicity that is in Christ, there is a “hidden wisdom” that is reserved for the spiritually mature (1 Cor. 2:6-7) that involves ideas “hard to understand, which those who are untaught [by God’s Spirit] and unstable [double-minded – Jas. 1:8] twist to their own destruction.” (2 Pet. 3:15-16) “Church” is just such an idea and it has been developed into what is perhaps the devil’s most effective scheme for separating an infant or immature saint from the Savior and Lord Jesus Christ.

Consider that the New Testament uses word-pictures to describe the corporate group of saints. One of the word-pictures we have already touched upon is *body* - the body of Christ. (Eph. 5:30) Other word-pictures used are *temple* (1 Cor. 3:16-17) and *house*. (1 Pet. 2:5) Each of these have something of depth to teach us about what every genuine convert has been jointed to – and each of these words, especially the Greek word most often rendered “church” in English translations, have very little in common with the modern practice of “church.” The Greek word we find in the New Testament is *ekklesia* [1577] and at one point Paul clearly says that the *ekklesia* is His body (Eph. 1:22-23), letting us know that whatever the body is, the *ekklesia* is also.

Because this deception is so prevalent and goes so deeply into our existence, it is necessary to reiterate where the word “church” comes from. We return again to William Tyndale, whose brilliant and gifted translation work is found in over 90% of the King James New Testament, who chose the words “assembly” or “congregation” as more fitting words to translate *ekklesia*. And it is indeed a more fitting translation. The *ekklesia* – literally, “called out ones” just as saints are “set apart ones” – are those *people* who are called out of this world of darkness and transferred into Christ’s kingdom of light. But because the Anglican “church” needed to preserve its structure, King James issued an edict that his translators must retain the “certain old words,” specifically “church,” in his 1611 Bible. The deception was thus put securely in place for most English speaking people and, in this case, would remain so for the next four hundred years. But this is not the earliest origin of the deception – this is only the added layer of distortion that has accumulated since the Greek term was exchanged for an English word of vastly different meaning.

If we know the truth that *only* a genuinely converted and spiritually reborn individual can be a member of Christ’s body then we can see that saying *only* a saint can belong in Christ’s *ekklesia* is simply expressing that same truth using different words. The question of whether the *ekklesia* is a society of saints or a school for sinners is virtually a no-brainer. No sinner can be a saint and no sinner can be a true member of Christ’s *ekklesia*. Yet this question as to the role of the *ekklesia* (long before there was an English language to further confuse the issues) divided the people who followed Christ in the third, fourth and fifth centuries. Bishops like Cyprian in 251 A.D. declared that no one could be saved if they did not join themselves to the visible, hierarchical authority structure patterned after and centralized in Rome. Later Bishops like Augustine in 411 A.D. declared that the *ekklesia* – referring not to the spiritual body that Christ was building but instead referring to the temporal, visible hierarchy of bishops who presided over assemblies of people who gathered in “Christian” temples (patterned after Rome’s basilica or judgment hall) to practice pagan-like rituals and hear the teachings and sermons (homilies) of the bishops – insisted that the *ekklesia* would always be a “mixed multitude” of both saints and sinners. The New Testament’s definition of *ekklesia* had already been changed. Now the people followed the bishop of their choice. (Acts 20:30) The mystery of lawlessness – rejecting the

commands and leading of the King, Christ, by His Spirit, and doing what is right in one's own eyes – was already at work (2 Ths. 2:7, Jdgs. 21:25) and the ekklesia had begun its transformation into modern-day “church.”

If the ekklesia is again to be able to stand on the true Mt. Zion (Heb. 12:22), we must again see the distinctions of sinners and saints in the light of truth. These are not categories by which we can justify delusions of self-righteous grandeur as did the Pharisees of old. (Lk. 18:9) Rather they are the humble recognition that Christ died to raise us up out of the realms of sin and into His realm of holiness, a realm into which *all* sinners are freely welcome to enter into and become saints!

And we must also reject the distortions of truth that overly complicate our life in Christ. We must again see that *keeping* our status as saints *requires* us to obey Christ (Heb. 5:9) – by relying on His grace (power), certainly, but also by giving all diligence to add to what He has already given us so as to gain that which He would yet lead us into. (2 Pet. 1:3-7, Jn. 16:13)

The “church,” as is evident from its structure and form, is something from the world that has attached itself to the true way of following Christ and God. The ekklesia is not anything like “church” – indeed “church” is the prostitute who poses as the bride of Christ. (Rev. 17:1-6)

Yet there is one word-picture that still needs to be embraced or the ekklesia will, as history repeatedly shows, again devolve into some form of “church.” We must again take our place as “sons of the kingdom.” (Mt. 13:38) In the simplicity that is in Christ, the kingdom of God is that realm in which Christ is obeyed. If we will simply allow Christ to be our true King – individually and corporately – most of the deception and subterfuge which confuses so many will simply vanish as darkness must do when light comes. But we must “Seek *first* the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Mt. 6:33), placing the interests and issues of His kingdom above even our participation in His ekklesia. If our participation in spiritual matters ever takes us into realms of disobedience to Christ, we have stepped outside of His kingdom. (1 Cor. 6:9-10) And this luring into subtle disobedience to Christ is what the demonic scheme called “church” does best. It is a leaven which, by God's grace and power, we must purge from our midst. (1 Cor. 5:6-8)

To be the genuine ekklesia is to be joined with other genuine saints committed to remaining in the kingdom of God – that is, in careful, diligent, watchful obedience to Him in all things. In such groups, the King will lead each individual by His Spirit (Jn. 10:27) and will lead any groups who come together by unanimous agreement (“one accord” – Acts 2:46, etc.) on all issues and questions of direction and practice that impact the group. This is “the unity of the Spirit” which creates an atmosphere where the ministry of the saints can produce “the unity of the faith.” (Eph. 4:3, 12-13) To be the ekklesia, then, is to cease being corrupted away from the spiritual simplicity that is in Christ and to return always, only and completely to Him who is our First Love. (Rev. 2:4)

Let he who has ears hear.

6. The Standard of Perfection

Even though the gospel *is* simple, the malady which the people of Christ suffers from perhaps the most is a self-induced confusion, a confusion that complicates the simple and oversimplifies the complex. That is, the things hard to understand of which the New Testament speaks (see 2 Pet. 3:16) are reduced to being things that “really don't matter” because they aren't

simple. And the things that are simple to understand are either obscured behind poorly translated words or intermingled with complex “theology” so that obedience to Christ’s simple commands need no longer be practiced. Jesus’ question still stands worthy of contemplation – and action! – “Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?” (Lk. 6:46)

As but one example, some theologians imagine that there are two standards for conduct. One scholar writes, “Some students of Christian ethics make a distinction between the general standards of Christian conduct and what are called ‘counsels of perfection,’ as though the former were prescribed for the rank and file of Christians while the latter could [only] be attained by real saints.” (F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, p. 74) One can see the vestiges of the clergy-laity distinctions as well as the failure to note that *all* believers are called to be saints. (1 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1, Phlp. 1:1, etc.) It has been humorously but accurately noted that there are only two categories when it comes to being a follower of Christ – saints and ain’ts! To be a saint is simply to be one who is set apart for God’s purposes – to not be set apart from this world to participate in the things of God is to be separate from the new life which Christ gives. It is most important, therefore, to know on which side of that line one stands!

Jesus said, “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Mt. 5:48) This “counsel of perfection” for some supposed elite or superior kind of believer falls flat on its face in that regard when we simply compare it with what John wrote: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1 Jn. 1:8) If *sinless* perfection is not what Jesus is speaking of here – and it is not – then just what kind of perfection is He talking about?

The first answer is found in recognizing that “perfect” in this instance is an imperfect, even unfortunate, word choice. However, in defense of the many translators who have chosen “perfect” over all other available choices, there really isn’t any one English word that would convey all that is implied in the Greek. The Greek word here is *teleios* [5046] and is many times elsewhere, especially in more recent translations, rendered “complete” or “mature.” “Whole” would come close in some respects. But hidden in the Greek is also the idea of “the end result, the goal, the limit.” It is not so much the sinlessness of God that is to be our standard and goal here but rather the wholeness or completeness or even oneness of God that is what we are to pursue.

This is also confirmed by recognizing what the scholars call the context of Jesus’ words. Directly before this command, He has given six instances where He demands from His followers even greater things than the law required. His requirements looked at the physical action merely as a symptom or indicator of the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Christ required – and still requires – an appropriate thought or heart attitude, not mere outward, physical compliance. (see Mt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-34, 38-39) In the sixth instance, the topic He takes up is love – love even your enemies. Have a love that is greater than the human love that even the tax collectors have for their own. (Mt. 5:43-47) Love, the divine characteristic which both Peter and Paul also place as the pinnacle of spiritual maturity (2 Pet. 1:5-7, Col. 3:14), is the crowning indicator of just how whole, complete, mature, perfect, like the Father, one actually is. In effect, Jesus is saying, “You must, by the power I give you by My Spirit, go beyond the letter and outward compliance with God’s laws and fulfill the spirit of the law so that you will be whole, mature and complete as the creation God created you to be.”

To What End

This standard of perfection – that of completeness, wholeness and maturity – is the standard by which we should be measuring our own life. But it is not the standard by which we are to judge and decide whom we will fellowship with. That is to say, we cannot fellowship only with those who display spiritual maturity – in our day, one might not find any fellowship at all on that basis! Yet the question of who should be received as a brother in Christ is a question as old as Christianity. The closely related question is – just what is the ekklesia supposed to be? It is not really possible to decide who should be included if one is not even certain what one is being included in! This question has historically been difficult to answer because the “theologians” were unwilling or unable to envision what the people of Christ were supposed to be because the Nicolaitan bishops had already corrupted the gospel and changed it to an outwardly visible structure by drawing followers after themselves and away from Christ. (Rev. 2:6, 15, Acts 20:30)

Cyprian, in 251 A.D., closed the gate as best he could, by saying, “Outside the church there is no salvation.” Though it is true that no one can be in Christ’s ekklesia (the Greek word inappropriately rendered “church” in English) who has not received Christ’s new life (Jn. 3:3, 2 Cor. 5:17), this is not nearly the same as saying that anyone who refuses to participate in a sect’s rituals and peculiar doctrines (and, yes, the Catholic sect, though the majority sect and the dominant power at that time, was, and is, nothing but a sect) is not being saved by Christ. In this way, Cyprian and the other “church” fathers thus spawned the “Mother Church” or “Mother Kirk” errors. Peter boldly and rightly declared, “[Jesus Christ of Nazareth] is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:11-12) Any salvation obtained in the name of “the church” that has no genuine roots in Jesus Christ of Nazareth is a false “salvation.” And any one’s salvation that is genuinely in Christ that is not recognized by those who claim to be “leaders” in “the church” only demonstrates the false nature of their “church.”

A Mixed Multitude

After the second century, the “church” has always been a mixed multitude, in part because *orthodoxy* (majority opinion about truth) was the primary standard for inclusion in the Catholic sect, and in part because many of the bishops and even popes were themselves corrupt and even wicked men. In many instances, we cannot historically ascertain if the bishop or pope in question had *ever* personally and genuinely received Christ’s new life! Yet these sometimes unregenerate, even carnal, worldly and wicked men were called upon to decide what truth was and to produce rulings and creeds which the rest of the people of Christ were then to abide by. To be certain, there were also bishops and “divines” who radiated the Spirit and wisdom of Christ but the trend of corruption was never checked and was the primary cause behind the Reformation which broke away from the Catholic sect in the sixteenth century.

The idea that “the church” must always be a mixed multitude was cemented in place with the conflict of Augustine and the Donatists (411 A.D.) Bruce Shelley writes:

North African Christianity was still torn by a passionate conflict between Catholics and a movement called Donatism. The controversy was long-standing and deep-seated. A bishop of Hippo [in North Africa] could scarcely avoid speaking to the issue.

When Augustine stepped into church leadership, Donatism was almost a hundred years old. The movement stood for a holy church, for church discipline, and for the unflinching resistance of unworthy bishops. The Catholics, said the Donatists, had surrendered all of these by ordaining immoral priests and bishops.

The *Donatist* name arose from Donatus, an early bishop of Carthage [also in North Africa] (315-355) who led the protest against Catholic practices. Donatist charges centered on the fact that certain Catholic bishops had handed over the Scriptures to be burned during the persecution under Diocletian. Such an act, the Donatists insisted, was a serious sin of apostasy. Since the Catholic pastors were ordained by bishops who had sinned so grievously, the Donatists believed they, rather than the Catholics, constituted the true church of Christ. During Augustine's time the Donatists were still widespread in North Africa and in some areas they constituted a majority.

Augustine rejected the Donatist's view of a pure church. Until the day of judgment, he said, the church must be a mixed multitude. Both good and bad people are in it. To support this idea he appealed to Jesus' parable of the wheat and tares (Mt. 13:24-30), overlooking the fact that Jesus was not speaking of the church but of the whole world.

Augustine also set forth a different understanding of the sacraments. The Donatists argued that the validity of the sacrament depends upon the moral standing of the minister. Augustine said, "No." The sacrament does not belong to the minister but to Christ. The priest's acts are really God's because He has placed the sacraments in the hands of the properly ordained minister. All that is required of the priest is his awareness that he administers God's grace for the whole church.

Such a view makes the priest the channel for grace to the members of the church. Thus, Augustine added his considerable influence to his priestly (sacerdotal) view of the church that reached such unfortunate extremes in medieval Catholicism. (*Church History in Plain Language*, p. 143-144)

The Wheat and the Tares

Let us try to avoid the superficialities of this episode and look at the points that touch upon perfection and maturity. Augustine supported his idea of "the church" as a mixed multitude by appealing to the parable of the wheat and tares but overlooked the fact that Jesus spoke of the world and not "the church." That is, Jesus, in the parable, specifically said that "the field" in which both kinds of seeds were planted "is the world." (Mt. 13:38) Why did Augustine and the Catholics miss this obvious fact? Augustine knew the Old and New Testaments inside out yet missed this. There are two more elements of that same parable that should be noted:

1) "While men *slept*..." Jesus said. (Mt. 13:25) Augustine and the Catholics certainly seemed to be sleeping at this point. And

2) the owner, representing Christ or God, said, "Let both grow together until the harvest..." (Mt. 13:30)

If God had awoken Augustine on this point, there would not have been a place for the tares to grow together with the wheat. Our vantage point, 1,500 years later and much nearer to the time when the angels will come to remove the tares, places us in a time when God is graciously showing (to those who will receive it) again just what a tare really is so that we can purify ourselves from all the contaminants and be ready for His return.

So what is this place that God allowed so that the two seeds could mature simultaneously? This place must be in the world – the Donatists had that part right. Yet the tares, “all things that offend [stumble] and those who practice lawlessness [what is right in one’s own eyes],” will be gathered “*out of Christ’s kingdom.*” (Mt. 13:41) What kind of place can be both in the world yet in the kingdom? Christ’s careful choice of words allows us, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, to understand *exactly* what He had in mind. It’s a matter of perspective. On another occasion Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is in your midst.” (Lk. 17:21) The tares stand now in the midst of the wheat – when they are removed, they will no longer be in the midst of the wheat and they will no longer be “in the kingdom.” They will have missed and refused all of God’s offers for them to become wheat and they will be gone. Sad indeed.

Let us consider the Nicolaitan bishops who stood over the people they had drawn after themselves (Acts 20:30) and stood as priest and mediator between the people and God. (see 1 Tim. 2:5) Is this the kingdom of God? No! This is the pattern of the world. Even the “church” buildings of the third and fourth centuries, the first to be specifically built for “Christian worship,” were manufactured at the order of the Roman emperor and were in contradiction to the teachings of the original apostles (Acts 7:48, 17:24) and patterned after Rome’s basilica or judgment hall. The “church,” that hierarchy of Nicolaitan overlords presiding over their own sect, is *from the world*. It was and still is a worldly authority structure, pattern and method.

Augustine, blinded to the truth contained in the parable, rightly judged that the “church” must be a mixed multitude until the tares were to be removed. But he failed to see that the only reason this must be so is because the “church” is really part of the field, *the world!* He did not see that “Mother Church” was in reality the Mother of Abominations. (Rev. 17:5) Augustine was asleep.

Where Does It Come From

Augustine also delivered another truth that carries much weight even today – yet he did not realize what a condemnation it was on the whole system of which he was a part. Petilian, a Donatist spokesman, said, “He who receives faith from a faithless priest, receives not faith, but guilt.” Augustine answered, “But Christ is not unfaithful, from whom I receive faith, not guilt. Christ, therefore, is properly the functionary, and the priest is simply His organ... My origin is Christ, my root is Christ, my head is Christ. This seed, of which I was born, is the Word of God, which I must obey even though the preacher himself practice not what he preaches. I believe not in the minister by whom I am baptized, but in Christ, who alone justifies the sinner and can forgive guilt.” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. III, Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity*, p. 367)

But wait a minute, Augustine. You’re a Catholic – you’re in that sect that teaches there is no salvation apart from “the church,” that hierarchy of priests and bishops and popes whom God gave direct permission to forgive sins. (Cyprian – again) If we must go through “the church” as the only channel of God’s grace in order to be saved, and we obtain our salvation from a part of “the church” that is not in Christ, how is it possible that we are truly saved? The Donatists quite

logically and rationally and rightly reached this conclusion. They too, however, were asleep, not seeing that their conclusion was sound but built on a false premise, not seeing that “the church” was something from the world.

But let us look also at the illogic that is contained in Augustine’s argument. A corrupt, deceived, disobedient, unregenerate priest (or “pastor” or “apostle” or “elder” or whatever) is Christ’s organ? It must be admitted that God indeed uses imperfect men to accomplish His perfect purpose – indeed, what other kind of men are there on planet earth that He could work with? But the priests and bishops of the Catholic sect are known to include some who routinely practice the basest and worst kinds of sins, those things which Paul said were “shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret.” (Eph. 5:12)

What is lacking here is the understanding that God gives His Spirit to *all* to drink of (1 Cor. 12:13), that *all* have the anointing of His Spirit (1 Jn. 2:20), that *all*, from the least to the greatest, shall know God and *none* shall need to be taught to know God. (Heb. 8:11, also see 1 Jn. 2:27) Because the Catholics had come to believe their priests and bishops were needed to mediate between God and men, they had to give these guys something to do. The men who stood in the place of God now also took on the work that originally belonged to the Spirit. Unity, truth and obedience were replaced with orthodoxy, doctrines, creeds and rituals and these latter became the special venue of the priest – the priesthood of *every* believer virtually died out though it has experienced various episodes of revitalization since the Reformation restored this truth at least to our awareness if not our practice. But under the Nicolaitan priesthood, men now had to go through other men just to get to God – just as it was under the Pharisees. (Mt. 23:13, Lk. 11:52) None of this Nicolaitan system was God’s New Covenant. This was what came into existence because men slept and God allowed a place, “the church,” to come into being so that the wheat, the sons of the kingdom (Mt. 13:38), and the tares, the sons of the evil one (largely but not exclusively the priests and bishops), could have a place to grow to maturity together, the tares in the midst of the wheat. Rightly did Loisy observe, “Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God but it was the Church that came into being.”

Sons of the Kingdom

To be a wheat, then, is to return to the kingdom of Christ and God. What is the kingdom? The kingdom of Christ, simply put, is that realm where Christ is truly King, that is, obeyed. This simple definition, believe it or not, *is* the whole counsel of God on this question and is the basis for deciding what is and what is not the kingdom of God. Christ was perfected (brought to completeness, maturity) through suffering and, having been perfected (brought to completeness, maturity), He became the author of eternal salvation to all who *obey* Him. (Heb. 2:10, 5:9) This *is* the gospel of the kingdom that was preached by the apostles and preserved for us in the New Testament so that we might again find and follow Him who is Light and Truth and Life.

Augustine and the Donatists were not the first to debate and divide over whether the people of Christ were to be a society of saints or a school for sinners. Novatian and Cornelius in 251 A.D. earned that distinction. The confusion that surrounds this ongoing debate only gives great confirmation to Jesus’ words: “While men slept...” (Mt. 13:25, also see Mt. 25:5)

If we conclude that saints are sinlessly perfect people, we must deny the notion of the *ekklesia* being a society of saints. But this is not what saints are – there are no sinlessly perfect people anywhere on this planet! Saints are simply those who have been set apart, by God’s invitation and grace and their own subsequent willful choice, for use in God’s kingdom. To be a saint, then, is to be a citizen or son of the kingdom, a functioning member of His body which is

His ekklesia. (Eph. 1:22-23) A saint is a sinner who has repented and by faith received the new life which is from above. Thus the ekklesia *is and can only be* a society of saints. No sinners who have not yet received Christ's grace and life can be in the ekklesia because they are not saints – but that transformation can happen to them in an instant. And, oh to God, that it would!

The idea that the genuine ekklesia could ever be a mixed multitude is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what a saint is and of what the ekklesia is. Similarly, the notion that the ekklesia could ever be a school for sinners fails to acknowledge what sinners are and what saints are. If any sinner could ever be educated to become a saint, then Christ's death was a useless gesture. True preaching is not so much an intellectual dissertation as it is a proclamation of kingdom realities. The sinner must repent and believe in Christ in order to become a saint – or he will remain an "ain't." That the Catholic sect of the early centuries thought "the church" could be an intellectual and philosophical entity that progressively brought men into the salvation of Christ shows only how they had already fallen from their first love of simply walking with Christ and had exchanged kingdom truth for "church" doctrines, philosophies and creeds. (see Rev. 2:4, Col. 2:8)

"God is not the author of confusion..." (1 Cor. 14:33) These historical episodes of confusion, of men failing to see obvious spiritual truths and blundering forward with their carnal misunderstandings, have been preserved for our benefit. We can learn from history, purify ourselves from the contaminants of the "church" and the tares and truly become the wheat, the sons of the kingdom that God intends us to be. Or we can scoff at the ridiculous notions presented in this book, continue to attend the "church" of our own preference, sit at the feet of the man or woman who scratches and tickles our ears in just the way we like (2 Tim. 4:3-4), and be surprised on judgment day when Jesus says to us, "Get away from Me! I never knew you, you who practiced only what was right in your own eyes!" (Mt. 7:23) The choice is ours to make. The time to make that choice is now.

Let he who has ears hear.

7. The Call for Unity

The call for unity that is sounding forth from so many among the professed followers of Christ today is nothing new – it is a call that has roots in God and yet it is a dangerous proposition. Consider that this call is nothing new – Luther and Zwingli attempted to unite in the sixteenth century but Luther claimed that Zwingli and his followers were of a different spirit and all hopes for a united Reformation died out. But the fractures that cause the disunity that prevails and abounds today goes much further back. To find that fracture, we have to look back to one of the most undocumented periods of church history – the second century. Of all the many thousands of people who had come to follow Christ, only a very few wrote and an even tinier handful of writers are preserved – in all, about a half dozen writers' works from the second century have survived. It is not to be supposed that these very few writers acted in some kind of conspiracy (though there is some room for "conspiracy" among the "church" leaders of later centuries in destroying or even changing various texts) but rather that these writers, because their ideas contained error and because they wielded incredible power, the opinions of these men – chiefly Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Cyprian – carry an incredible influence. This is all the more incredible because the vast majority of those today who profess to follow Christ, if they have ever even heard of these men's names, have

little or no idea how and to what extent their spiritual lives are impacted by these men's writings. Thus it remains virtually unknown that the call for unity in the second century resulted in a fracture from which the people of Christ have yet to recover.

The Cast

Philip Schaff writes,

“The fathers of [this] period all saw in the church, though with different degrees of clearness, a divine, supernatural order of things, in a certain sense, the continuation of the life of Christ on earth, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the sole repository of the powers of divine life, the possessor and interpreter of the Holy Scriptures, the mother of all the faithful.” (*History of the Christian Church, Vol. II*, p. 169)

Those who have been led into the truth by the Spirit of truth recognize that everything but this last item is truth. But in putting this last item into the beliefs of these men, Satan had successfully inserted one of his lies into their – and our – midst.

In spite of believing that the work of the “mother church” is a necessity, men like Augustine (who rightly belongs to the fifth century when the question of sin and grace was in conflict) still insisted that the salvation of man is *wholly* a work of God – and they never saw the contradiction. Augustine had already believed what Cyprian had said in 251 A.D., “No one can have God for his Father, who has not the church for his mother.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 173) This “mother church” error is built upon men like Cyprian’s complete inability to imagine a Christianity outside of the “empirical orthodox church, episcopally organized and centralized in Rome.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 173) Coupled with this blindness, Cyprian and the other “church fathers” built on the error that *Peter* was the rock upon which “the church” was to be built (Schaff, *II*, p. 161 – see Mt. 16:18, in which it is now clearly recognized by almost all that even the Greek construction used shows that Christ was *not* building His ekklesia on the person or character of Peter!) Also not to be missed is Cyprian’s nearly fanatical “horror of schism.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 262) Blindness, error and obsession – these are indications of demonic deception, not the work of Christ.

Ignatius of Antioch (martyred c. 107 A.D.) wrote that “the catholic church” was the closely united and full totality of His people and “only in her can we eat the bread of God; he, who follows a schismatic, inherits not the kingdom of God.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 171) Ignatius was the first martyr-bishop whose writings supported the exaltation of the episcopate (the bishops) – in the succeeding centuries those writers who did not agree with this idea would be labeled schismatic, heretics, rebels and antichrists. (Schaff, *II*, p. 170) The writings of these dissidents – and often they themselves – were very often eradicated and burnt. Yet modern scholarship even calls Ignatius’ writings into question – “The whole story of Ignatius is more legendary than real, and his writings are subject to grave suspicion of fraudulent interpolation.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 145) And it is in these questionable writings of Ignatius that we find “the first time that the term ‘catholic’ is applied to the church, and that episcopacy is made a condition of catholicity” (Schaff, *II*, p. 148) Ignatius’ idea of the episcopacy is found in statements such as

- “Look to the bishop, that God also [may look] upon you...”;

- “He that does anything without the knowledge of the bishop serves the devil...”;
- “...do all things with a divine concord: the bishop presiding in the place of God...”; and
- “follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ [follows] the Father...” (Schaff, *II*, p. 146-148)

Such teachings make salvation virtually dependent upon obedience to the bishop, thus putting upon the bishop a role reserved for Christ alone. (Heb. 5:9, 1 Tim. 2:5) Ignatius’ letters may well represent “a special pleading for a novelty which in the mind of the writer was essential to the very existence of the church” (Schaff, *II*, p. 148) but the overall character of Ignatius pointedly suggests another conclusion: “Ignatius glows with the fire and impetuosity of the Greek and Syrian temper which carries him beyond the bounds of sobriety... Hierarchical pride and humility, Christian charity and churchly exclusiveness are typically represented in Ignatius. ...his enthusiasm for martyrdom...degenerates into boisterous impatience and morbid fanaticism... There mingles also in all his extravagant professions of humility and entire unworthiness a refined spiritual pride and self-commendation. And, finally, there is something offensive in the tone of his epistle to Polycarp [born about 69 A.D. or earlier] in which he addresses that venerable bishop and apostolic disciple [of the apostle John], who at that time must have already entered upon the years of ripe manhood [Polycarp was at least 50, perhaps older], not as a colleague and brother, but rather as a pupil...” (Schaff, *II*, p. 657-659) Ignatius too appears to have had areas of his soul dominated by demonic influences.

Irenaeus too relied on historical error (deception?) and “calls Rome the greatest, the oldest (?) church, acknowledged by all, founded by the two most illustrious apostles, Peter and Paul, the church, with which, on account of her more important precedence, all Christendom must agree, or (according to another interpretation) to which (as the metropolis of the world) all other churches must resort.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 159) As there are now serious reasons to reject either Peter or Paul as the founders of any Roman Christian assembly, it would seem that Rome certainly inherited (or took upon itself) Peter’s propensity to strive to be “the greatest”! (see Lk. 22:24, 31, etc.) Irenaeus calls the hierarchical church “the haven of rescue, the way of salvation, the entrance to life... Only on the bosom of the church...can we be nursed to life. ...separation from her is separation from the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Heretics...are enemies of the truth and sons of Satan...” (Schaff, *II*, p. 171) “To the ever-shifting and contradictory opinions of the heretics Irenaeus opposes the unchanging faith of the catholic church which is based on the Scriptures and tradition, and compacted together by the Episcopal organization.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 753-754) Unfortunately for the rest of Christianity – all those, like ourselves, who have come after – “the Episcopal organization” with which “the Scriptures and tradition” (which those were and are largely truth) is bound up (“compacted together”) is not to be found anywhere in the Scriptures! Irenaeus, seeing only the small number of men between himself and the Christ (Irenaeus was the pupil of Polycarp who was the pupil of the apostle John), seeing the influx of ideas like the Gnostic heresies, and, as so many other bishops believed of their position, believing the primary role of the bishop to be the successor of the apostles and guardians of the doctrine of the church (Schaff, *II*, p. 763), failed to see that he too was under a number of deceptions – the “native language” of the devil and demonic. (Jn. 8:44)

Similar statements and insights can be found in Tertullian (who became a “schismatic” during the Montanist movement), Clement of Alexandria and Origen (who was condemned as a

“heretic” in a later age), and further evidence can be brought forth that the episcopate arose as a separate office *after* the so-called apostolic age of the original apostles – chief among these evidences being the ample testimony of the New Testament itself that speaks of elders (Greek *presbuteros* [4245]) and overseers (traditionally “bishops,” Greek *episkopas* [1985]) as being the same thing! – but surely the point has been made that an important definition was made by the most visible and the most overlooked sect in church history, the so-called “Catholic” sect. They made these definitions and set the pattern even though the “church fathers” of this age believed that “No heresy can reach the conception of the church, or rightly claim any one of her predicates; it forms at best a sect or party, and consequently falls within the province and the fate of human and perishing things, while the church is divine and indestructible.” (Schaff, *II*, p. 170) To that last, we must also add the Catholic sect’s claim, not only to be exclusive, divine and indestructible, but also to be infallible – a claim proven false time and time again. What we are examining here is the first instance where the Catholic sect took upon itself the role of setting forth a false doctrine and calling it truth. In this case the doctrine was not so much a tenet but a practice that required justification.

Nowhere in the New Testament is the ekklesia called a mother. She *is* called the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:23-24) and it does not take much insight to see that one cannot be the mother of oneself nor that Christ could have the same entity as both mother and bride. The “mother church” error is simply the historical hiding place for Mystery Babylon, the mother of the abominations of the earth. (Rev. 17:5) The teachings of Ignatius, Irenaeus, Cyprian, etc. are simply the proof that “while men slept” the devil, the enemy of the kingdom of God, sowed his sons among the sons of the kingdom. (Mt. 13:25, 38) Whereas men in the second, third and fourth centuries, especially the Catholic sect, could only see the “empirical orthodox church, episcopally organized and centralized in Rome” (Schaff, *II*, p. 173), the “church” – that world-like organization and structure that, being a part of this world, “the field,” that would conceal the real nature of the tares among the wheat (again see Mt. 13:38), only those who remained sons of the kingdom, that realm where Christ is *obeyed*, would be the true wheat. As Paul had precisely prophesied to the elders of Ephesus, “From among yourselves [the ranks of the elders] men [“bishops”] will rise up, speaking corrupted things [subtle distortions of truth], to draw away the disciples after themselves [in their newly-created office].” (Acts 20:30)

The Basis of Unity

Paul wrote clearly about the body of Christ in his letter to the Ephesians. One of his instructions was that we should “endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:3) One thing that ought to jump out at us immediately is that the unity based on the Spirit of God is not nearly the same thing as a unity based on the catholic system under an exalted bishop! And it is here that we can best see the fracture, even rupture, that occurred in the second century. Because these men (“bishops”) believed themselves to be the exclusive possessors of the “keys of the kingdom,” the right to forgive and absolve sins (see however Mt. 16:19, 18:18, Jn. 20:23 – a function that belongs to all genuine members of the priesthood of *all* believers provided they act in the unity of the Spirit on such occasions), all manner of non-Scriptural abominations have been perpetuated in the “church” – both the original Catholic sect and all her prostitute daughters (“denominations”) that have broken away, many of which until the sixteenth century were eradicated in blood. This *is* the mother of abominations – a “mother” who destroys her own offspring because they are too much like herself!

The Greek word translated “unity” is *henotes* [1775] and it really should be rendered “unanimity.” Strong’s defines it as “oneness or unanimity.” A.T. Robertson, one of the most respected Greek scholars to date because he only rarely lets his “theology” define the Greek but rather lets the Greek speak for itself, writes, “Late and rare word (from *heis*, one) in Aristotle and Plutarch, though in [the New Testament] only in [Eph. 4:3, 13].” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol. IV*, p. 535) Kenneth Wuest, another respectable Greek scholar, writes, “‘Unity’ is *henotes*, ‘unanimity, agreement.’ It is the unanimity or agreement among Christians that is the product of the Holy Spirit.” Wuest then renders the passage as “...doing your best to safeguard the unanimity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (*Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. I*, p. 95-96, on Eph. 4:3) This is the idea of being in “one accord” as practiced by the first believers. (Acts 2:46, etc.)

The Marburg Confrontation

Imagine, if you can, how different church history would be if men had not slept but had instead remained alert to the spiritual realities and consequences of their actions. We can only engage in a small bit of imaginative speculation, however, because over all human history God is still enthroned and it was He who chose, for His own purpose and glory, to allow the devil to slip into the field while men slept. Men slept – God did not. But let us consider how some specific things would have been handled differently if all the people had operated in the unanimity of the Spirit.

The Marburg conference (1529 A.D.), the conflict between Luther and Zwingli, was attended by about a dozen men. Imagine now how different this conference might have been if all those in attendance knew that the Lord Himself expected them to come together in unanimous agreement and that this was *His* highest priority. Thus when Luther doggedly held onto his faulty idea that “This is My body” (Mt. 26:26, 1 Cor. 11:24) meant the literal presence of Christ’s body in the bread served at communion, the simple fact that there were others in the room who disagreed should have told Luther that one – or both! – parties were wrong. But Luther’s bull-headedness, which had served him well throughout his conflict against the Catholic sect, was completely inappropriate at this conference and prevented the bringing about of the unanimity of the Spirit of God. Luther’s parting shot when the conference ended with no resolution, “Yours is a different spirit from ours” (Schaff, *VII*, p. 644), holds more truth than Luther intended and Luther’s rude and obstinate refusal to receive from the Spirit of truth indicates that Luther was under more demonic control than he thought or believed. His letter to his wife, written on the last day of the Marburg conference, betrays that Luther wanted “no brotherhood and membership, only peace and good-will” – the latter meaning, as was actually stated to the Swiss in a final thrust, “‘We cannot acknowledge you as brethren.’ They were willing, however, to include them in that universal charity which we owe to our enemies.” And after listing Zwingli’s “best arguments,” he arrogantly writes to his wife, “I think God has blinded their eyes.” (Schaff, *VII*, p. 645)

Another historian notes,

After Augsburg [1530, one year after Marburg] Luther continued to preach and teach the Bible in Wittenburg, but even sympathetic biographers have found it hard to justify some of the actions of his declining years. As *Time* once put it, “He endorsed the bigamous marriage of his supporter, Prince Philip of Hesse. He denounced reformers who disagreed with him in terms that he had

once reserved for the papacy. His statements about the Jews would sound excessive on the tongue of a Hitler.” By the time of his death in 1546, says biographer Roland Bainton, Luther was “an irascible old man, petulant, peevish, unrestrained, and at times positively coarse.” (Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, p. 263)

It is not really all that difficult to discern which spirit Luther was of at the Marburg conference and in the last seventeen years of his life. And it is these last years that betray the previously hidden presence of demonic control even in the man who helped bring many of the sixteenth century people of Christ into greater light and liberty than was available under the Catholic “church.” Indeed, his blindness about the bread and body which he used to separate the body of Christ stands as a witness of just how powerful the fracture of failing to practice unanimity of the Spirit really is.

Back to the Second Century

If we indulge in a bit more imaginative speculation and apply the notion of the unanimity of the Spirit to the second century, it is not difficult to conclude that there would be no bishops, no basilica (judgment hall) temples (that English-speaking men would come to call “churches”) and no “church” laws by which one could choose to follow the Spirit of truth or follow the bishop who taught what seemed right to his listeners and followers. Thus many of the situations that were insurmountable in the second century would never have even come up for consideration.

- The men whose writings helped bring about the Catholic “church” as it was in the Middle Ages would never have been bishops, probably would never have written down anything (certainly not what they did write) and other men truly led only by the Spirit of truth might have written things that could have been included in what we now call “the New Testament.”

- Rather than Montanus being forced to break away from the Catholic sect because the bishops relied on synods and councils and the power they wielded as bishops of “the church” (all while they practiced whatever was right in their own eyes, lawlessness – Jdgs. 21:25), perhaps Montanus’ call for moral improvements would have been heeded and his own spiritual, moral and aesetic excesses would also have been restrained and curbed.

- The persecutions (303-311 A.D.) of the Roman emperor Diocletian produced literally thousands who, rather than be tortured or killed, bowed to Caesar as God. After the persecutions were over, many repented of this and sought to be restored to the faith. These people were called “the lapsed” because it was said their faith lapsed during their persecution. The reaction to the lapsed produced the system of outward penance and was the trigger for at least six major schisms. But suppose each local assembly had been trusted to restore each individual as the Lord led each assembly – evidenced by the unanimous agreement of all genuine and confirmed members of that local assembly. There is no reason to suppose the lapsed shouldn’t be forgiven –

Jesus Himself had said, "...every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men." (Mt. 12:31) But there is no need, as is evidenced by the silence of the New Testament, for any kind of ritualized penance. Instead, under practice of unanimity, there would have been no ritualized system of penance and there would not have been six divisions of the people of Christ. The Head of the body, the Lord Jesus Christ, would have restored the lapsed in ways that would have greatly surpassed the method of penance.

Practicalities

The objection that unanimity is impractical only gives evidence of the carnal perspective of the one giving this response. In truth, it is an objection rooted in unbelief and lack of faith. The unanimity of the Spirit is a work in and of the eternal God whose fruit is patience and long suffering. (Gal. 5:22) Though men are anxious and hurriedly striving to build their own fiefdoms, God is patient in His dealings with men. Christ, who is building His eternal body and bride, does not take quick, slip-shod shortcuts. If we are not willing to wait for God to bring His people into unanimity on a given issue, then that is our impatience or our own striving to build some kingdom other than His. It is our sin.

It is also true that leftover elements of the "church" paradigm will prevent us from seeing how possible and even necessary this unanimity really is. Because we see huge mega-"churches" herd its people in and out several times a week, we will tend to think we need to bring all this diverse and divided crowd, in truth an abominable mixed multitude, into unanimous agreement. Or we'll see the vast number of sects and divisions and dissensions (the real names for "denominations" – see Gal. 5:20) and we'll despair of ever bringing them into unanimity. But this is reaching too far. The mega-"church" and the denominations (especially the fraudulently "non-denominational" ones) are, *at best*, a mixed multitude and, at worst, the *apostasy*, the great falling away from the faith that occurs before the return of Christ. (Mt. 24:10, 2 Ths. 2:3) We cannot hope – nor should we even try – for unanimity of the Spirit with those who have not yet drunk of the one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13) or who seek to partake of both the Lord and the demonic. (1 Cor. 10:21) We can neither judge nor unite with large, ill-defined groups of people – we can only interact with those individuals we do come into contact with and respond accordingly to what spirit or Spirit controls their life.

The principle that will guide us best in seeking to practice unanimity with any group of genuine believers we come in contact with is the question: "Who is impacted?" If we will take care to include every known genuine follower of Christ (evidenced by their personal obedience to Him and not to the "church") that is likely to be impacted by the given question or issue at hand, then we are literally insisting that Christ be the literal Head – and not just the nominal "Head" He is to the "church" – and Director of our work and assembling in His name.

The call for unity is genuine – but it is dangerous. It is dangerous because most people who claim to be followers of Christ don't recognize this call as a call to unanimity and they do not recognize the parameters God has set for this unity. It is dangerous because men do not know how to follow God without the input of their Luther, Ignatius or Diotrephes (see 3 Jn. 9) who stealthily and subtly follow, practice and teach things they've learned from cleverly concealed demonic sources. (see 1 Tim. 4:1)

For these reasons, a call for "ecumenical" unity of the denominations is similarly short-sighted. The "church" pattern and denominationalism are carnal, worldly add-ons to the way of following Christ. One cannot practice the unanimity of the Spirit, perhaps God's highest calling

for any corporate body or group, within the context of these aberrations. It simply cannot – and will not – happen. This is why God continues to call His people out from the “Christian” idolaters (see 2 Cor. 6:17, 1 Cor. 5:10-11) and to go to meet Jesus “outside the camp.” (Heb. 13:12-13) The genuine ekklesia begins to function wherever “two or three are gathered together in [His] name and [Christ as King is] there in the midst of them.” (Mt. 18:20) If we will but let Him be King in our “twos and threes,” and walk in the unanimity of the Spirit in the bond of peaceful resolution of our differences of opinion, doctrine, practice and “theology,” we can simultaneously trust Him to build His eternal globe-spanning ekklesia of which He is the Head. (Mt. 16:18, Eph. 4:16, Col. 1:18) After all, He has much more invested in this process than we do and He alone has the right and ability to build it – He *is* the Blueprint, the Architect and the Builder all in one! (Heb. 12:2, Jn. 13:15, 1 Pet. 2:21, etc.)

Paul warned those who would come after him (in imitation or in time) that “each one [should] take heed how he builds on [the only foundation, Christ],” stating that he, by the grace (power) of God given to him, was God’s fellow-worker or co-laborer. (see 1 Cor. 3:9-11) Paul, in this metaphor of building gives *three* (although most “churches” teach only two) possible outcomes. Paul wrote, “If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw...” (1 Cor. 3:12) and goes on to say, “If anyone’s work which he has built on [the foundation of Christ] endures [the fires of testing on judgment day], he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.” (1 Cor. 3:13-15) Many teachers stop there but fail to recognize that Paul does not end his metaphor here.

Paul continues, “Do you not know that you are the temple [the *whole* building, temple, house, body, ekklesia, bride – Eph. 1:22-23, 2:21-22, 5:30, 32] of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.” (1 Cor. 3:16-17) *This* is where Paul ends his metaphor. We will have to wait until judgment day to see whether God will consider the demonically-tainted works of the men whose words we’ve already examined will be “wood, hay or straw” or an actual defilement of God’s temple for which they will have earned destruction. But we must not rule out this third possibility and this is precisely why we must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Phlp. 2:12), aware that through negligence we can fall short of the grace of God that simultaneously leads us into true holiness and out of defilement and wickedness, and thus be disinherited as Esau was. (Heb. 12:14-17) We know that “Many will say to [Christ] in that day [of final judgment], ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then [Christ] will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness [what is right in your own eyes]!’” (Mt. 7:22-23) Lawlessness, that which is right in one’s own eyes, the fruit of the tree of the independent knowledge of good and evil, is diametrically opposed to righteousness, what is right and true in *God’s* eyes and He alone *is* the tree of life. (2 Cor. 6:14, Gen. 2:17, Rev. 22:14)

The real call to unity that comes from the Spirit of God is a call to the kingdom of God, that realm where Christ is literally and consistently obeyed. The commands and directives of the King will be confirmed and accomplished by “endeavoring to keep the unanimity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:3) Only by returning to being sons of the kingdom will we “shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of [our] Father.” (Mt. 13:43) No other Person can be – or should be – the focus of our unity and He alone is capable of bringing any group of humans together in unanimous harmony regarding such controversial and diverse and divisive issues. In this way, He demonstrates that He is God and that He is in our midst. (Jn. 17:21-23) That the “church,”

after two thousand years of trying, cannot produce anything but rampant division and dissension is only proof that the “church” is not the way God has proscribed for men to follow Him. Only those who dare to step out in obedience to God’s command to practice unanimity with all of His other true children will discover what God had in mind all along.

Let he who has ears hear.

8. Kingdom or “Church”?

Alfred Loisy rightly observed: “Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God, but it was the Church that came.” This astute observation leaves us with the question of whether Christ truly came to found and institute the “church” or did He truly come to bring forth the kingdom of God among men? This latter question was the one on the minds of the disciples after His resurrection:

“Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:6-8)

Though the disciples of that day were not given an understanding of His answer, two thousand years later we can see more of what Jesus referred to – if our minds are not clouded over with human tradition or demonic “theological” deceptions. What time or season had the Father taken into His own authority? If we were to carefully read the parables about the kingdom of God, we would see that the *owner* of the field (in which both wheat and tares were sown) unilaterally made the decision to leave the tares inter-planted among the wheat “lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest...” (Mt. 13:29-30)

When Jesus explained this parable, He identified the field as the world, the harvest as occurring at the end of the age and further explained, “The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness.” (Mt. 13:30, 39, 41) When the enemy (the devil –Mt. 13:39) sowed the tares (“the sons of the wicked one”) among the wheat (“the sons of the kingdom” - Mt. 13:38), a worldly and demonic element was introduced into the midst of the people who named the name of Christ. And the owner – Christ and God – deliberately allowed this to be so. The two thousand years since the writing of the New Testament we commonly call “church history” is simply the story of tares interacting with wheat. Clearly discerning which is which from the written records is often an exercise in futility. But at the end of the age, *all* the worldly, deceptive, lawless elements will be removed from His *kingdom*.

Let us note with great sobriety that there are indeed differences between the “church” and the kingdom of God. In the “church,” there has been left a place where the sons of the wicked one can practice lawlessness (that which is right in one’s own eyes) and offend (stumble, cause to fall away from the faith) others who are foolish enough to listen to and follow them. Paul warned that in the last days such teachers would be heaped up (2 Tim. 4:3-4) and Jesus warned that these men who falsely claim to be “God’s anointed” would deceive *many*. (Mt. 24:5) But

when the angels are sent to bring in the harvest, only the kingdom of Christ and God will remain. The son of the kingdom who wishes to remain a son of the kingdom will do well to be certain that he has a true place in the kingdom now.

Jesus had said, “You shall receive power...and you shall be witnesses to Me...” (Acts 1:8) The true son of the kingdom must walk in the power of Christ’s Spirit and bear witness of Christ. The tare, being a son of the wicked one, is quite able to routinely practice deceit, slander, power-mongering, flattery, sophistry (worldly wisdom and philosophy) and to pour forth all manner of religious and philosophical information (rhetoric) so as to gain followers after himself, followers willing and even eager to pay him handsomely to soothe and stimulate their ears while he does nothing to stop or rescue their souls from their journey down the broad path that leads to destruction. (Mt. 7:13)

The primary evidence that one has truly submitted one’s life to Christ’s Spirit is love. (Gal. 5:22, Jn. 13:35, 1 Jn. 4:16, etc.) “In this the children of God [the wheat] and the children of the devil [the tares], are revealed: Whoever does not practice righteousness [what is right in God’s eyes] is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.” (1 Jn. 3:10) This standard alone makes many things quite clear – if we have eyes that see.

John goes on to tell us that Cain “was of the wicked one and murdered his brother...because [Cain’s] works were evil and his brother’s righteous.” (1 Jn. 3:12) Jude warns of those who would feast “*with us*” without fear, serving only themselves, saying that “they have gone in the way of Cain.” (Jude 11-12) The tare, the son of the wicked one in our midst, may not physically rise up against us and literally kill us (though that is precisely what the tare does to us spiritually) but he certainly will not hesitate to lie or slander or gossip about us and cause us great hardship. And, then again, when the situation is lethal, he will certainly abandon or betray us without hesitation when his own self interests (especially his “theological” ones) are at stake.

The last parable Jesus gave about the kingdom of God also speaks of the end of the age.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.” (Mt. 13:47-50)

This is the same picture as in the parable of the wheat and the tares – the Son of Man sends out His angels to separate and remove the wicked ones from His kingdom. But also embedded in this parable is the difference between the kingdom of God and the “church.”

There are two promises that Jesus made that few have seen or understood exactly how He would fulfill them – and their fulfillment is best seen when one views them as intricately linked. “I will build My ekklesia...” (Mt. 16:18) and “I will make you fishers of men...” (Mt. 4:19)

While men have built ornate temples and erected authority and power structures that exactly mirror those of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ was quietly tying together His net with cords of two or three strands, a formula that wise Solomon said could not be easily broken. (Eccl. 4:12) “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” (Mt. 18:20) Jesus did not say, “...two or *more*...” – He said, “...*two or three*...”

Love cannot be practiced while one sits passively at the feet of an ear-scratching “pastor,” “apostle” or priest of any kind. Love – personal, intimate, life changing, sin-, self- and

Satan-overcoming agape love – cannot be accomplished in a large meeting but is almost always effortlessly enacted where there are only two or three people present. And love *is* the primary evidence that one truly is a son of the kingdom! Worldly practices and power structures (and their inherent power struggles) are only evidence that one is among tares, no matter what titles these men have taken to themselves – “pastor,” “prophet,” “elder,” “apostle,” etc. What one *does* simply and only gives evidence of who one’s father truly is. It really is that simple. That many have been lured away from the simplicity that is found in Christ tells us that we most often make judgments based on appearances and not according to God’s righteous standards (Jn. 7:24), that we have not truly purified ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit (2 Cor. 7:1) and that the roaring lion who roams around seeking whom among us he may devour is much more well-fed and fatter than many want to believe. (1 Pet. 5:8)

Christ’s kingdom – which on earth among men includes what the New Testament calls His body, His temple, His household, His family *and* His ekklesia (Eph. 2:19-22) – is that which will remain. Those false “brothers” who have taken a false place of power, prestige, position and preeminence among the genuine followers of Christ now – though they have prophesied, cast out demons and performed miracles in His name (Mt. 7:21-23) – will find they have no place reserved for them in His kingdom then. There will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth but, like Esau (Heb. 12:16), it will be too late for them to repent. Only the true son of the kingdom who has submitted to the flow of Christ’s Spirit and become truly incorporated in Christ’s “net” in his personal interactions with others will be the properly attired, genuinely prepared wedding guest (Mt. 22:11-13) who is enabled to also be part of Christ’s bride, body, temple, household, family and people.

Let he who has ears hear.

9. Come Out From Among Them

At the end of His explanation of the parable of the wheat and the tares, Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Mt. 13:43) What did He mean by that and why did He say it? First, we must understand that He speaks of *spiritual* hearing. Jesus said to the seven ekklesias, “He who has an ear, let him hear what *the Spirit* says to the ekklesias.” (Rev. 2:7, etc.) And Paul wrote, “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Cor. 2:14) We may readily restate Jesus’ statement as “He who has spiritual ears that are submitted to the Spirit of God, use them now to hear what the Spirit says to you.”

Why would Jesus say such a thing? He has just explained the parable of the wheat and the tares in rather clear and precise terms. What is left to hear from the Spirit of God?

Embedded in the parable of the wheat and the tares is the owner’s instruction to allow the wheat and the tares to grow together until the time of the harvest. (Mt. 13:30) And Jesus even clarified it further by saying, “The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels.” (v. 39) Some have taken this to mean that the tares (the sons of the devil – v. 38) are irrevocably in the midst of the wheat (the sons of the kingdom – v. 38) and there is absolutely nothing that can be done about it. Various “church fathers” and leaders whose thinking is clouded by this deception, have even declared that the people of Christ will always be a mixed multitude – never seeing the complete, inherent contradiction of terms in what they are saying and espousing.

Jesus said, “Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (v. 43) What is left to hear from the Spirit of God? All the *other* things Jesus and the New Testament have to say about dealing with men who claim to be children of God but in truth are children of the devil.

- “Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. *Let them alone.* They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch.” (Mt. 15:13-14) If a tare is a “pastor” or leader who, by virtue of his unScriptural position and power, refuses to hear the truth and repent, we will hear the Spirit say, “Leave them alone. You stay away from them and avoid their judgment too.”

- “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.” (Lk. 17:3) But if the sinning brother refuses to hear the truth, not even from witnesses or the whole ekklesia, he is to be treated as “a heathen and a tax collector.” (Mt. 18:15-17) In today’s unScriptural context of the “church” as a mixed multitude, purportedly receiving God’s approval and blessing, attempting to obey these instructions usually results only in yet another “church” split. Take great care to step carefully, with ears attentively attuned to the Spirit, through this minefield!

- “Note those who cause divisions (sects, *denominations*) and offenses (sins, stumbling away from faith), contrary to the [original apostles’] teaching [of the kingdom of God] which you learned, and *avoid them.*” (Rom. 16:17) The one following the Spirit of truth into greater spiritual light, liberty and truth is *not* the one causing the divisions and offenses! Rather it is the local Diotrefes (3 Jn. 9) with his death grip on the pulpit and the purse strings who demands that you either follow him and his teachings or leave his “church” that is the one separating the body and stumbling others. Do not be deceived by mere outward appearances.

- Paul concludes his prophetic description of the perilous times of the last days, a description that sounds eerily like much of the “church” environment today, by saying that people would be “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. *And from such people turn away!*” (2 Tim. 3:1-5) Those who do not love the truth and who prefer unrighteousness (anything other than what is right in God’s eyes) are those who are given over to strong delusion so “that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” (2 Ths. 2:10-12) These may be loyal and faithful “church”-ites in good standing at their “church” and with their “pastor” but their destiny is destruction if they remain stubborn and unrepentant in their religious rebellion against God. From such *turn away!*

- “Now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother; who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person. For what have I

to do with judging those also who are outside [the ekklesia]? Do you not judge those who are inside [the ekklesia]? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘*put away from yourselves the evil person.*’” (1 Cor. 5:11-13) Those who claim to belong to Christ but who persist in practicing evil things are to be put away from ourselves.

- “And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said, ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’ Therefore ‘*Come out from among them and be separate*, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty.’” (2 Cor. 6:16-18) In his writings to the Corinthians, Paul spoke repeatedly of coming out and being separate from sin, especially idolatry. “I wrote to you in my [previous, not conclusively historically preserved] epistle not to keep company (associate) with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.” (1 Cor. 5:9-10) Today we would say, “You would have to get off the planet and leave everyone else here!” Since Paul then clearly, in at least two letters, indicated that he was *not* talking about getting out of the world, by what foolishness can we conclude that Paul is now, in his third letter, speaking about anything other than “Christian” idolatry and immorality? Come out and be separate from the “Christian” forms of sin and wickedness for they are of the worst sort! It is in this light that the similar call to “Come out of her [Mystery Babylon]” indicates that Babylon, the great prostitute, is, at least in some regards, a “Christian” counterfeit of the bride of Christ. (Rev. 18:4, 17:5, etc.)

From these Scriptures, we can see that it is not necessary to uproot a tare – such a thing, apart from actually murdering the tare (a practice completely contrary to the way of Christ!), can only be done by an angel anyway. (Mt. 13:41-42) It is not even absolutely necessary to expose a tare. Though that may be something we have to do on occasion, particularly with or for someone ensnared by that tare (see Eph. 5:11, etc.), there is much, much more to the genuine life in Christ than confronting and arguing with the Pharisees! And if you’re living the real life in Christ, the Pharisees will come looking for you soon enough, with murderous intent! There is no valid reason to rush into this encounter! Nor is it necessary to sit idly in some pew listening to demonically-influenced (1 Tim. 4:1) sermons from some Nicolaitan overlord (Rev. 2:6, 15) while we languish and wait for some distant future time when the angels will have removed the tares from this world. All that is necessary is that we let them alone, avoid them, turn away from them, put them out of our midst, come out from among them and be separate *unto God*.

When the tares no longer exert their wicked and evil influences upon the sons of the kingdom, “*then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*” (Mt. 13:43) It is very likely to be a rather lengthy process to detox and purify one’s thoughts and beliefs – especially for those who have submitted themselves to some “church” or “pastor” or “theology” for many long years. It may take an equal or even greater number of years to learn to sit quietly at the Master’s feet, to hear only His voice and to follow only Him as we unlearn our ingrained tendencies and trained proficiencies in

“rationally” and intellectually (soulishly) dissecting and dismembering *spiritual* truths. This time in “the wilderness” will be difficult, uncomfortable, even painful – but it is still only a tested faith that produces patient endurance that leads to a perfected or completed work in our lives. (Jas. 1:3-4)

The kingdom of God is that realm where Christ and God is *obeyed* and the will of God is the “prime directive.” (Mt. 6:10, Jn. 7:17, etc.) This is the heartbeat of a son of the kingdom. It will never be enough to admire and imitate the administrative structure of the kingdom. It will never be enough to seek to conform to patterns of ekklesia or apostolic “order.”

Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will do what I say...” (Jn. 14:23) It is not even enough to strive to obey the requirements, neither as “church” by-laws nor as “kingdom” edicts, that are laid out in the pages of the New Testament, God’s true and complete “manifesto” of His kingdom. ***No! We must love the King!*** Then we will obey Him and we will seek His will – not as a prescribed remedy or as an onerous duty but as a joy and a privilege. And thus we will be righteous (clothed in His righteousness and doing and saying what He sees as right and good and true) and we will shine in our own dark generation like the sun because we are functioning in His kingdom, that realm of righteousness, peace and joy in His Spirit (Rom. 14:17) and of power and not mere talk. (1 Cor. 4:20) When this is true of our life, should the angels come in our time to remove the tares, such an event will not cause much change for us!

This *is* what no man can tell us and what we must hear from the Spirit of truth who resides within and teaches us all things. (Jn. 14:26, 1 Jn. 2:27, etc.) We are called to something that far transcends mere religion and mere philosophy – we are called to a new and transcendent *life* in a glorious and transcendent kingdom ruled by the God of love, truth, beauty and life! We will only be the sons of God when we are truly led by His *Spirit* (Rom. 8:14) Though the devil and deceived men and even some sincere but misguided men make every effort to keep us from stepping into this liberty (and responsibility!) which God calls us into, the schemes of death and darkness cannot keep the genuine people of Christ imprisoned! (Mt. 16:18) It is our birthright and personal privilege to overcome *all* the hindrances of sin, self, this world and Satan combined. “We are more than conquerors through Him who loves us.” (Rom. 8:37)

This is what the Spirit is telling us – when the tares no longer exert their wicked and evil influences upon the sons of the kingdom, *then* the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let us with all diligence press onward and upward in this call of God in Christ Jesus (Phlp. 3:14), casting aside *every* weight and sin which so readily trips us up and running with endurance the race God has set before us (Heb. 12:1) and cleansing ourselves from *all* filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. (2 Cor. 7:1) This is our glorious privilege and inheritance which only a blinded and deceived fool would trade for the mere morsels dispensed by the “church” and this world. (Heb. 12:16-17) Let us be those who diligently and truly “*continue* in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel.” (Col. 1:23) We have gone too far, gained too much and endured too long to grow weary now. Let us press on.

He awaits us!

Let he who has ears hear.

Section II: The King Is Here

10. The Kingdom of God Is at Hand

“Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand!” (Mt. 3:2, etc.) With this proclamation, Jesus ushered in a new phase in the work of redemption that God had purposed before the creation of the world, a phase that would include the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord of Glory, the Prince of Life (see 1 Cor. 2:7-8, Acts 3:15), and that would usher in what many have come to call the “church age.” To grasp the scope of deception that is upon many of the people of Christ, one needs only to recognize that Jesus proclaimed the *kingdom* of God but it is the “church” (Greek, *ekklesia* [1577]) that came into being. While Loisy’s observation indeed contains “buzz words” or “jargon” that can be easily misconstrued, it yet remains true that this observation contains what is perhaps *the* key insight the people of Christ need in this time and season of deception. (Mt. 24:4, 2 Ths. 2:9-10)

When Jesus spoke of the sign of His return at the end of the age, He said, “And this gospel of *the kingdom* will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” (Mt. 24:14 – emphasis added) There is in this prophecy a sense that the gospel of the kingdom will have been so corrupted that by this time it will be almost unrecognizable and will seem almost like an entirely different gospel. Indeed, the gospel of the kingdom is vastly different from the “gospel” most often preached, verbally or by practice, by the “church.” The “church’s” “gospel” centers around a man or what some men are doing – “Come hear this man preach” or “Come, see what this group of people are doing” and “If you like what you hear and see, you may participate as much or as little as you like, doing whatever you want to *for* God,” forgetting entirely that “without Me you can do nothing.” (Jn. 15:5) The gospel of the kingdom centers around Christ, who He is and what He has done – “The King has come. He has bought and redeemed you with His own blood. Now repent, be changed and bear fruit worthy of Him.” (Heb. 5:9, 1 Cor. 6:20, Acts 17:30, Rom. 7:4, etc.)

The Kingdom

Paul wrote, “The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 14:17) Here we find both what the kingdom is and what it is not. As Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight...” (Jn. 18:36) If Christ’s kingdom were something of this world, it would be in competition with the kingdoms of this world for temporal power. If Christ’s kingdom were something of this world, the kind of foods we eat and drink would have special significance to God. That so many who claim to follow Christ are caught up in political activism or in bondage to dietary rules shows how far short of Christ’s kingdom they have come.

The three primary characteristics Paul gives here of the kingdom are righteousness, peace and joy – accomplished *in* the Holy Spirit. In another place Paul writes, “For the kingdom of God is not in mere talk but in power.” (1 Cor. 4:20) The kingdom of Christ and God is not found where men *talk* about righteousness, peace and joy – the kingdom is found where men *practice* righteousness, peace and joy by the power of the Spirit of God. We are specifically commanded to withdraw from those “Christians” who have a mere form of godliness but none of the real power. (2 Tim. 3:5)

Thus we can see that righteousness is not a set of laws (compiled from either the Old or New Testament) that we perform so as to be right before God. Righteousness is simply what

God says is right. Paul wrote, “For what fellowship [commonality, unity] has righteousness with lawlessness?” (2 Cor. 6:14) In this contrast we see the inherent enmity between God and man. Righteousness can be summed up as what is right in God’s eyes whereas lawlessness is what is right in a man’s own eyes. (Jdgs. 21:25) Lawlessness is the primary characteristic of our relativistic times because the very idea that there is an exterior source by which men should order their life and conduct is ridiculed and condemned. (also see Mt. 24:12) God, however, still *requires* men to have a righteousness that exceeds even that of the Jewish scribes and Pharisees to even enter His kingdom. (Mt. 5:20) This righteousness is not our own – Christ Jesus is our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30) and God still requires us to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh...” (Rom. 13:14)

When Jesus was still with His disciples, He promised that the Holy Spirit would come and “teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.” Then He said, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” (Jn. 14:26-27) Similarly, Paul wrote that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus,” that is, *if* we would obediently refuse to be anxious but instead pray and, with thanksgiving, make our requests to God. Then Paul goes on to list the things about which we should be thinking – things that are true, noble just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, praiseworthy. (Phlp. 4:6-8) In this way we begin to train ourselves in the discipline of “bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.” (2 Cor. 10:5) Peace, the peace of God and Christ Jesus, simply attends those whose minds are genuinely within the kingdom of God, that realm where Christ is literally and truly obeyed. It is from the peace we have with God (because our sins and enmity against God is no longer held against us – Eph. 1:7, Col. 2:13-14, etc.) and the inward peace that accompanies life by the Spirit (Rom. 8:6) that we can, as much as it depends upon us, be at peace with all men. (Rom. 12:18) It is in this way that we can proclaim – with or without words – the gospel of the kingdom of the Prince of peace.

When we study out the idea of joy in the New Testament, we find that joy is not found in one’s self, it does not come from self, nor is it about self. The joy the writers of the New Testament spoke of was *Christ’s* joy given through His Spirit and experienced by abiding in Him and in His love. (Jn. 15:10-11) This joy is not connected in any way with the outward circumstances of one’s life. Indeed, Christ spoke the most about joy the night before He went to the cross (Jn. 16:20-22, etc.) and in that we can see that it really was “for the joy that was set before Him [that He] endured the cross, despising its shame...” (Heb. 12:2) Joy is about looking beyond the circumstances and seeing the outcome as God sees it and then pressing on to attain to His will. The joy of Christ is found by seeking first the kingdom of God (Lk. 12:32), expending one’s time, energy and resources toward the same goal as Christ had (the redemption, restoration and maturing of the sons of God – Jn. 10:15, Eph. 1:7-10, Rom. 8:18-21, etc.) and then resting in the love and comfort we receive from the Father and Son by His Spirit. (Gal. 5:22-23) In this way Christ’s priestly prayer – “that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves” (Jn. 17:13) – is brought into being. Some have encapsulated these priorities into an easily remembered acronym - *Jesus, Others, You. J-O-Y*

Not of This World

Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?”

Jesus answered him, “Are you speaking for yourself on this, or did others tell you this about Me?”

Pilate answered, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?”

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.”

Pilate therefore said to Him, “Are You a King then?”

Jesus answered, “You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born and for this cause I have come into the world, but that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”

Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?” And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, “I find no fault in Him at all.” (Jn. 18:33-38)

Of the many insights we could draw out from this account, let us focus on three:

- Pilate did not particularly see Jesus as a threat to the Roman empire and government. Pilate clearly saw that Jesus was something more than some wild-eyed, fanatical mystic – if that was all Pilate saw in Jesus, he would not have resisted the Jews in their desire to execute yet another claimant to royalty who just might have enough followers to disrupt the smooth flow of governing over the already too-troublesome Jews of Palestine. But Jesus, by proclaiming to be king in the realm of truth, posed no visible threat Pilate could see to the Roman empire that day. Indeed, Christ – who taught “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s” (Mt. 22:21) and whose followers would instruct careful obedience to the governments of this world (Rom. 13:1-4, 1 Pet. 2:13-14, 17) – poses no threat to the orderly restraint of evil that is in this world. It is only when evil takes the reins of government and demands of its citizens things contrary to God’s requirements or when the men who claim to follow Christ forget that they serve only a spiritual kingdom that there is any conflict. (also see Gal. 5:23)

- Jesus’ kingdom is simply *not* a kingdom of this world (Jn. 18:36) but of another realm entirely. His is a kingdom measured in terms of obedience to righteousness and holiness and discerned by abilities given to us only by the Holy Spirit of God. It is not measured by miles or kilometers or defined by lines drawn on a map. His laws are written on His subjects’ hearts and their obedience demonstrates that His kingdom has come. (Heb. 8:10) Those who must have their religious laws and creeds written down on paper and who obey these at the expense of their obedience to what God wrote in their heart are serving the kingdom of darkness and not Christ’s kingdom of light. (Lk. 6:46)

- Jesus is not the King of the Jews of the first century but rather the King of Truth. “*Everyone*,” Jesus said to Pilate, “who is of the truth hears My voice.” (Jn. 18:37) John would later write, “They [the false prophets speaking in and by the demonic spirit of antichrist] are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the

world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” (1 Jn. 4:5-6) Paul’s experiences in the book of Acts show repeatedly that some Jews and many Gentiles, known to history as the “God-fearers,” were prepared to receive the truth of Jesus. (Acts 17:4, 12, etc.) Jesus still says, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (Jn. 10:27) and Paul’s warning still stands: Deception holds power over those who are perishing “because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.” (2 Ths. 2:10) Truth is an integral part of Christ’s kingdom and those who refuse to walk in the light of truth – as did Pilate – will reap the consequences even as the purposes of God’s kingdom are fulfilled.

Jesus said, “This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (Jn. 3:19-21)

Paul wrote, “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), proving what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.” (Eph. 5:8-11)

Though Jesus proclaimed that His kingdom of light was at hand, men slept (Mt. 13:25, 25:5) and the devil constructed a counterfeit of the ekklesia that was based on outwardly visible man-centered authority structures and man-made temples – those things which the kingdom of God is *not!* – and planted his children, the tares, among the wheat, “the sons of the kingdom.” (Mt. 13:38) And God, in order to gain a mature harvest of wheat, allowed this to be so. (Mt. 13:30) Thus darkness has, throughout the “church” age, hindered the wheat from growing to maturity but as the wheat return to their heritage and place as sons of the kingdom, that realm where Christ is truly obeyed, “the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Mt. 13:43)

Citizens

Paul clearly told us that “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phlp. 3:20), that realm *not* of this world. It is important to know what *kind* of people constitute this heavenly kingdom because people who differ from the following descriptions do not belong to God’s kingdom – no matter how many of the “right” words they use!

- Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” (Mt. 5:3) Those who recognize their moral and spiritual poverty, and thus their need for the mercy and grace and power of God, are those who are in His kingdom.

- Jesus also said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” (Mt. 5:10) Peter wrote that the Gentiles (those of pantheistic or paganistic or worldly religious ideas) “think it strange” when we who seek the righteousness of God “do not run with them in the same

flood of dissipation” and thus they speak and do evil things against the true followers of Christ and God. (1 Pet. 4:4) Jesus prophesied that we “will be hated by *all* nations [people-groups] for My name’s sake.” (Mt. 24:9) and Paul *promised* that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” (2 Tim. 3:12) To these recipients of worldly and demonic hatred belongs the kingdom of Christ and God.

- Jesus said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God.” (Mt. 19:14) Jesus even said, “Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of God.” (Mt. 18:4) Humility, the ability to accurately recognize and evaluate one’s own lowly qualities and characteristics, is a core requirement for citizens of the kingdom of God.

- James wrote, “Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” (Jas. 2:5) When John the Baptist sought confirmation that Jesus was the true Messiah and that he wasn’t sacrificing his life in prison for nothing, one of the confirmations Jesus listed was “the poor have the gospel preached to them,” a fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. (Mt. 11:5, Isa. 66:1) And Paul wrote, “For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things...the weak things...and the base things of the world and the things which are despised...and the things which are not...that no flesh should glory in His presence.” (1 Cor. 1:26-29) As Jesus said to the Pharisees, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” (Mt. 9:13) The kingdom of God is not available to the deserving - *there are none who deserve His kingdom!* (Rom. 3:10) – it is available for those who recognize their enmity against God and their righteous deserving of an eternity in hell and cry out for mercy and grace.

In contrast to the citizens of the kingdom of God, the citizens of this world, those who are excluded from God’s kingdom, are described in the following terms:

- “Do you not know,” Paul wrote, “that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Cor. 6:9-10)

- “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Gal. 5:19-21)

- Jesus said to John, “The cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” (Rev. 21:8)

It is not to be supposed that the kingdom of God is some self-righteous snobs’ club like the “church” has so often devolved into. The kingdom of God is populated with the humble recipients of God’s forgiveness, grace and mercy. As Paul wrote after describing the people who would not inherit the kingdom of God – “And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were set apart, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor. 6:11) Those of us who were held deep in the wickedness of this world before receiving God’s grace know the depths of love God has lavished on us and know that, having been forgiven much, we must love much. Those who (as is true at far too many “churches”) have not really received God’s forgiveness and who still practice many of the sins that disqualify them for the kingdom of God, “the same loves little.” (Lk. 7:47)

Nor is it to be supposed that we can attain to the fullness of what it means to be a son of God in this life. Paul wrote, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.” (1 Cor. 15:50) And Paul wrote, “For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. And not only they, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.” (Rom. 8:19-23)

There is more to being a son of God than we can even imagine and this is one more reason we should take great care that we “Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking diligently lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or godless person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.” (Heb. 12:14-17)

Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of God, but he who *does* the will of My Father in heaven.” (Mt. 7:21) When the wheat has fully matured, “The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather *out of His kingdom* all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness [what is right in their own eyes]... Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Mt. 13:41, 43) The wheat, the sons *of the kingdom* (Mt. 13:38), will radiate the light of Christ’s kingdom in the midst of the darkness of this world. The tares, the carnal, lawless, fallen-away “church,” will have been removed and the way of following Christ and God will again be seen to require us to enter into the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:3, 5, Acts 14:22) and the “church” will be seen to be the deception whereby Satan sought to prevent and delay the wheat, the sons of the kingdom, from attaining to their glorious inheritance. The choice of which kingdom we will now belong to – the kingdom of Christ’s light or the kingdom of Satan’s and this world’s darkness – is ours to make. Today is the day we need to make that choice. The kingdom of God *is* at hand now in spite of what the “church” has done to distort and conceal the good news of God’s kingdom.

Let he who has ears hear.

11. Presenting the King

Do you know what it means to have a King? Most people – especially those who live under a democracy – have great difficulty picturing the role of a king in their life. Since their ingrained, democracy-induced sense of independence is reinforced by their own encounters with multiple and varied expressions of parental, civic or governmental authority (which runs the gamut from beneficially benign to oppressively cruel to all points in between), many people not only have difficulty envisioning the role of a king, they find it incomprehensible that one should live and even die at the word of the king. That one can and indeed should wholeheartedly devote one's life and energies to one person is simply a mind-boggling proposition. Yet this is precisely what the true gospel of the kingdom of Christ presents to us.

It is thus very difficult to portray to one who suffers from the above blockage of perception the whole picture of who the King is, what He does in our life, what He has done in our life and why He deserves our complete and faithful obedience.

Who is this King? He is the King of the universe (or multiverse, if you prefer), the Most High God who encompasses all light, truth, beauty, goodness and love and whose kingdom is characterized by justice, equality, liberty, righteousness, peace and joy. Anyone who has experienced even a slight encounter with any of these characteristics readily recognizes their desirability even as one's experience with human versions of these concepts causes one to doubt that these things can ever reign supreme among men.

Yet it is right here that we find one of the strongest reasons upon which our devotion to our King rests: though He is fully human, having suffered all things that afflict and plague and tempt humankind (Heb. 4:15), He is also somehow fully Divine (Col. 2:9) and completely capable of implementing all the above characteristics in sovereign power. The reason we have not seen more of His kingdom on earth among men is because, even among those who claim to be His people, very few live their lives under the absolute monarchy of His Kingship. Much – far too much! – of the history of Christianity is to be understood in this light. But the infidelity and treason of those who claim to be His and to act in His name and on His behalf – but in reality traffic in a false “Christ,” a false “gospel,” speak under the power and inspiration of demonic spirits (see 2 Cor. 11:2-4) or simply pursue the “Christian” way by means of the power of the flesh – has not been overlooked nor will these go unpunished. *All* men, by sovereign decree of the King, have been granted the right to choose the course their life will take. The King is still well able to preserve those who are truly His own even as He reserves for judgment those who in truth are His betrayers and traitors and enemies to His realm. (2 Pet. 2:9)

What does our King do in our life? Though He gives us commands (some of which, quite honestly, are difficult to obey at the time), this is not the central focus of one's co-existence with Him. His commands are simply part of the process by which we are healed of and overcome the sin nature which cripples and retards each and every one of us. Nor does He rely solely on commands to communicate His will to us – He works in us to cause us to choose more wisely the events and even the course of our life. At times we want Him to give us a clear command while He waits for us to make a wise, mature choice!

It is also unwise to suppose that the kingliness of Christ is to be the central focus one should have. This really only results in a stultified, warped perspective of who Christ is and what He wants us to be. In reality, the love and comfort which Christ personally extends to us fallen, sinful creatures can cause one to almost forget that He is still King of kings and Lord of Lords, the Most High God sovereign over and above all created beings and things. But when we

do forget that He must also be our King as well as our Comforter, we begin to devolve into all manner of lawlessness, pursuing whatever is right in our own eyes, becoming our own “God” even to the point where we will “theologically” redefine “God” and “Christianity” to conform to our own agendas and preferences. So while the kingliness of Christ is not the central part of our love relationship with Him, it must always remain an underlying, foundational stone upon which our faith and conduct resides. It is simply impossible to truly love and obey Him unless we incorporate *all* (as best we are able and enabled) of who and what He is into our love for Him just as surely as it does no good whatsoever to love a “Christ” who is not the same One found in the New Testament or a “God” who does not correspond to all of the characteristics ascribed to Him in the Bible.

What has our King done for us? It is summed up in this: though He was fully divine and never sinned, He took the place of judgment and condemnation that is rightfully ours. This is for both the sins which we have *committed* and for the fallen sinful creature that we *are*. In complete contrast to what He deserved, our King was beaten, tortured and executed on a cross by the religious system and political government of His day. When He came to His own people, they rejected Him because it threatened everything the leaders stood for. The ensuing 2,000 years since His execution and subsequent resurrection and exaltation to the throne of God is simply the enacting of men’s choices of which side of the eternal conflict they will be on. Assuming that the major players in church history books or the founding fathers of a particular movement or denomination were completely following only God would be a mistake of grave proportions. God’s “heroes of the faith” are those who quietly and consistently reproduce the characteristics of His Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) and His list of such “heroes” is sure to be very much different from the lists that men would make.

All these and more are the things that make it quite reasonable and appropriate that we should adore and obey our King. For those who have previously experienced a misguided or inadequate presentation of the gospel of Christ, I can only offer a sincere and humble apology – not for the King who was improperly represented but rather for the messenger who failed to convey to you the beauty, depth and importance of the real gospel of Christ. But I must also encourage you to not allow someone’s misrepresentation of Christ (no matter how high or low a title that person claimed to have nor what manner of misrepresentation was used) to keep you from finding and bowing down to the one true King.

It is precisely at this point, though, that we find the beauty of Christ’s kingdom displayed. He does not ask us to obey anyone but Him – even though many times His instructions may indeed first come to us through the words or actions of another human being. But we can know with certainty that any man who comes to steal away our resources by demanding “tithes” and “offerings,” or who comes to kill our ability to hear, obey and follow Christ for ourselves, or who comes to destroy our personal relationship with God by replacing it with a dependence upon some other man’s “wisdom,” “knowledge” (most often “sermons” or “messages”) or his “superior” “grace” or “gifting” (most often using some religious-sounding title such as “pastor,” “apostle,” etc.) is simply doing the work of the devil. (Jn. 10:10) Christ expects us to hear Him for ourselves (Jn. 10:27, etc.) – and when we hear Him (and refuse to re-interpret what we hear through our own paradigms and preconceived “understandings”), we will be able to mesh with any and all others who similarly seek the heart and mind of Christ in and above all things. Thus Christ’s kingdom does *not* resemble a corporation’s authority structure which relies on top-down command flows and blind adherence to corporate policies and procedures. Rather, because the Spirit moves on and in each individual’s heart, His presence and power is displayed when men

and women under His guidance relinquish their own agendas and display the same love that Christ displayed to everyone He came in contact with and these individuals resolve any and all personal differences into the *unity* of the body of Christ. (Jn. 17:20-23, Eph. 4:3, etc.)

That this kind of Christianity is not readily visible (though it has been practiced in every age in limited arenas or corrupted measures) does not give us reason to abandon the King. Rather it places before us the necessity to return and press in all the more so that we are certain to find and obey the real King. Any man who blindly presumes that the “gospel” he follows is the correct one is already following a usurper against Christ’s throne. Christ’s enemy is the master of deception (Jn. 8:44) and those who handle the things of God with calloused negligence or arrogant presumptiveness or blind religious-“correctness” are already the devil’s victim and perhaps even his tool. The true King still *requires* all men everywhere to turn away from sin- and self-generated agendas (even “theologies” – Acts 17:29-30) and still *insists* that those who have answered His summons and call to eternal life be faithful to Him. (Rev. 17:14) The true King will yet one day sit on a throne and judge every man according to what he has done with the life that was given to him by his Creator. (Rev. 20:12-13) On that day every knee will bow to the one true King (Phlp. 2:10) but it will be too late to change anything that will affect the verdict the King will hand down to every man. Of particular note should be those who have spent their lives doing “spiritual,” religious and even miraculous things *in the name of Christ* but who are summarily dismissed because what they really practiced was lawlessness, whatever was right and good in their own eyes. (Mt. 7:21-23) *Today*, while it is still called today, is the day that salvation and redemption and restoration to the rightful rule of the one true King is available. (see Heb. 3:12-15)

The God of light, truth, beauty, goodness and love *commands* you to bow down to Him now so that you might *live* - abundantly now and more so in eternity. Refusing to bow down to Him or bowing down to some other god (whether that be the devil, money, fame, possessions, self-rule or whatever other gods there may be) is to volunteer for death – progressive frustration and loss now and complete, ultimate rejection and loss for all of eternity in the lake of fire built for the devil and his angels. (Mt. 25:41) Be wise – choose Life. Bow to the one true King and *live!*

Let he who has ears hear.

12. Opening Spiritual Ears

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Mt. 11:15 to Rev. 3:22) was a primary and unique feature of Christ’s preaching. The ear that hears what God is saying is one of the most important things that accompany salvation. (see Heb. 6:9) Yet in modern churchianity even the notion that anyone is supposed to hear the Lord for oneself is explained away or ridiculed, especially since those people who begin to hear the Lord for themselves quickly develop ideas that are anathema to the “church.”

In spite of churchianity’s attempt to downplay and dismiss the need to hear the Lord for oneself, this facet of salvation remains a key ingredient of the gospel and a core element of the genuine resurrected life in Christ. Jesus described His own teachings when He said, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” (Jn. 6:63-64) Belief (or faith) is

intricately wrapped up with spiritual hearing. Immediately after Jesus said this, “many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.” (Jn. 6:66)

Jesus – instead of apologizing and begging those who were leaving to return and remain – turns to the twelve and invites them to leave too! “Do you also want to go away?” (Jn. 6:67) This question evokes Peter’s declaration, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Jn. 6:68-69) In Matthew’s account, Jesus responds to this statement (or a similar one) by saying, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” (Mt. 16:16-17) Peter had spiritual ears to hear that Jesus was the Messiah and he believed what he heard and acted accordingly – he did not abandon Jesus but remained at His side.

The Shepherd and the Sheep

We see this again when Jesus speaks of Himself as the good shepherd. (Jn. 10:11, see also the surrounding verses) Here was a group of Jews who *did not* have spiritual ears to hear what God had revealed to Peter. “How long,” they demanded, “do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered them, “I told you [in words that could only be spiritually discerned], and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father’s name, they bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.” (Jn. 10:24-28)

We need to slow this down and digest this more carefully. There were two groups here – the Jews and Jesus’ disciples. Both are called sheep.

The sheep of another shepherd (the Jews) neither believed nor were able to hear what God was saying. Jesus’ spiritual words were not penetrating their dulled ears. Even though these Jews were undoubtedly well-versed in the Scriptures, they had no ability to hear the truth because they were not willing to believe that Jesus was the One who was to come – He did not fit their own preconceived notions of who and what the Messiah would be, He did not accept the religious hypocrisy with which so many “served God,” and their God would certainly never say such things to them as what Jesus said and certainly not in public to their face! Jesus must therefore be a fraud. (see also Jn. 5:39-40, 6:29, Mt. 23:13-15, etc.) These Jews would then attempt to capture and stone Him (Jn. 10:31, 39) and undoubtedly later were among those who participated in having Him crucified. (Jn. 19:6, etc.)

The sheep of the true Shepherd (the disciples) had heard Jesus’ words and God had somehow confirmed truths to them in their hearts, among these truths that Jesus was indeed the Christ. They, in obedient response, followed Him. It is to be noticed, however, that just because God had opened up certain truths, the disciples did not have a grasp on the whole counsel of God at this point in their life – they had no ability to receive the necessity and impact of the crucifixion of the Christ until *after* the event! (see Lk. 24:45) However, Jesus still gives these sheep life – both eternal and abundant. (Jn. 10:10)

The ear that hears God *is* the first difference between these two groups. God designed man to live by hearing Him. (Mt. 4:4, Dt. 8:3) Without this ability to hear God (however imperfectly) there simply is no ability to enter into the life that Christ gives.

The Prophet

This linking of faith with spiritual hearing is no accidental development. It was prophesied by Moses. When the man who had been lame from birth was healed, Peter plainly told the people that Jesus was the Christ and referred to Moses' prophecy, saying, "Moses truly said to the fathers, 'The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you. And it shall come to pass that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.'" (Acts 3:22-23)

Modern churchianity has so warped and spun this truth virtually out of existence by limiting "hearing the Prophet" (a clear reference to Christ) to hearing Him just enough to say a "sinner's prayer" and thus "safely" secure one's eternal abode in "heaven." That no "sinner's prayer" can be found anywhere in the Scriptures does not keep the "church" from making it a central means of drawing members into their religious and social club. But modern practice is far from the truth as Peter preached it that day.

"Every soul who *will* not hear that Prophet shall be *utterly destroyed* from among the people." (Acts 3:23 - emphasis added) How much more clearly can this be said? Hearing God is not an option for those who do not wish to be utterly destroyed. This is such a serious matter that God promises strong delusion for those who demonstrate they have no love of truth (2 Ths. 2:10-12), in this context, those who willfully refuse to hear what the Spirit of truth is saying to them in their innermost being. Nor should we miss Paul's warning that those who heap up teachers in the last day "turn their ears from the truth," that is, deliberately refuse to spiritually listen and learn from the Spirit of truth, but instead soulishly (intellectually, emotionally, willfully) gobble up "fables," myths about Christ and God and the right way to follow Him. (2 Tim. 4:3-4, Jn. 16:13) These are dire consequences indeed and they are reserved for those who *will not* or *refuse to* hear what God is saying.

The writer of Hebrews sounds a similar note when he writes, "See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven." (Heb. 12:25) Once again, "church" "theologians" dilute the power of this truth by intellectually attributing "salvation" to those who have said their "sinner's prayer" and who practice "church" attendance – these same "theologians" would scream bloody murder, however, if anyone but them preached this kind of "salvation by works" doctrine! – and thereby they and their followers routinely and systematically fail to listen to the Spirit of truth and thus make themselves qualified for the dire consequences that come of neglecting their salvation.

Truth and Error

The necessity of having an ear that hears God is also found in John's letter. He wrote, "You are of God, little children, and have overcome them [the spirits and false prophets of antichrist], because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error." (1 Jn. 4:4-6)

Again we see two categories – the dangerously ambiguous terms "us" and "them." It is very easy to presume that, because we have had some experience or because we have some Bible knowledge that, of course, *I* belong in the "us" category. However, the primary difference between "us" and "them" is the question of *who* is within – whether the Spirit of Christ and God

or the spirit of antichrist (both the attitude and the actual demonic spirit that replaces and displaces Christ and God are in view here) is the “line of demarcation” between these two groups. How is one to know which spirit resides within? It is made clear by who one listens to and understands. If one hears the words of the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of truth – note well that no mere human speaker is necessarily involved in *this* conversation! – then that one will progressively conform to the likeness of Christ. But if all one can do is listen to the world or listen in its carnal ways – and this includes listening to one’s favorite, ear-scratching spiritual guru who preaches our favorite pet doctrines – then one will continue on in worldliness and the desires of the flesh, however subtly revamped by “Christian” religion.

“By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” (1 Jn. 4:6) The “church” and its “theologians,” because they have written off and dismissed the need to have an ear that hears God, propagates the spirit of error even as they speak words that come from the Book of truth. One who operates under the influence of the spirit of error cannot hope to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15) and cannot possibly deliver the whole counsel of God. (Acts 20:27) These can only be those who are “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. . . .these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith...” (2 Tim. 3:7-8) There is perhaps no greater tragedy visible today than to see a man learned in the Scriptures embrace a role reserved for God alone, routinely robbing himself and the people while he purports to “feed” the sheep ensnared at his feet.

Hard of Hearing

The writer of Hebrews wanted to share spiritual insights regarding Christ as High Priest in the order of Melchizedek and indeed had much to say but it would be hard for him to explain because his readers were “dull of hearing.” (Heb. 5:11) It is of utmost importance that we understand how they came to this condition. The writer of Hebrews goes on to say, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles (sayings, Scriptures) of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are mature, that is, those who by reason of use (practice) have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” (Heb. 5:12-14)

Becoming skilled in the word of righteousness or rightly dividing the word of truth, to use Paul’s phrase to Timothy (2 Tim. 2:15), takes practice. After much practice, one is then mature, ready for solid food, meat. But everyone who drinks only milk, taking in all their spiritual nutrients from some other man’s sayings, is still only an immature infant child, at best, and is completely unable to rightly divide the word of truth. Listening to sermons and attending Bible studies (assuming God enables one to survive the inherent dangers of over-reliance on men who very well may be secretly dominated by demonic deceptions) may be a place to start. But if one stays there too long or if one is never taught (as happens in most “churches”) to compare what the man says with what the Spirit of truth says, one ends up with a collection of old babies – and Satan could not be much more pleased with his work in their midst.

The Jews who heard Jesus’ teachings, who are a close parallel to the listeners in many “churches” today, also had ears that were “hard of hearing.” The disciples came to Jesus and asked Him, “Why do You speak to the people in parables?” Jesus answered them, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries (secret or hidden truths) of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.” (Mt. 13:10-11) The disciples would believe and know that He was the Christ but the people would argue back and forth among themselves and chose to wait

until Jesus received the official approval from the Jewish leaders (Jn. 6:69, 7:12, 25-27, etc.) – something that never happened and never could happen!

Jesus continued explaining to His disciples, “For whomever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.” (Mt. 13:12) This is the lesson of the third servant given a large sum of money and expected to earn yet more money for his master. (Mt. 25:24-30) Those who hear and understand the parable recognize that the large sum of money is symbolic of receiving the new life of Christ from above. Those who do not have ears to hear and understand will apply the parable to their own financial strategies and use their “once saved, always saved” “theology” to dismiss the truth that one who had received the life of Christ could ever be removed to the eternal outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mt. 25:29-30)

Jesus continued to explain, “Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: ‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the heart of this people has grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their heart and turn, so that I should heal them.’” (Mt. 13:13-15) Like the Laodiceans who thought of themselves as “rich, wealthy and in need of nothing” but God saw them as “wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked” (Rev. 3:17), the Jews who did not have ears to hear still thought themselves to be superior specimens of humanity but failed to be justified in God’s eyes. (Lk. 18:9-14) John amplified this idea when he wrote, “Beloved, let us *love* one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (1 Jn. 4:7-8) To have the facts and words of the gospel of Christ but fail to have the life, love and spiritual realities of Christ and God is a tragic condition indeed.

Safeguard Your Ears

Jesus continued to explain, “But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not hear it.” Jesus then gives forth several parables about the kingdom of God. (Mt. 13:16-18 and following) The one who has ears to hear what God is saying is the one who gains the opportunity to live, abundantly and eternally. The one with an ear to hear is the one who can be led of the Spirit of God and truly be a son of God. (Rom. 8:14) Finally, such a one can press into what God created and designed him to be and do, first individually and second corporately with anyone else who has and uses their ears to hear.

In this time and season of apostasy (departure from the faith under the name of Christ or God – churchianity), deception (false, inaccurate or incomplete knowledge, understanding and teachings about the gospel) and lawlessness (most people doing whatever is right in their own eyes – Mt. 24:10-12, Jdgs. 21:25), we need to safeguard the ear that hears God. Far too many teachers today rely on “the Greek” (their own personal distortions of it, that is – 2 Pet. 1:20, 3:16) to hold up their warped and twisted teachings – and far too easily Satan, the master of deception and guile, can imitate the voice of God within our own hearts. If we grow carelessly confident that we can hear God – a subtle confidence in our own abilities that shifts our faith from God to our flesh – Satan is all too happy to send us a lying spirit who will, with expert mimicry of our usual way of hearing God, ever so subtly at first, divert us away from hearing and

obeying God. And God will allow this as a test of our loyalties – whether to Him or to ourselves and our own religious preferences.

The best safeguards to protect our ears that hear God is a humble, quiet and contrite heart (Psa. 46:10, Isa. 30:15, 66:2, Phlp. 4:6-7, etc.) and a commitment to cooperating with and obeying the will of God. Jesus said that anyone who wanted to do God's will would know the source of any teachings he heard, whether they were from God or from some man's vain imaginations. (Jn. 7:17) Jesus said that His *food* was to do the will of God and to finish His work. (Jn. 4:34) Jesus recognized that of Himself He could do nothing and therefore He did not seek His own will but the will of the Father. (Jn. 5:30, also see Heb. 10:7, Psa. 40:8) We do well to imitate Him!

Cultivating the ear that hears God is almost certainly the most necessary element we need so that we can do our part to maintain and preserve our salvation that was freely given to us by God, especially in the perilous and tumultuous days of the closing of the age. Those who are content to hear the words of men are those most likely to be propelled down the path of deception and plunged into the ditch of eternal destruction. (Mt. 7:13, 15:14) But those who persist on hearing and obeying the words that come from God's mouth will be those who endure to the end and are saved. (Mt. 24:13)

Let he who has ears hear.

13. The Voice of Strangers

Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me... Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." (Jn. 10:27, 5)

In contrast to this, Paul wrote, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables." (2 Tim. 4:3-4)

These two very different pictures both stand within the pages of Scripture. How do we reconcile or even explain the differences? One group hears the voice of the Shepherd and follows Him, refusing to follow a stranger whose voice is different from the Shepherd's. The second group *heaps up* to itself - *in the name of Christ and God* - strangers whose voices are much more soothing and stimulating to their itching ears! We must face the fact that Paul is prophesying against our present-day, modern churchianity!

How did the people of Christ transition from being (however incompletely or imperfectly) the first type of people into being the second type? We dare not ask this question just to place blame but rather to shine light on the intellectual, philosophical and even demonic trips, traps and snares that have caused the people of Christ to devolve into the apostasy, the great falling away from the faith that occurs before Christ's return (Mt. 24:10, 2 Ths. 2:3) so that we might avoid and escape and overcome these hazards.

In the seven letters to the seven ekklesias (poor English rendering "churches") in *The Revelation*, we also see this same progression (a study beyond the depth and scope of this writing.) The first ekklesia (Ephesus), representative of the first-century believers, is said to have fallen from the heights of their first love, a love accompanied by labor, patience and an intolerance of false apostles – strangers whose voice differed from that of the Shepherd. (Rev.

2:2, 4) The seventh ekklesia (Laodicea), representative of the completion of the so-called “church age,” is the last type of ekklesia to come into being. Though there will be remnants and descendants of the other ekklesias at the time of Christ’s return, Laodicea will be the prominent type. Of this ekklesia, Christ describes them as wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked, and “lukewarm,” fit only to be spit or vomited out of His mouth. (Rev. 3:16-17) This is the same transition from the original outpouring of the Holy Spirit that gave power and transformed lives (Acts 2:4, 42-47) to the time of “the last days” characterized by a mere “form of godliness” that denies the power of God (2 Tim. 3:1, 5), a religion so permeated by human tradition that, like the traditionalism of the Pharisees, it makes us impervious to the personal leadings of the life-giving Spirit when the word of God, the truth of the gospel of His kingdom and His righteousness, is presented to our ears and hearts. (Mt. 15:3, 6)

What were the heights of our first love? One of the earliest deviations from what we read in the New Testament was the exaltation of the bishop (Greek – episkopos [1985]) over the other elders (Greek – presbuteros [4245]) and the rest of the assembly. Paul prophesied, “From among yourselves men will rise up, speaking corrupt things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.” (Acts 20:30) This extremely precise prophecy was spoken to a group of men who were both *episkopos* and *presbuteros* (Acts 20:17, 28) and was precisely fulfilled within 120 years as by 180 A.D. every city had its own bishop presiding over it – in spite of the clear instructions of Christ that “it shall not be so among you.” (Mt. 20:25-26, etc.) The dissident critic “Montanus was not entirely wrong. By the year 220 [A.D.] it was evident that the Christian churches together with their bishops and clergy were no longer what they had been.” (*Church History in Plain Language*, Bruce L. Shelley, p. 89) The heights of primary love for and with Christ were no longer attainable. Even the Holy Spirit’s gifts and miraculous power began to diminish as evidence that something was not as it should be as *men* now stood over other men, between them and God, corrupting and even blocking their direct access to God.

The bishop was installed because of the various arising “theologies” and doctrines (teachings). The Way seemed to be splintering into factions and there was a perceived need for a visible unity. In other words, men stopped listening to the voice of the Shepherd and began listening to the voices of men. The Spirit-inspired gift of preaching was replaced by the arts of sophistry, eloquence and rhetoric (note well that each of these come from the pagan Greek religious pursuits of knowledge and “wisdom”) and “the traveling worker who spoke out of a spontaneous burden left the pages of church history.” (*Pagan Christianity*, 1st ed., Frank Viola, p. 81) The transition from apostles to bishops created intellectuals who had to choose which bishop and teacher to follow because these men had risen up, speaking a corrupted gospel and were drawing men after themselves and their own peculiar doctrines. Even when the bishop’s words were true and correct, as often they were, lost was the practice of hearing the Shepherd for oneself, replaced by the growing dependence on voices that spoke many of the words of the Shepherd with varying degrees of union with the heart and Spirit of the Shepherd. The dilution from purity and transition to apostasy had begun.

It is not enough, though, to just jettison the bishop (most commonly called “pastor” today) – we must first return to the original new covenant God made with His people. “This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. *None* of them shall teach his neighbor, and *none* his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for *all* shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” (Heb. 8:10-11 - emphasis added) This *is* God’s new or second covenant with “the house of Israel” (both the

natural branches and the wild branches – Rom. 11:24, etc.) that we (the people of Christ) were supposed to be living under since the outpouring of His Holy Spirit. Instead, with the installation of bishops and the heaping up of teachers, we have rewritten God’s covenant – and then we wonder why He doesn’t adhere to His covenant terms as we have rewritten them!

The apostasy, modern churchianity, has long since departed from teaching its adherents to hear the Shepherd for themselves as this is detrimental to the teachers’ ability to draw followers after themselves. But Jesus still says, “Do not be called teachers, for one is your Teacher, the Christ.” (Mt. 23:10) The New Testament still says, “But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you, but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.” (1 Jn. 2:27) The apostasy, modern churchianity, must concoct “theologies” that distort or dismiss what these verses plainly say and attack the character of any who quote them and expound their plain meaning.

What then of the teachers whom God gives to mature His people? (Eph. 4:11-13, 1 Cor. 12:28, Rom. 12:7, etc.) First, we must see these as *gifts* - they are not skills and abilities that can be taught and learned in seminaries and Bible schools and they are not offices to be held by men wielding “delegated” authority over their brothers and sisters in Christ. This gifting is only stirred up as the person learns to sit quietly at the Master’s feet and hear the voice of the Shepherd for himself and that one is progressively and spiritually transformed into the likeness of Christ. One who is inundated and saturated with the ear-scratching preachings and writings of men – even men of the caliber of Luther, Calvin, etc. – are not able to teach even the primary and first requirement of the follower of Christ, which is to sit at the feet of the Teacher, the Christ, and to hear first, foremost and truly only Him. Second, we must recognize that the genuine teacher is supposed to “work himself out of a job” – and that rather quickly! The notion of an ongoing symbiotic relationship of dominance and dependence between a teacher and his following is foreign to the New Testament (see Heb. 5:12, etc.) and is as unnatural, immoral, nauseating and grotesque as a child of adult age still trying to nurse off his mother’s breast!

No, it is not enough to simply jettison the bishop/“pastor” – if we do not recognize the underlying paradigm, we will only replace the bishop with a man sporting a different title (“apostle,” “teacher,” “prophet,” etc.) but wielding the same (albeit more subtle and restrained perhaps) “delegated” authority he mistakenly believes comes from God. We must jettison the entire notion that we need anyone to teach us or that we need to teach anyone! A true teacher’s job in Christ is to teach the younger, less-spiritually developed follower of Christ to turn his or her ears toward Christ and hear Him for themselves. That is all! The usual objection against this truth is that “This will only produce chaos and division.” The truth is, however, that it is the exalted bishop (under whatever modern title) who is the one who produces chaos and division because he enables his followers to operate in the flesh (1 Cor. 3:4) and to practice lawlessness, what is right in one’s own eyes, in the name of Christ and God. (see however 2 Cor. 6:14) Denominationalism (sects, heresies and dissensions as they were called in the New Testament – Gal. 5:20) is only institutionalized dissension and disunity and is the secondary and necessary fruit of the Nicolaitan (“exalted over the laity,” the people – Rev. 2:6, 15) bishop.

What we need to embrace is the simple truth that Christ speaks one truth to *all* His people – Himself! (Jn. 14:6, 2 Cor. 1:19-20, etc.) When we recognize this, we can utilize a few simple principles to safeguard against the errors of modern churchianity.

First, **unanimity**. If Christ speaks one truth to all His people, that one faith delivered once for all (Jude 3), we must at some point come into genuine unity – first the unanimity of the Spirit (what He *is* – Eph. 4:3) and *then* we will grow into the unanimity of the faith (what we believe – Eph. 4:13) This will not be a unity of likeminded sects lining up behind their prevailing bishop or the current “man of God for the hour” nor even a unity of intellectual agreement with “essential doctrines” but rather the calm, quiet consensus of all who are truly involved in the question at hand – the unity of the Spirit preserved in the bond of peace. Unanimity, by its very nature, rules out the Nicolaitan lording over of the bishop, the lording over of competing factions and even the lording over of the simple majority vote! Operating in unanimity or one accord, with the leaders’ fleshly or religious excesses curbed by the unanimous recognition and acceptance of the simultaneously personal and corporate leading of the Holy Spirit *is* the hallmark and safeguard of the genuine people of Christ. (Acts 2:46, 15:22, 1 Cor. 1:10, etc.)

Second, **local**. The New Testament gives to the singular ekklesia the province of just one town or village but it gives to that province *all* of that one town or village. The New Testament knows nothing of commuter “churches” or of more than one (competing) ekklesia in one area. This is representative of the oneness that Christ calls us into. (Jn. 17:20-21) In practical terms, especially during this time of rampant lawlessness, apostasy and division (Mt. 24:12), we can simply make every effort to include in the decision-making process all the people who are genuinely affected by that pending decision or proposed action. Since we are one body (see 1 Cor. 12:26, etc.), much more than we normally believe affects others. But if we use the standards of 1) who will be affected and 2) unanimous agreement about the will of God and the leading of His Spirit, we can readily eradicate Nicolaitanism from our midst.

Third, **God’s will**. Though modern churchianity, particularly in the middle and upper classes, has absorbed the gospel of Christ into its culture of self-centered excess and relativistic lawlessness, the truth remains that we *all* “who live should live no longer *for themselves*, but *for Him* who died for them and rose again.” (2 Cor. 5:15 - emphasis added) If we will submit all our questions (and questions of “doctrine” are often not as crucial as the combatants believe – often “doctrine” is only an excuse to wield power or take preeminence) to God’s will as revealed to all brothers and sisters involved at that time, we will find ourselves walking in peace and harmony rather than the strife and contention of the “church.”

These three simple principles will safeguard any group who wishes to participate only in the divine nature though they will be a source of constant friction with those who have their own hidden agendas for significance, preeminence and power.

Let those who have ears hear the voice of the one true Shepherd and forsake all the other ear-scratching teachers who speak a word that does not come from the mouth of God but from their own vain imaginations, claiming that they have received some special “sacred anointing”

from God that now qualifies, equips and enables them to lord over their brothers and sisters by teaching and telling them how they should live and be. (see Jer. 23:21, Mt. 24:5, etc.) This very subtle strain of presumed better-ness and superiority (pride and arrogance) is precisely the primary element that makes one's voice that of a stranger.

Jesus still says, "You are not to be called or perceived of as an exalted teacher, for you have only one Master and you are *all* brothers. You are to stand side-by-side and back-to-back as I lead each one personally from within. If My people – those who truly are My people – would simply understand and obey in this fashion, I will quickly remove those who stand in My way and block the building of My house, My temple. Soon enough I will send My angels to forever remove those who have defiled My house but for now I seek a body, even a small remnant, who will turn their hearts and ears to Me, and turn away from the fleshly sermons and carnal songs that abound, and be still and know that I am your God."

It is time – first and foremost in our own lives and practices – that we tear down the high places we have erected for some man or men whose eloquence soothes and stimulates our ears and bow down once again before the Lord of truth, beauty and life so that we may receive needed grace and truly live our lives totally for Him who died and rose again. Anything else will be only one more variation of the theme of the ongoing cacophony of noise, error, deception and death that is the apostasy, the great falling away from the faith, modern churchianity.

Let he who has ears hear what the Spirit is saying to the people of Christ.

14. Strong Delusion

Paul wrote, "...the working of Satan [comes] with all power, signs and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish..." (2 Ths. 2:9-10) Let us note carefully the two major characteristics of the great falling away from the faith, the apostasy, that comes just before the day of Christ's return (see 2 Ths. 2:3) – all power and all unrighteous deception. Miracles will occur. Great spiritual power will be present just as it was for Simon the sorcerer. Luke records:

"Philip went down to a city in Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city.

But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, 'This man is the great power of God.' And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time." (Acts 8:5-11)

It is perfectly understandable that the natural man, who cannot perceive the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14), would follow after any man who wields great spiritual powers. But let us note carefully the subtle deceptions at work. Simon the sorcerer was not directing the people to Christ and God – he was drawing followers after himself and ultimately into the power of Satan. One reason there were so many demonized people in that city may very well be because of

Simon's work there. He had been so consumed with his lust for power that he had invoked demonic spirits into other people's lives as well.

The modern "pastor" – especially (but not limited to) those who dabble in the counterfeit "revivals" which seem to regularly sweep around the world these days – is no different. Whatever accurate knowledge he has of the gospel is tainted with demonic and Nicolaitan contaminants (or else he could not be the "pastor" of a "church") and the followers are drawn after himself and his or his denomination's particular version of "Christ" and the "gospel." The "pastor," preacher or traveling "apostle" or "evangelist" who traffics in supernatural power will always be able to gather followers after himself. This is nothing new.

Let us note well that Satan's end time deceptions are "unrighteous" and effective "among those who perish." (2 Ths. 2:10) Righteousness is most readily defined as being what is right in God's eyes. Unrighteousness then is anything *not* right in God's eyes. The context of this verse is the coming of lawlessness – the practice of doing what is right in one's own eyes. Jesus said that just prior to His return lawlessness would abound (Mt. 24:12) and Paul told us that righteousness (what is right in God's eyes) and lawlessness (what is right in one's own eyes) have nothing in common. (2 Cor. 6:14) The picture here is not particularly of rampant monstrously evil deeds (though these will certainly be present in the world) but rather that most who proclaim to belong to Christ will not be pursuing His will for their life but will instead be busy pursuing whatever seems right and good in their own eyes. Thus, if a "church" practice or denominational "theology" seems good to them, they will submit themselves to that "pastor" or to that institutionalized "church" system – and to the demonic beings enmeshed behind the scenes.

Paul goes on to say, "...those who perish...did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved." (2 Ths. 2:10) The whole of the institutional "church" system hinges on the idea that each individual should choose which variation of denominational "theology" or practice which suits his or her own individual tastes and preferences. If you like pomp, rituals, robes and a serene spiritual, religious experience, try the Catholic sect. If you want an exuberant charismatic experience where you can be "free in the Spirit," try the Vineyard sect or the hyper-charismatic denominations. If you want to be intellectually stimulated in a teaching/lecture environment, try the Calvary Chapel sect or any of its imitators. But if all you want is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but God's truth, don't expect to remain welcome long at any of these places. These places are the niches designed to ensnare the unwary who settle in for whatever is right in their own eyes and who neglect to press on past that to discover and attain to what is right in God's eyes. The gospel – the truth, the love and the real power that draws men to the real Christ Jesus and God the Father of light – remains veiled to those who are perishing (2 Cor. 4:3) even though they be strong, faithful adherents to their own "church" and its ideologies and practices. Only those who love the truth – and Jesus and His Spirit *are* the truth (Jn. 14:6, 1 Jn. 5:6) – will be saved in the face of the unrighteous deception of the end times.

Paul continues, "And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." (2 Ths. 2:11-12) Because the people are quite content to sit in this self-constructed, comfortable midway point between being of the world and following God, God Himself will unleash strong delusion upon them so that they will take their rightful place among those who are condemned to perish. But if it is impossible for God to lie (Num. 23:19, Heb. 6:18, 1 Jn. 2:21), how will this strong delusion come from God?

There is a similar picture given in the Old Testament when the Lord decreed that it was time for the wicked king of Israel, Ahab, to die in fulfillment of other prophecies already spoken about his death. Micaiah, a genuine prophet of God, after all the king's prophets had promised victory, spoke the word of the Lord, saying, "The LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours, and the LORD has declared disaster against you." (1 Ki. 22:23) And even though Ahab (probably in direct reaction to this word of the Lord) disguised himself and did not go into battle in his place as the king of Israel, a random arrow struck him down any way and he died in complete fulfillment of all the prophecies given. (1 Ki. 22:37-38)

So too will the apostasy, the great falling away from the faith, take its sad place in human history. Through the lying spirits that are in the mouths of almost all of today's popular "pastors," teachers and preachers – in fulfillment of Paul's warning that the people would reject sound doctrine and instead heap up ear-tickling and ear-scratching teachers so that they can turn away from the truth and listen to fables and stories instead (2 Tim. 4:3-4) – many will come under strong delusion so that they might believe the lie. Which lie will they believe? Whichever lie they prefer over and above what is right and true in God's eyes. This preference of some lie above God's righteousness *is* the pleasure in unrighteousness which causes God to be so nauseated that He sends the strong delusion that cements them in the trajectory they have chosen for themselves and their lives.

This is the condition epitomized by the Laodicean ekklesia (another picture of the people of the end times). Jesus told John to write,

"Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth. Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' – and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked..." (Rev. 3:16-17)

Though the people claim to belong to Christ, He will reject them because they have neither desire nor ability to discern the truth about themselves and their real need for a Savior who would clean them, purify them and heal them if they would only turn from their ridiculous opinion (conceit) that they have no need for any such things. These are those which God has declared in His anger that they will never partake of His eternal life. (see Lk. 14:21-24)

The delusion God sends on the end time people who are perishing is strong precisely because it is a false knowledge which caters to the very human propensity toward self-centeredness, selfishness, arrogance and conceit. (see 1 Cor. 8:1) It is a lie (which the demonic will alter and tailor to fit each particular individual) which appeals to some aspect of the individual's tastes, preferences and personality. For some it will be a strong desire for religious order and structure but apart from personal obedience to God. For others it will be such a strong independence that no corporate unity with Christ and His true followers will be possible. Yet others will strongly desire to control the religious order and structure to the point that the Spirit and life of Christ are quenched and excluded as uncontrollable and unpredictable. Still others will reject various truths brought to life by the Spirit of God because obeying those truths would simply be too uncomfortable or too costly. And others, in their arrogance and conceit, will simply "know" these kinds of things to be true so therefore it could not possibly happen to them but could only happen to that group "over there."

Anything that the individual holds as of greater worth or value than what is right in God's eyes will be the vantage point whereby the demonic will exert its strong delusion over those

“Christians” who do not love the truth and who are in reality perishing. This *is* the perilous nature of the end times! (2 Tim. 3:1)

To be saved during this time of demonic power and deception will require endurance. (Mt. 24:13) Our love for the truth – and the truth is a Person, not just some list of dogmas, ideas, doctrines and theologies – must be stronger than our personal preferences for all the things which the demonic might use against us. Long ago, God, in the context of ridiculing all of men’s efforts to build Him a suitable habitation, said,

“But on this one will I look [with favor]: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word. [But] he who kills a bull [a required sacrifice for sin under the Law] as if he slays a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, as if he breaks a dog’s neck; he who offers a grain offering, as if he offers swine’s blood; he who burns incense, as if he blesses an idol. Just as they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations, so will I choose their delusions, and bring their fears on them; because when I called, no one answered, when I spoke they did not hear; but they did evil before My eyes, and chose that in which I do not delight.” (Isa. 66:2-4)

The institutionalizing of the “church” which produces the great apostasy is really the same story as the traditionalizing of Judaism which produced the rejection and murder of the Messiah. The human heart, apart from the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, will always become hardened and resist the way and work of God. (Rom. 8:7, Acts 7:51, etc.) When carnal men (any who obey anything other than what is right, true and pure in God’s eyes) band together and form an organized religion, the result can only be an abomination in God’s eyes. Whether one under the Old Covenant practiced the Mosaic law apart from a heart pure before God or one under the New Covenant attends “church” apart from a heart pure before God, it is the same thing in God’s eyes: abomination. Only faith which results in personal obedience to God is acceptable in His eyes. (see Gal. 5:6)

“Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” (Psa. 127:1) All the efforts throughout history to build God a building – especially the physical “church” buildings and all the errant attempts to practice “church” on any terms and conditions other than His (i.e., Nicolaitan authority, institutional system, etc., in contrast to His simple, abundant life through and by His Spirit) - will prove to be eternally disastrous for all who partake. The one who still trembles at God’s word, who recognizes his own inherent poverty, weakness, handicaps and limitations and who is content to walk under the direct Headship and Kingship of Christ Jesus (co-laboring with Him as *He* builds His ekklesia – Mt. 16:18) will not come under any delusion and will persevere to the end so as to be saved. This *is* - and always has been! – the gospel of the kingdom of Christ and God.

Let he who has ears hear.

15. The Right Answer

“Who do you say that I am?” (Mt. 16:15) This is the question Jesus put to His disciples – and the right answer, given by Peter but shared by all of them, that He was the Messiah, the Son

of God, is what Jesus said would be the foundation of the ekklesia, His people called out of this world's darkness to be citizens of His kingdom of light.

How we answer this question effects *everything* about how we will go about practicing the way of following Him.

We must also examine the answer that Peter gave – for that answer stands alone as a blessing of God. Let us also note that this answer is given at least three different ways, surely in an attempt to keep us away from the human tendency to turn spiritual truths into lifeless, dead and impotent formulas.

- “You are the Christ (the Messiah).” (Mk. 8:29)
- “You are the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of the living God.” (Mt. 16:16)
- “The Christ (the Messiah) of God.” (Lk. 9:20)
- “You are the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of the living God.” (Jn. 6:69)

When Peter gave this answer, Jesus responded, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” (Mt. 16:17)

Peter, unlike most modern-day hearers of the gospel, received a spiritual insight from the Holy Spirit of God that enabled him to understand and believe that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah. Most modern-day hearers of the gospel are told by flesh and blood preachers (men) that Jesus is the Messiah and far too many never get the spiritual revelation from the Holy Spirit of God or, if they do receive revelation, never seem able to separate that which is merely intellectual knowledge from that which is spiritual insight. Their faith, at best, thus rests almost entirely on the words of men and the fruit of their lives confirms this to be true. Such as these are content to sit idly and passively at the feet of their preferred spiritual guru, allowing him to “feed” them as he soothingly and addictingly scratches their ears. (see 2 Tim. 4:3-4)

Peter – as is true of nearly all modern-day hearers of the gospel – did not understand what the statement “You are the Messiah” really meant. “While there were many strands to Messianic expectation in 1st-century Palestine, ...the dominant popular hope was of a king like David, with a role of political liberation and conquest, and it seems clear that this would be the popular understanding of *christos*.” (R.T. France, *New Bible Dictionary*, 1985, p. 770)

It is obvious that Peter subscribed to the Conquering King interpretation of “Messiah.” Immediately after Peter declared Jesus to be the Christ, “Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again on the third day.” (Mt. 16:21) In short, Jesus began teaching them that He was not yet to be the Conquering Messiah-King of popular imagination but rather the Suffering Servant who would take away sin. “Far be it from You, Lord,” Peter said, “this shall not happen to You!” (Mt. 16:22) Peter was soundly rebuked for this and the process of learning what Jesus meant would have to wait until Jesus “opened [his] understanding, that [he] might comprehend the Scriptures...all things [that were] fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning [Christ].” (Lk. 24:44-45) Then, after the Spirit was poured out, Peter would preach and expound those Scriptures as if he had known what they meant all his life.

Peter had spiritually received the revelation that Jesus was the Messiah and had to learn that Jesus was the Suffering Servant-Messiah before Jesus could truly be King in Peter's life. Those modern-day hearers of the gospel who have been told by man that Jesus is the Christ need to first have that knowledge transformed into spiritual light. These who have intellectually grasped or deduced that Jesus was the Suffering Servant who was to take away the sins of the world (Jn. 1:29, 1 Jn. 2:2), after having this fact spiritually transformed into life-giving light, must learn that until He is the Messiah-King of the individual's heart and life, that individual truthfully has failed to enter and remain within the kingdom of God, that realm where Christ is truly obeyed as King. That is, unless He is Savior *and* Lord, He is neither Lord *nor* Savior!

It will do no good to claim to belong to "the church." The "church" was allowed to come into existence so that the tares could grow to maturity in close proximity to the wheat. Both are planted in the field which Christ said was "the world" yet the tares are later removed from the kingdom. (Mt. 13:38, 41) Since the kingdom is described as being "in your midst" (Lk. 17:21), once the tares are removed from the midst of the wheat, they can no longer said to be "in the kingdom." The precision of Christ's prophetic phrases solidly places the "church" as a portion of the field, the world – and this is amply evidenced by its very structure. Truly it has been said that Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God yet it is the "church" that came into existence.

Similarly, it will do no good to claim to have prophesied, cast out demons or even to have performed miracles in the name of Christ. To those who do so, Christ will declare, "I never knew you. You are not wheat – you are no son of the kingdom. Leave Me – you did only what was right in your own eyes. I was not your King – you were your own king." (Mt. 7:22-23, 13:38, Jdgs. 21:25)

Who we say Jesus is is equal in importance with **what** we believe Christ to be. In the "church," that worldly structure that imitates, counterfeits and purports itself to be the bride and body of Christ, there has arisen what can only be called a "two-step gospel." (We will explore this concept in more detail in a later chapter.) Men hear or read that Christ was the propitiation (atoning sacrifice) for sin (1 Jn. 2:2), say (perhaps even mean) the right words and reckon (intellectual accounting term) themselves "saved and bound for heaven." But Christ has not and probably never will become their King who alone has the right to command obedience and demand all if He so chooses. (Acts 20:30, Mk. 10:21) Since this second step is rarely if ever taken, it nullifies even a genuine first step because Christ is "the author of eternal salvation to all who *obey* Him." (Heb. 5:9) Put into another picture that Jesus used, there are many who huddle around, perhaps even inside, the gate but very few walk forward on the road that *leads away* to eternal life. (Mt. 7:14) Such a *road* requires the disciple to bear his own personal cross and follow after Christ (Lk. 14:27) – very, very few who are taught the first part of the "two step gospel" ever find this road. It is precisely here that we can see that "Many are called but few are chosen." (Mt. 22:14)

When he gave the right answer that Jesus was the Christ, Peter, like most Israelites, believed that Christ was to be a Conquering King who would deliver Israel from its political enemies. Thus very early in His ministry, Jesus began to avoid being overtly called the Messiah. When the crowds came to make Him king of Israel, He vanished. (Jn. 6:15) His kingdom was not to be of this world (Jn. 18:36) – to gain the kingdom of His Father He would have first have to be the Suffering Servant-Messiah and in this way win the right to be the Conquering Messiah-King for He would thereby deliver all of mankind from its worst enemies: sin, death, Satan and even self. Jesus was not willing to become king of physical Israel just to remove Rome from power and thereby leave sinful men to play their Machiavellian games to gain power over their

fellow human beings so as to oppress and exploit them. Jesus “for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb. 12:2), taking His place, not as the king of paltry and worldly Israel, but as the King of the “Israel” of God, an “Israel” not of this world but an eternal kingdom of absolute dominion that includes, even as it obliterates, all man-made divisions: Greeks, Jews, barbarians, Scythians, slaves, free, small and great, male and female. (Gal. 3:8, Col. 3:11) The Christ was the sacrificial Lamb who by His blood redeemed to God people “out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation” who would be kings and priests to God “who would reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:9-10), not as merely rulers over the paltry and worldly kingdoms of this world but as rulers over principalities and powers. Christ truly chose God’s kingdom but the “church” has failed to make the same choice and has devolved into merely one more of the kingdoms of this world.

Peter, who gave the right answer that Jesus was the Christ (though his understanding at that moment was entirely wrong, perhaps even demonically so – see Mt. 16:23), years later concluded his second letter, saying, “You therefore, beloved, since you know beforehand [that there will be carnal, false teachers untaught by the Spirit of God – tares, sons of the evil one – and double-mindedly unstable – with one foot in the world, the “church,” and one foot touching the kingdom, as it were – who twist and distort the Scriptures to their own destruction], beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; instead grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord [Master, *King*] and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 3:16-18, also 2:1, Mt. 13:25, 38, Jas. 1:8)

Jesus’ first warning about the end of the age and the sign of His return was, “Take heed that *no one* deceives you.” (Mt. 24:4) False christs, false prophets (Mt. 24:24), false apostles masquerading as workers of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:13-15), false assemblies gathering under any basis other than the genuine Headship of Christ (“church”), false miracles, signs and lying wonders (2 Ths. 2:9) – all these and more are arrayed against the end-time follower of Christ. Those who would persevere to the end so as to be saved (Mt. 24:13) will be those who have received the spiritual revelation that Jesus is the Messiah (in all that that means) and they will “become blameless and innocent, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom [they] shine as lights in the world, folding fast the word of life...” (Phlp. 2:15-16, also see Mt. 13:43) These will be those who keep themselves pure from false religion, who follow the Lamb wherever He goes, who refuse to lie because they have taken their stand with the slain Lamb who is the King on the true Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, the general assembly and ekklesia of the Firstborn who are registered in heaven...” (Rev. 14:1, 4-5, Heb. 12:22-23)

You: Who – and what – do you say Jesus is? How you answer this question effects everything about how you will go about practicing the way of following Him and, ultimately, will decide the eternal outcome of your life.

Let he who has ears hear.

16. A Picture of the Kingdom

The old adage, “A picture is worth a thousand words,” is certainly true. A photograph of a wanted criminal or of a visiting foreigner one is to meet for the first time at the airport is to be

vastly preferred over numerous descriptions of the subject. So too the kingdom of God. But how does one provide a photograph or snapshot of the kingdom of God that will remain long after the centuries and cultures that recorded them have long ago become dust? We need to also know that there is a danger in even seeking to view such a picture apart from the leading of the Spirit of God. “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will [people] say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is in your midst.” Jesus then warns His followers, “The days will come when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And [people] will say to you, ‘Look here!’ or ‘Look there!’ Do not go after them or follow them.” (Lk. 17:20-23)

The Scriptures do, however, contain a “snapshot” of the kingdom of God, placed there, in part, to show (at least to those with eyes to see and ears to hear) the futility of looking and running here and there to find the kingdom of God embodied in one man or one group – especially if this one man claims to be a special messenger (“apostle” or “prophet”) of the kingdom or the group claims unique status as the only true “ekklesia” or “kingdom of God.” (see Mt. 24:24) Let us, therefore, look at this “picture” God has given us of the kingdom of God.

Some Will See the Kingdom

- **Mark 9:1:** And [Jesus] said to [the people along with His disciples – also see Mk. 8:34], “Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power.”

- **Matthew 16:28:** [Jesus said to His disciples – see Mt. 16:24], “Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”

- **Luke 9:27:** [Jesus said “to them all” – see Lk. 9:23], “But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God.”

Whatever the differences or similarities in these accounts, Jesus says clearly that *some* of those who were physically standing there listening to Him speak would *see* the kingdom of God before they died. As we explore this episode and its significance, what these eyewitnesses see and what is later said about what they saw was “the kingdom of God,” presented in such a way that those with eyes to see and ears to hear will have a clear picture of the kingdom of God that will expose the frauds and counterfeits for what they are.

We will discover that one of those of whom Jesus spoke was Peter, who later wrote, “For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.” (2 Pet. 1:16) Peter gives testimony here that he saw the power, the coming, the majesty (kingliness) of Christ – in short, the kingdom of God. It is here that we begin to see the scope of the event of which Peter was an eyewitness. Jesus, who most likely did not speak Greek, is recorded as promising some to *see* (the Greek equivalent of Jesus’ Aramaic is *eido* [1492], in all three accounts) which expresses or emphasizes “merely mechanical, passive or casual vision.” (Strong’s) But Peter, in the only usage of the word in the New Testament, says that he and the others who saw the kingdom of God were *epoptai* [2030], “onlookers.” It is the various parts of this word, however, that point to how significant this event was to Peter – *epoptai* is a combination of *epi* [1909], “upon, on, at,”

and *optomai* [3700] which means “to gaze at as with wide-open eyes, as at something remarkable.” (Strong’s) Of this claim, A.T. Robertson writes, “Old word, used of those who attained the third or highest degree of initiates in the Eleusinian mysteries (common in the inscriptions)... Peter clearly felt that he and James and John were lifted to the highest stage of initiation at the Transfiguration of Christ.” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol. VI, p. 156*)

It is highly significant that this event where Peter saw and witnessed and experienced a profound change in his life, comes almost directly after his declaration that Jesus was the Christ. Jesus had asked, “But who do you say that I am?” (Mk. 8:29, Mt. 16:15-16, Lk. 9:20) Jesus then tells everyone listening to Him to tell no one that He was the Christ (Mk. 8:30, Mt. 16:20, Lk. 9:21) – only Matthew records the parenthetical saying of Jesus regarding Peter, the ekklesia and the “keys of the kingdom” (which we will examine more closely in a later chapter – Mt. 16:17-19), a passage we will touch upon frequently throughout this discussion. Jesus then prophesies of His coming death. (Mk. 8:31, Mt. 16:21, Lk. 9:22) Two of the accounts record Peter’s rebuke to Jesus and Jesus’ subsequent rebuke of Peter (Mk. 8:32-33, Mt. 16:22-23) – for whatever reason Luke leaves this exchange out of his account. Then Jesus speaks of what is *required* to be Christ’s disciple. (Mk. 8:34-38, Mt. 16:24-27, Lk. 9:23-26) Then comes Jesus’ pronouncement that some hearing Him that day would see the kingdom before they died and immediately after this pronouncement all three accounts record the transfiguration of Christ.

Let us review these items because the transfiguration of Christ is intrinsically linked to the revelation that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-promised Messiah of God.

- “Who do you say that I am?” – “You are the Christ.”
- “Don’t tell anyone this truth.”
- “The Christ must die – and soon.”
- “To be My disciple, you too must carry your own cross.”
- The transfiguration of Christ – a picture of the kingdom of God.

As we can see, the transfiguration is directly linked to the revelation of Christ, that same revelation Christ said would be the foundation for His ekklesia. (Mt. 16:18, 1 Cor. 3:11, Eph. 2:20)

Transfigured

- **Mark 9:2-3:** Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves, and He was transfigured before them. His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them.

- **Matthew 17:1-2:** Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, brought them up on a high mountain by themselves, and was transfigured before them. His face shown like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.

- **Luke 9:28-29:** And it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings, that He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening.

As we examine these accounts, let us remember that neither Peter, James nor even John – the three participants – are writing these accounts. Mark’s gospel is considered to be heavily reliant on Peter’s views and preaching and is also the first account to be written (probably first published around 50 A.D.) As such, it is readily seen that Matthew’s account (published around 62 A.D.), which relies much on Mark’s gospel for structure and order, adds or takes away from Mark’s account based on what Matthew had observed or the source Matthew used. Similarly, Luke’s gospel (published around 67 A.D.) also draws heavily from Mark’s work (though it is by no means Luke’s only source – see Lk. 1:1-2) It is certain therefore, especially with the early death of James (around 44 A.D. - Acts 12:2), that these three accounts largely stem from Peter’s testimony. Perhaps Peter, in simply telling of this event, was perceived by some as boasting (as so many others did – 2 Cor. 11:18) and John, writing much later (perhaps as late as 90 A.D.) and very much interested in presenting Christ as both divine and human in order to counter Gnostic errors about the Christ, elects not to include at all this event in his gospel, of which gospel even he says it was by no means an exhaustive work. (Jn. 21:25) Yet even John gives the testimony, “We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father” (Jn. 1:14) and there is no reason to believe that John’s brief testimony here does not include his experience on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured before his, James’ and Peter’s eyes.

The only significant variation in the three accounts comes in Mark and Matthew’s usage of the Greek word *metamorphothe* [3339] for which English translators chose to use the Latin word *transfiguratos* (Vulgate) as the basis because of associations between pagan mythology, especially Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* which were published after 8 A.D. Luke, instead of the Greek word *metamorphothe* instead writes, “the appearance of His face became different.” (Robertson, *Word Pictures, II*, p. 130)

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is “a collection of mythological and legendary stories in which metamorphosis (transformation) plays some part, however minor... The importance of metamorphosis is more apparent than real; the essential theme of the poem is passion... [Ovid’s] gods are nothing if not human.” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 9, p. 19, 1990) Matthew and Mark provide here a confirmation of both the differences of character between themselves and Luke, as well as the earlier dates of Mark and Matthew’s gospels. Ovid was banished to the extreme frontier of the Roman empire in 8 A.D. by Augustus Caesar because of some undisclosed charges of “immorality” (which Ovid called an indiscretion and not a crime) and “treason.” Ovid died in exile in 17 A.D., three years after Augustus’ stepson Tiberius became the next emperor of Rome in 14 A.D. Whatever crime or indiscretion Ovid committed, Augustus was entirely successful in stifling its exposure and even public comment as to its nature and it would seem that Tiberius was not inclined to rescind Augustus’ banishment of Ovid.

Ovid’s writings were removed from public libraries and his writings were politically dangerous to own or especially quote and had to be kept “underground” as it were and it is not unreasonable to assume this condition lasted until at least 37 A.D. when Tiberius passed from the scene and another emperor (Caligula), with other priorities and concerns, ascended to the throne. Mark and Matthew, being Jews closely associated with Jesus and writing about the time Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* would be just starting to become known outside of academic circles, had no real problem using the word *metamorphothe* (though it should be noted that Matthew’s description of Christ’s face shining “like the sun” and His clothes “as the light” could be his attempt to guard against pagan associations – and it should also be noted that other New Testament authors use the word in other specific contexts as well.) Luke, almost certainly a Gentile and likely a Greek,

a physician at the least trained in the Greek schools before coming to know and follow Christ, would be more likely to know (both by virtue of his connection to academia and because of writing later) of the use of metamorphosis as the apparent theme of Ovid's poem. John, writing even later and overtly desirous of presenting Christ as fully God and fully man, could easily have seen this event, the transfiguration, as something that would cause his primarily Greek-speaking readers to place his Christ on the same level as Ovid's all too human gods, a risk John was not at all willing to take. Peter, at a much earlier time and especially if he were visiting and preaching in Rome primarily to Romans, may have found it advantageous to show that Christ Himself had raised this lowly Jewish fisherman to the heights of initiation into the mysteries of Christ. Neither Luke nor John would have been as likely to have felt such a need in their efforts to cause men to believe that Jesus was the Christ, as both openly declared their motive to be. (Lk. 1:4, 1 Jn. 1:3)

Perhaps the main point we can glean from this aspect of the picture presented of the transfiguration is that all of the New Testament will stand up to historical scrutiny. The coming of the kingdom of God was – and is – an event that happened – and is happening – in real time to real people.

The brightness or whiteness of Christ here and as seen particularly in John's *Revelation* is always representative of the righteousness with which Christ's kingdom is characterized. (see Rev. 19:11-14, etc.) Paul wrote, "The kingdom of God is not [physical] food and drink, but *righteousness* and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Rom. 14:17) Jesus taught His disciples, "Seek first the kingdom and His *righteousness*..." (Mt. 6:33), a righteousness which must be of a character and quality completely different and superior to the righteousness of mere men, no matter how religious, in order to enter His kingdom. (Mt. 5:20) God's way has always been about righteousness – from righteous Abel (Heb. 11:4) and throughout the prophets of the Old Testament. God said through Isaiah, "Come now, and let us reason together," says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isa. 1:18)

As we shall see, this seemingly simple event, the transfiguration, encompasses all the elements of the kingdom of Christ and God. When Christ was transfigured before the eyes of Peter, James and John, they literally saw the kingdom of God given in symbolic representation, even though it would be some time before they began to understand all that they had seen.

The Law and the Prophets

- **Mark 9:4:** And Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus.
- **Matthew 17:3:** And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.
- **Luke 9:30-31:** Then behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

As we have already touched upon, the kingdom of God, characterized first and most by righteousness, was attested to by the prophets like Isaiah. Elijah is generally recognized by the Jews as the chief representative of all the prophets. Similarly, Moses is the representative of the

Law. Thus for a Jew to say “Moses and Elijah” is the equivalent of saying “the Law and the Prophets.”

On at least two different occasions, Jesus summed up “the Law and the Prophets.” He said:

- “Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” (Mt. 7:12) And,
- “On these two commandments [to love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself] hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Mt. 22:37-40)

Thus when the glorified Moses and Elijah appear to talk with Jesus, they bring all of “the Law and the Prophets,” all the writings and wisdom and insight from the Old Testament that are summed up in the word “love,” into the equation. What Peter, James and John literally saw before them was the Law and Prophets conversing with the Messiah, the Man who Himself had previously said to His followers, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.” (Mt. 5:17) And in a short few months after the transfiguration, He would say, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” (Lk. 24:44)

The men who represent “the Law and the Prophets” speak with the Messiah regarding His soon-coming death – and this was more than some listing or review of all the hundreds of places where the Old Testament speaks of the coming Messiah. It is easy to suppose that Jesus’ human soul derived much comfort from speaking with these two men who understood His mission – He certainly couldn’t get such understanding from any other human beings. Peter, His closest disciple, had just rebuked Him for His saying that the Christ must die at the hands of the Jewish leaders! (Mk. 8:31-32, Mt. 16:21-22) Not much comfort there. But surely Jesus, as a human, drew strength from “the Law and the Prophets,” reinforcing His ingrained desire and intent to do the will of God. (see Heb. 10:7) And indeed, it is very shortly after the transfiguration that Jesus “steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Lk. 9:51) though it would be another ten chapters (in Luke’s account) before His triumphal entry into Jerusalem where if His disciples had not proclaimed Him the Messiah and King, the stones would have! (Lk. 19:37-40)

Moses, Elijah and Jesus spoke of His departure – the Greek word is *exodon* [1841] “exodus.” Moses led the exodus out of Egypt and brought the people to the Jordan River even though Moses himself was not permitted to enter the Promised Land. (Dt. 32:52) Many recognize this historical fact as being symbolic of the Law being unable to take anyone into the eternal, righteous promises of God, that is, the overcoming spiritual life in Christ. Elijah began an exodus of sorts, one of the first “come outers,” by leading the people out of idolatry. (1 Ki. 18:20-22, etc.) Both Moses and Elijah experienced their mortal exodus, their death, in unusual ways. Moses went up into a mountain, saw the Promised Land, died and was buried by the Lord. (Dt. 34:5-6) Elijah was caught up to heaven in a chariot of fire. (2 Ki. 2:11) Jesus’ exodus by way of the cross would fulfill all that these men had said, done and begun. These three men, when understood in their depths, that is, when rightly divided and balanced precisely in the

whole counsel of God, present the complete picture of what God has done to reconcile man back to Himself.

We see this same pattern perpetuated in the work of Paul. Three days after Paul arrived in Rome, where he was held under house arrest, he sent for the Jewish leaders. (Acts 28:16-17) These leaders desired to hear Paul and appointed a day to speak with him. Many came to him on that day at his lodging (being under house arrest, he was not permitted to leave the house) and Paul spoke from morning to evening “explaining and solemnly testifying of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets.” (Acts 28:22-23) But when Paul, seeing that most of the Jews had no ears to hear the Spirit of truth, declared that “the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!” (Acts 28:28) The Jews departed and went off to argue with themselves but Paul preached for the next two years in that house – “preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Acts 28:29-31)

Most scholars place these two years of Paul in Rome under house arrest as 60-62 A.D. Mark, if not Peter, has been preaching in Rome (most likely Peter was only an occasional visitor to Rome – it is now virtually certain that Rome was *not* his primary area of work just as it is not even certain now that Rome was *ever* a place of his work!) and Mark’s gospel has been written and is circulating. And into Rome under house arrest now comes a man whose preaching and testimony perfectly coincides with the claims of the lowly Jewish fisherman who had been “lifted to the highest stage of initiation” into the mysteries of Christ.

While Men Slept

- **Mark 9:5-6a:** Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” – because he did not know what to say,

- **Matthew 17:4:** Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles; one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

- **Luke 9:32-33:** But Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep; and when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him. And it happened, as they were parting from Him, that Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” – not knowing what he said.

In an indication of how far the Scriptures can be said to go in providing a well-developed picture of the kingdom of God, even the variations here can be seen to point to the necessary progression our perception of Christ’s place in our lives must take. The order in which the accounts were written coincides with the order we must mature in Christ: Rabbi [4461], Lord (*kurios* [2962]) and Master (*epistates* [1988]). Of this last word A.T. Robertson writes, “...one standing over another. This word recognizes Christ’s authority.” (*Word Pictures, II*, p. 70) We must first be taught by Him, then recognize His authority as Lord and then personally embrace His supreme right to command us as King. While one can raise the argument that Luke is just writing better (more Greek, less Aramaic) Greek, that this “coincidence” even exists in this very well orchestrated picture-event is at least worth noting.

Though God has given a complete picture of the kingdom of God to these three disciples, it is evident in Luke's account (which many see as the most chronologically oriented) that they did not yet spiritually understand what they had seen. Directly after the transfiguration:

- The disciples, including Peter, James and John, were unable to cast a demon out of a boy. (Lk. 9:40)
- Jesus plainly says, in words that should have cued His disciples to use their spiritual ears which He had been training them to use, "Let these words sink down into your ears, for the Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men." But they did not understand this saying. (Lk. 9:44-45)
- Then a dispute arose among the disciples, including Peter, James and John, as to who would be the greatest. (Lk. 9:46)
- The disciples, including Peter, James and John, stopped someone else from casting out demons in Jesus' name because he wasn't one of the disciples. (Lk. 9:49)
- James and John want to call fire down from heaven on a Samaritan village who would not receive Jesus. (Lk. 9:53-54)
- Three men volunteer to follow Jesus but aren't ready for the all-out commitment He required of them. (Lk. 9:57-62)

It is in the light of these coming discouragements (as these surely must have been to Jesus' human soul) that we can see how the disciples being asleep on the mountain, coming on the heels of Peter's rebuke, was simply another item in a series of assaults against Jesus' human soul. When the writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus "was in all points tempted as we are" (Heb. 4:15), this may be some of the very things he has in mind! Is it any wonder He had to set his face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem! (Lk. 9:51)

And since God has provided the event of the transfiguration as a "snapshot" of the kingdom of God, the fact that the disciples were asleep takes on a deeper significance as it points to the role men will play in the coming of Christ's kingdom in the interim between His exodus and His return. Jesus said that "while men slept" the devil, the enemy of the kingdom of God, would sow his sons among the sons of the kingdom. (Mt. 13:25) Many have failed to see that the tares were able to be in such close proximity to the wheat because of layers of deception. The "church," organized by bishops who rose up and subtly corrupted the gospel and drew followers after themselves (as Paul had prophesied they would – Acts 20:30) was then drawn, in the third century, into temples that God would never live in (Acts 7:48, 17:24), temples patterned after the Roman basilica or judgment hall. In reality, the "church" was always and only another part of "the field," the world. (Mt. 13:38) Jesus also said that "while the bridegroom was delayed," *all* of the wedding maids slumbered and slept. (Mt. 25:5) This *is* the origins of the "church"!

At another time when Jesus again had brought Peter, James and John apart from the other disciples and instructed them to pray, Jesus again faces what must surely have been

disappointment. (Mt. 26:40, Lk. 22:45) On the night before going to the cross, a night that was probably more of a test than the next day would be – how easy it would have been to get up and walk away and be anywhere but where Judas Iscariot expected Him to be and how necessary it was for Jesus to resist sin, violating God’s will, to the point of sweating “like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Lk. 22:44, Heb. 12:3-4) – Jesus returns and “found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy.” (Mt. 26:43)

Yet it is also true that “the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam” and God took one of his ribs and made a woman. (Gen. 2:21-22) Daniel, on two occasions when angels spoke to him, fell into deep sleep even as the angel spoke to him. (Dan. 8:18, 10:9) Apparently there is something overwhelming to the human soul or body in the realities of the spiritual realms. This may be one reason Jesus said to the disciples when He found them sleeping, “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak.” (Mk. 14:38, Mt. 26:41, Lk. 22:46)

Peter, James and John

With the idea in view that the transfiguration is a picture of the kingdom of God, even the presence of the three disciples takes on a deeper significance. Each of these disciples can be seen here as the type or representative of the various kinds of Christ’s followers who will attain to eternal life in the kingdom of God. And it is even significant that Peter, representative of those who follow Christ in the context of the visible “church,” is the most visible in this event, whereas James, who would be martyred by Herod (Acts 12:2), and John, who would both endure persecution and produce the deepest, most consistent spiritual testimony of the Christ, are in the background.

Let us consider the depths to which Peter’s actions, as recorded in the New Testament, parallel the actions of the followers of Christ who have also kept themselves under the visible, worldly authority structure men commonly call “the church.”

- Because Jesus was talking to Peter, it is held that *Peter* must be the “Rock” upon which “the church” is built. (Mt. 16:18) The Catholic sect still claims this fallacy and error to this day. The “church” is built on error and deception – Christ’s *ekklesia* is still built on the *revelation* that Jesus is the Messiah and King.

- Peter, as one of Jesus’ “inner circle” of three, certainly felt obligated to participate in the arguments about who would be the greatest in the kingdom. (Mk. 9:34, Lk. 9:46, 22:24) It is obvious that especially the Catholic “church” (in reality, sect) inherited or took upon itself Peter’s propensity to strive for the position of “the greatest in the kingdom” – and in so doing, both Peter and the Catholic “church” have had to experience severe reality therapy!

- There are hints in the New Testament accounts that Peter even vied with James and John for superiority even in the inner circle. These hints can be seen in Peter’s indignation against James and John for trying for the seats at the left and right hand of Christ in His kingdom (Mt. 20:20-21, 24) and in his questioning of Christ about John after being told that he, Peter, would die an undesirable death. (Jn. 21:20-21) Peter’s hypocrisy also becomes evident here when we recall that at

his first encounter with Jesus, he “fell on his knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.’” (Lk. 5:8) This man who at the beginning of his encounter with Christ was a sinful man was still a sinful man vying for fleshly leadership and preeminence (also see 3 Jn. 9) but apparently later grew in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 3:17-18) and kept himself under the Headship of Christ and refused to become a lord over the flock. (1 Pet. 5:2-3) Not everyone in “church” authority positions has been able to do this and maintain a proper balance, to say the least.

- The incident when Peter walks on the water but then sees the wind and the waves and begins to sink (Mt. 14:30) is comparable to the first and second century believers who had believed in Christ but saw the increasingly conflicting waves of teachings (Eph. 4:14) from the various bishops and the waves of persecution and, rather than trust for preservation from an invisible God, they placed themselves under a visible representative, the bishop,” and the “church” has been a sinking ship ever since because the “church,” quite content with its lesser heads, has no reason to call upon the true Lord and Head to save them.

- Peter rebuked Jesus, telling Him, in effect, that He did not need to die. (Mk. 8:32, Mt. 16:22) The “church,” either by concocting “New Testament” laws, such as “church” membership and attendance, “tithes and offerings,” etc., that are required to be obeyed by one’s own ability, or by failing to teach the true, self-denying way of Christ’s cross, routinely declares, by its words or actions, that Christ didn’t really need to die – nor do His followers.

- The time when Peter cuts the ear off of the high priest’s servant (Mk. 14:47, Mt. 26:51, Lk. 22:50) gives the perfect picture of the “church’s” tendency to remove its victims’ ability to spiritually hear the things of God, a wound that only Christ can heal. (Lk. 22:51)

- When God gives Peter the vision of the sheet full of unclean animals and commands him to kill and eat, Peter responds, “Not so, Lord! I have never eaten anything common or unclean.” (Acts 10:14) The “church,” at almost every change of season wherein old doctrines were shown to be false and inappropriate for the next generation, has said, in effect, “Not so, Lord! We’re far too religious to do or believe something like that.”

- Even though God tells Peter three times not to call anything common or unclean that God had declared clean (Acts 10:15), Peter uses these very words to explain why he’s insulting the Gentile who sent for him and to whom God had sent him. (Acts 10:28) The “church,” especially its clergy, uses the gospel to stand over the people and have them sit at their feet. But, like Peter, most clergy won’t let the people go “too far” in actually worshiping the clergyman. (Acts 10:25-26) It should be noticed in this light that the Holy Spirit doesn’t even wait for Peter to get finished preaching before He fell upon the Gentiles! (Acts 10:44)

- Peter, after men of the circumcision group arrived, no longer mingled with the Gentiles but simultaneously displayed his partially-buried *fear of men* (in this case, of James and the circumcision group), his *bigotry* (that ridiculous idea that one is somehow better than others because of one's genetic ancestry), and his *hypocrisy*. (Gal. 2:11-13) These are primary characteristics of almost every "church" that has ever existed.

- Even in the Gospel accounts of the transfiguration where Peter was not knowing what he said, what Peter said has been echoed in "churches" ever since they began to be built in the second century! Have we not all heard "It is good to be here in the house of the Lord today!"? And "let us build tabernacles" ("church" buildings) is the prime directive of nearly every denomination that has come into existence! And Peter seems to have forgotten that only a few days before, Jesus had said, "**I** will build..." (Mt. 16:18)

None of this is to say that all who have done these kinds of things will not be a part of God's kingdom – in fact, Peter's presence here would seem to suggest that there are those who will somehow be *in* the "church" but not *of* the "church." While this may be true, it is in no way any kind of guarantee that one can *remain* in both the "church" and the kingdom of God – especially after one has heard the Spirit's call to come out and be separate. The wrath of God still comes upon the sons of disobedience. (Eph. 5:6)

James, as was already touched upon, in the picture of the kingdom which the transfiguration gives us, is representative of all those who lose their lives for the sake of the gospel. We see "the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held" (Rev. 6:9) – a number which is said to be incomplete. (Rev. 6:11) It is of this category in the end times that we are told "And they overcame him [the devil] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and that they did not love their lives to the death." (Rev. 12:11) That we look upon these truly great heroes of the faith as being unsung, little known and virtually unrecognized shows how different our perspective here on earth is from that of eternity! There, their names and lives are well-known and much spoken of – here we rarely admit to their existence and importance, even those we do know of!

John presents a picture of those who have sought to walk in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:24), the standard by which all men will be judged. John's life is characterized by endurance and holiness – his life is virtually unmatched in the number of tortures he survived and his refusal to be found even in the same bathhouse with the Gnostic teacher Cerinthus is extraordinary. (see 1 Jn. 4:8, 11, Jn. 15:17, etc.) John is given the privilege of conveying the *Revelation* to the servants of God so that they may know the things he saw, "and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this." (Rev. 1:1,19)

Jesus gave one parable that is never explained in either of the Gospels in which it was recorded. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." (Mt. 13:33, Lk. 13:21) Though there are those who refuse to recognize the leaven of the parable as wickedness or hypocrisy (in spite of the fact that *every* other passage in the New Testament that refers to leaven as a metaphor speaks of wickedness), and even though there are those who fail – or refuse – to see the deep-reaching effects of the great prostitute, Mystery Babylon, upon the people who follow Christ, it may well be that Jesus had in view the snapshot of the kingdom that would be orchestrated at the

transfiguration. That is, He knew that each type of His followers in the kingdom – as represented by Peter, James and John – would be corrupted (or leavened) to one extent or another.

Thus Paul’s teachings also regain something of their original significance: “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” (1 Cor. 5:6-8)

One can dismiss the above insights about these three disciples as fanciful – indeed it is not critical that one agree with the conclusions these insights lead to – yet it is fascinating to what extent the Scriptures go to in providing us an accurate picture of the invisible kingdom of God.

Listen to the Son

- **Mark 9:6b-7:** for they were greatly afraid. And a cloud came and overshadowed them; and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!”

- **Matthew 17:5-6:** While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid.

- **Luke 9:34-35:** While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were fearful as they entered the cloud. Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!”

Each account says they were greatly afraid or fearful. This too is the common reaction of the human soul coming into contact with undiluted Deity. Moses experienced this (Ex. 3:6) as did Isaiah (Isa. 6:5) and the apostle John again at a later occasion. (Rev. 1:17) In the *Revelation* an angel is dispatched with the eternal gospel and his first instruction is “Fear God...” (Rev. 14:6-7) That many people who claim to believe in Christ have never experienced anything of this kind only shows how far they are from God and the true gospel. That many people seek and some later claim to have had “Shekinah” or “glory cloud” experiences but subsequently fail to live in any greater holiness or consecration to God’s righteousness casts doubt on their entire grasp on the life of Christ! Conversely, those whose entire religious bent is a pursuit of this “glory cloud” experience, should recognize that this was a one-time event involving three disciples – a scripted and designed “photo shoot” if you will – an orchestration to set up for all time a picture of the kingdom of God, an event that included two men from eternity, one Messiah and three men not yet glorified. And we should note well that the voice from the cloud, the voice of the Father, did not say, “Pursue the glory.” Rather, He did say, “This One is My Son - hear Him!”

One can also note with amusement how Peter is interrupted here – just as his preaching at Cornelius’ house will later be interrupted. (Acts 10:44) One has to wonder if, while the Holy Spirit filled the Gentiles, Peter did not think back on his preaching to see if he had mentioned something about tabernacles!

But the need to hear the Messiah was prophesied as long ago as Moses. God said, “I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.” (Dt. 18:18-19) Peter uses this very passage when he preaches to the crowd that gathered after the lame man who had lain daily at the Gate Beautiful had been healed. (Acts 3:22-23)

The only way in which dozens, or hundreds, or thousands, or millions, of followers of Christ can hear what God is saying is through His Spirit who dwells within and is with those who believe. (Jn. 14:16-17) This is why, after Christ redeemed men back to Himself (1 Jn. 2:2) and the Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh (Acts 2:16-17), that

John could write, “The anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone continually teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him.” (1 Jn. 2:27)

Similarly the writer of Hebrews, quoting prophecies of Jeremiah, wrote, “This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” (Heb. 8:10-11)

Jesus Himself said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” (Jn. 10:27)

And the writer of Hebrews also wrote, “God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son... See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven...” (Heb. 1:1, 12:25)

As God told Moses, “It shall come to pass that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.” (Acts 3:23)

The kingdom of God is based entirely on the premise that God speaks to every man, woman and child who places their faith in Jesus Christ. Thus it is a kingdom of kings and priests (Rev. 1:6) and the ekklesia, the people called out of darkness to become light (Col. 1:13, Eph. 5:8), is built upon the revelation that God gives – that Jesus is the Messiah. (Mk. 8:29, Mt. 16:16, Lk. 9:20, Jn. 6:69) Without the ear that hears what God is saying we cannot be a functional, beneficial part of God’s kingdom. (Mk. 4:12, Mt. 13:14-15, Lk. 8:10)

Tell No One

- **Mark 9:8-10:** Suddenly, when they had looked around, they saw no one anymore, but only Jesus with themselves. Now as they came down from the mountain, He commanded them that they should tell no one the things they had

seen, till the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept this word to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant.

- **Matthew 17:7-9:** But Jesus came and touched them and said, “Arise, and do not be afraid.” And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead.”

- **Luke 9:36:** And when the voice had ceased, Jesus was found alone. But they kept quiet and told no one in those days any of the things they had seen.

There were at least two reasons that Jesus should instruct His disciples not to tell anyone what they had seen – obviously, they did not yet realize exactly what it was they had seen, and equally obviously, their own lives were not yet the proper context or platform from which to speak such things. Jesus tells them to not speak of this event until after He is risen from the dead – the disciples are still so confused that they’re stuck trying to decipher the “hidden spiritual meaning” (which this time there was no hidden spiritual meaning!) in what “rising from the dead” meant!

In this instruction, however, we can also see the need to wait before we begin to tell others. The disciples’ knowledge was inaccurate, incomplete and, most importantly, they lacked the indwelling Spirit within. With these huge inadequacies (which the latter will make up for most deficiencies in the former), it is not surprising that Jesus would instruct His disciples not to tell anyone what they had seen. As it is, this picture of the kingdom is not explained in the New Testament, certainly not in the depths to which it can be examined. It has been left for the “scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of God” to bring new treasure out of the storehouse (Mt. 13:52) at a time when the people of God need again to see what a simple picture of the kingdom of God can teach them.

When we see the kingdom of God as it is shown in the transfiguration, we can see where “the church” deviated from that simple picture. The “church” claims Christ as their King but then tries to build “tabernacles” for Him as if He needed their help. The “church” utilizes the top-down authority structure of the world and does not recognize that Jesus intends to personally be the King of all His subjects, every man, woman and child. Where the individual believer has submitted to the Headship of Christ, His right to rule and reign over all aspects of life, the imprisoning gates of death and darkness (which the schemes of the devil, particularly that one called “church” are designed to bring believers under the power of) cannot overcome the true follower of Christ. (Mt. 16:18)

The kingdom of God, then, can be seen to be:

- The Messiah who died as the propitiation (atoning sacrifice) for the sins of the world so that men could be reconciled to God and brought back into obedience to His kingdom. (1 Jn. 2:2, Eph. 2:4-7, etc.) He is the slain Lamb who *alone* is able to be King. (Rev. 5:5)

- Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, all point to the Messiah and have something to teach us regarding the kingdom of God. The Old

Testament is not to be rejected and discarded but rather, its true place and function in the kingdom must be found.

- The followers of Christ are those who submit to Him. Whether they attend “church,” die a martyr’s death or live in spirit and truth, it is the personal Headship of Christ which places one in the kingdom of Christ – and it is this fact that makes “church” so dangerous as “church” systematically and progressively blinds its victims to the subtle occasions when one chooses to obey the “church” and not Christ. Doing what is right in one’s own eyes (lawlessness), even when done by the “leadership” in “the church,” only proves that one is *not* in Christ’s kingdom.

- It is in our ability to hear God – and not men (“milk” – Heb. 5:13) – that we find the life of God (Mt. 4:4, Dt. 8:3) and participate in His kingdom.

- It is only after we have spiritually experienced Christ’s resurrection that we are truly then able to tell others about Him. When we know only that the Lamb of God died to take away our sins but we do not individually and personally know Him as the living and resurrected Lord, Master and King, we have not yet come into the fullness of His kingdom.

If we can keep this simple picture before our eyes, we will not be deceived when the fiefdoms and ambitions of men rise up claiming to be the kingdom of God. And we will be enabled to follow after Christ and truly be the ekklesia He is building us to be (Mt. 16:18), “as living stones, being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet. 2:5) Though it took some time, it would seem quite clear that Peter got the picture. If he can get it, so can we.

Let he who has ears hear.

17. Friends of the King

Jesus said to His disciples, “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.” (Jn. 15:14) If an ordinary man ever said to his equally ordinary friend, “You are my friend so long as you do what I tell you,” those two would not long be friends! Such a statement is inherently a contradiction to a relationship of equals. Thus this statement by Jesus implicitly links His position as the King with the relationship He has with His disciples.

Many people claim to be a disciple or even friend of Jesus but they fail to turn to Him as King (Lord, Master). This was true in His own day and caused Him to ask, “Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?” (Lk. 6:46) It is even more true in this day which is flooded with people, even so-called “Christians,” who are “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.” (2 Tim. 3:4)

When a king of a realm gives a command and it is disobeyed, the crime against the king is called treason and betrayal – and the penalty is almost certain to be death. We do not like to think of our sins and disobediences and lawlessness (what is right in our own eyes – Jdgs. 21:25)

as treason and betrayal – those are such ugly words! – but that is precisely what we are practicing if we do not obey Christ’s commands.

When Christ first began to preach, He said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Mt. 4:17) John the Baptist had preached the same message adding “Therefore bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Mt. 3:2, 8) and Paul, in his defense to King Agrippa, described his work among the Gentiles as having the intent that “they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.” (Acts 26:19-20) To the Athenians, Paul said, “God now commands *all men everywhere* to repent.” (Acts 17:30) The first and foremost command of the King is “Repent!” At the same time, however, it is widely recognized and is even common knowledge in many circles that many people in many “churches” often desperately need to repent – yet these consistently fail or refuse to do so. Because John never uses the word “repent” (Greek, *metanoeo* [3340]), some “theologians” have concocted a “gospel” that requires no repentance whatsoever but instead, these insist, we need only “believe.” Such a view is in error because it is impossible to believe in Christ as Savior without changing one’s ideas about Him and of one’s relationship to and with Him. One simply cannot believe in a Savior who is “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29) when one has no sin to be repenting of! As Jesus said elsewhere, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” (Mt. 9:13) The one who refuses to obediently repent is not a friend of Jesus, is not a citizen of His kingdom and is not one entitled to claim that he is even saved!

Jesus gave another command to His disciples, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.” (Jn. 13:35) John would later write that anyone who does not love his brother (fellow believer), like one who does not practice righteousness, is not of God. (1 Jn. 3:10) and goes on to say, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.” (1 Jn. 3:14) This is strong language indeed!

Jesus indicts the people of the last days by saying, “Because lawlessness [the practice of what is right in one’s own eyes] will abound, the love of many will grow cold.” (Mt. 24:12) This relativistic, free-spirited, self-driven philosophy and attitude is the direct opposite of a life led by the Spirit of God who causes us to love all men with the same love that God has for mankind. (1 Jn. 3:16, Jn. 3:16, etc.) Lawlessness simply has *no* fellowship (commonality, unity, likeness) with righteousness (what is right, good and true in *God’s* eyes – 2 Cor. 6:14)

The “church,” like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, stands guard in front of the door to God’s kingdom and, by refusing to repent, believe *and* obey, the clergy neither enter in themselves nor allow anyone else to enter either. (Mt. 23:13) In spite of all the preaching, teaching, singing, praising, worshiping, experiencing of miracles, etc., the “church” is not the friend of Christ. Rather it is a counterfeit who usurps the place and function of the bride of Christ and draws the followers of Christ away from the road that leads to life and, whenever possible, back to the road that leads to destruction. (Mt. 7:13-14) When this is done for the purpose of procuring personal gratification, it is rightly called adultery – when it is done to procure money or personal comforts, it is rightly called prostitution! Either way, in God’s eyes, it is abomination.

Anyone can readily find God through sincerely believing in Christ Jesus. In fact, God is actively drawing all men to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9) though only those whom He chooses (recognizes as truly repentant and obedient) will remain in His kingdom. (Mt. 7:21) Those who twist and distort this spiritual reality so as to excuse their own subtly lawless, disobedient and rebellious lifestyles do so to their own destruction. (2 Pet. 3:16) God, through Christ Jesus, extends the most gracious offer of redemption mankind could ever hope to receive. But it is not

available to those who think that a mere form of godliness is adequate or acceptable (2 Tim. 3:5), or that preaching the gospel is a cloak for covetousness (the greedy desire for gain – 1 Ths. 2:5) – these only heap up judgment upon themselves. (2 Pet. 2:3)

The true friends of Christ are those who serve and obey Him as their only King. As Jesus said, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep my word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to Him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father’s who sent Me.” (Jn. 14:23-24)

It remains the truth that Jesus “became the author (or source) of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.” (Heb. 5:9) There simply is no salvation for those who use the name of Christ and the facts of the gospel to practice their own peculiar form of “Christianity” or to condone their own preferred form of unrighteousness. (2 Ths. 2:12) On the last day, all the “theologians” who were in reality traitors to and betrayers of Christ will be exposed for what they are and it will be a grand folly to suppose that Christ will look any differently upon their carnal followers than He does upon these lawless “theologians.” The command of the King that day will be, “Bring here those enemies of Mine, who did not want Me to reign over them, and slay them before Me.” (Lk. 19:27) It will do no good to protest then – just as it truly does no good now – that we are Christ’s friends. He is not at all fooled by our words when our actions and heart attitudes, which are clearly visible to Him, so clearly demonstrate our enmity against Him and His kingdom.

As Loisy observed, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God (that realm where Christ is truly the King) but it was the “church” (that realm where men and their hierarchies rule) that came into being. When men began to embrace worldly authority structures, to that extent they ceased to experience the power of the kingdom of God until, in this day, the lifeless, powerless, counterfeit religion of churchianity is what most people consider the right way of following Christ and God. The devil has perpetrated his deceptions all too well.

The word God spoke to Jeremiah still stands strong and true: “You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.” (Jer. 29:13) The half-hearted and those who think to use the things of God to cover and simultaneously perpetuate the smell of their dead and rotting flesh would do well to stop deceiving themselves and their followers into believing that they follow and worship the only true and most high GOD.

Let he who has ears hear – and repent, believe and obey!

18. Enemies of the King

At the end of the parable of the minas (Luke’s equivalent to Matthew’s parable of the talents – a mina was worth about three months’ wages whereas a talent, a weight and not a coin, was worth as much as several years’ wages), Jesus has the king in the story say, “But bring here those enemies of mine who did not want me to reign over them, and slay them before me.” (Lk. 19:27) What does Christ give us that would be comparable to this large sum given to servants required to responsibly increase their master’s wealth? The only satisfactory answer to this question is His *life*. Though the “church” wants to spin these parables off as teaching the responsible handling of *money*, in reality, these parables teach the *necessity* of responsibly handling the life of Christ so as to prevent our losing the life that He gives, (see Lk. 19:26, Mt. 25:29 – “...even what he has will be *taken away*.”) These parables, when seen in their true light, are a somber warning indeed.

At the end of this parable, the culmination of human history is brought into view. In the administrative outworking of the completion of the times, God will “gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him.” (Eph. 1:10) This will be the complete fulfillment of God’s promise to His Son: “Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.” (Heb. 1:13, Psa. 110:1, also see Heb. 10:12-13) Simultaneously, it will be the fulfillment of Paul’s prophecy: “Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.” (1 Cor. 15:24-26) John recorded, “Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire [“the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels – Mt. 25:41]. This is the second death.” (Rev. 20:14) It is a profound mystery that the King of life culminates and gathers all things into Himself by executing (killing, ending the life of) His enemies. Yet this is exquisitely appropriate: “...through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned – [thus] death reigned...and sin reigned in death...” (Rom. 5:12, 14, 21) When all of Christ’s enemies are made into His (lifeless) footstool, sin and death and the agents of darkness, both angelic and human – elements that are all foreign to God’s kingdom – will be forever removed from His kingdom (Mt. 13:41) and only righteousness (that which is right, good and true in God’s eyes) will be allowed to dwell (abide, remain, stay) there. (2 Pet. 3:13)

We have little difficulty believing (even while having a great deal of difficulty *understanding!*) these things. But far too often we do not take seriously just who and what is considered the enemy of God. We like to believe that death will one day be destroyed. We like to believe that the devil will be destroyed too, even though far too many might wonder why such an inept buffoon needs to be destroyed anyway. We are eager to believe that “heretics” and “infidels” will be eternally executed but perhaps we ought not be so eager – perhaps in our ignorance that inept buffoon is really ingeniously clever and has quietly conned and deceived us into *being* a “heretic” or “infidel” worthy of execution even while we blindly believe ourselves to be a blessed and eternally secure child of God. And as soon as we begin to ask or even think such questions, quite conveniently it would seem, some “theologian” or Bible “scholar” is right there to reassure us that if we just know the right facts, we are saved – and then he pulls out a couple of proof texts to “prove” his “doctrine.” Lost or overlooked is the fact that one can find any number of “theologians” or “scholars” who espouse and propagate opinions directly opposite to what this first one is reassuring us is “truth”! No – only a fool rests his hopes for eternal life on what “theologians” argue over!

James wrote, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” (Jas. 4:4) In the same vein, John wrote, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.” (1 Jn. 2:15-17) And Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” (Mt. 7:21) Someone who loves this world or its things is God’s enemy and will be one of those who are eternally executed on the last day – no matter how much they professed and practiced their own version of “Christianity.”

Paul wrote, “Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally

minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. ...if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” (Rom. 8:5-7, 13-14) Paul also wrote, “He who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.” (Gal. 6:8) He also wrote, “For many walk [conduct themselves], of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame – who set their mind on earthly things.” (Phlp. 3:18-19) Carnality is a cornerstone of much “church” activity but it remains enmity against God. Those who practice carnality, no matter how much it serves some “church,” are those who will be eternally executed on the last day.

Paul wrote, “You, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight – if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the good news which you heard...” (Col. 1:21-23) Many “church”-ites live their lives as if God’s plan of reconciliation was a completed thing in their life and they never live up to God’s requirements, never continue to be rooted and steadfast in the faith and they are routinely moved away from the hope of ever being reconciled to God. Too often “grace” is used as the excuse for living sinful, self-centered, even demonically-dominated lives. Paul wrote that when we were enemies of God we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son so that, all the more, we shall be saved by and through His life. (Rom. 5:10) Paul *did not write* that we were reconciled to God so that we could claim to be His friends and children while we clandestinely or even overtly continue to practice enmity against God. Paul wrote that such as these “profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being abominable (detestable), disobedient, and disqualified (worthless) for any good deed.” (Tit. 1:16) Paul goes on to say that Christ “gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.” (Tit. 2:14) Christ did not buy us back from destruction so that we could practice with immunity the wicked works that made us His enemies in the first place! (see again Col. 1:21)

In the parable of the minas, Jesus said that the citizens of the nobleman’s realm “hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We will not have this man to reign over us.’” (Lk. 19:14) It is easy to see the application of this parable to the Jews who crucified their King. But it is none the less applicable to today’s apostate “Christian” who denies Christ’s right to rule in totality over his or her life. Today’s “church”-ite does not desire truth but rather wants to feel “loved” or at least “accepted” or wants to know “truth” that has no attending responsibilities or that does not require submitting to God’s Spirit of truth in order to know these “facts” and “theologies.” Such as these have not received the love of the truth that enables them to enter into salvation (2 Ths. 2:10) and have turned their ears away from the Spirit of truth, preferring to have their ears scratched with man-made or even demonic fables. (2 Tim. 4:3-4, 1 Tim. 4:1) Peter prophesied that *many* would follow after false teachers who would stealthily build up destructive divisions (sects, denominations) that would deny the sovereignty (right to be King) of Christ. (2 Pet. 2:1-2) Jude added that these men would creep in unnoticed and turn the grace of God into lewdness, denying Christ His right to be King over their lives. (Jude 4) These prophecies are being fulfilled in our own time.

In the days of the judges, it is recorded, “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” (Jdgs. 21:25) If our lives declare that we secretly hate Christ and that we refuse to have Him reign over us, we will be able to do *only* what is right in our own eyes. Still worse, we will deceive ourselves into believing that what is right in our own eyes is what is right in God’s eyes. In time, God Himself will even give us over to strong delusion so that we will believe the lie we prefer over His righteous standards. (2 Ths. 2:11-12) The New Testament labels this “lawlessness.” In His teaching about the day of judgment, Jesus said there would be *many* who would come before Him thinking they had a right to be in His kingdom but who would be rejected because, rather than doing what was right in God’s eyes, they had done only what was right in their own eyes. “Depart from Me; you who practice lawlessness!” (Mt. 7:22-23)

This is the second death – where death becomes the footstool of Christ. This is Christ commanding that *all* His enemies who did not want Him to reign over them be brought before Him and summarily and eternally executed. Jesus said, “He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” (Rev. 2:11) And John writes, “Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power...” (Rev. 20:6) Only those who overcome in this life and whom God deems worthy to be included in the first resurrection will escape this second death.

When we read that Christ will have His enemies executed, we must not suppose they will die in the same manner as humans die now for death itself is one of the enemies that will be slain! When all things in heaven and on earth are gathered up in Christ and God, all that enters into that state will be eternal. The temporal will be swallowed up in the eternal and infinity that is God! Thus the devil and his angels and all who served them (whether overtly and willfully or in deceived blindness and religious hypocrisy) will be eternally consigned to what Jesus called “the everlasting fire” whereas the “righteous,” those washed in the blood of the Lamb, will enter into eternal life in the presence of Christ and God. (see Mt. 25:41, 46)

Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God. On those who have fallen away, severity, but toward those who steadfastly abide, goodness – *if* these continue to abide in Him and in His goodness. Otherwise, even these will also be “cut off.” (see Rom. 11:22) This *is* the gospel – that those who will enter into God’s reconciliation may live forever in the righteousness, peace and joy of His kingdom (see Rom. 14:17) but equally those who persist in their enmity against God will receive everlasting punishment.

The call is sounding forth again: “Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand.” (Mt. 4:17, etc.) Each person who hears this call from the Holy Spirit of God must confess their own sins to God and turn from them, forsaking them and this world and all the deceptions of the devil and the demonic. Anything else or less is simply enmity against God and, if left uncorrected, will bring the one who does such things under the summary judgments and final, eternal execution as ordered by the Lord of life and glory Himself. The choice to remain God’s enemy or to enter into His magnanimous offer of friendship is ours to make.

Let he who has ears hear.

Section III: Choosing Sides

19. The Keys of the Kingdom

Jesus said to Peter, “And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will already be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will already be loosed in heaven.” (Mt. 16:19) Here in this verse hangs perhaps the most tantalizing nugget of knowledge the intellect could wish to grasp – the keys to the kingdom of God! With this knowledge, one must certainly possess eternal life! Though this thought seems valid, it is mistaken. One can ask and even answer questions like “What is the kingdom of God?” and “How do I get in?” but knowledge of or about the kingdom of God is not nearly the same as being *in* God’s kingdom. It is also to be noticed that the kingdom of God is, to the fallen and natural mind, concealed and unable to be explained and understood. Its existence can perhaps be acknowledged but the true shape and substance of it will remain hidden from those who have not yet entered into it. Those who have entered into it, especially those who have not come primarily by way of the intellect but rather by way of the heart and of faith (which, in truth, is how all must come, with or without extensive knowledge), will recognize these “new” truths about the kingdom as well-known signposts on the road they’ve already been traveling.

When one seeks to understand the kingdom of God, one approaches a subject that has been brutalized by “scholars” and “theologians” for centuries, even millennia. Cults have taken up the concept and formulated their own dogmas and deceived millions. How, then, can we hope to know the truth about the kingdom of Christ and God? Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.” (2 Cor. 11:3) The simple truth about the kingdom of Christ and God – the one by which we can evaluate all ideas concerning genuine life in Christ – is the simple fact that the kingdom of Christ and God is that realm where Christ is actually and truly the King. And we can know whether He is really the King when *He*, and not some other, is the One telling *everyone* what to be and do and how to live and think and behave. This simple definition rules out many things done by men, things done even in the name of Christ and God, as *not* being His kingdom and exposes the fallacy of many things in our own lives that we have presumed to be “the right way” to follow and seek God. Simply put, if, in any given arena or context, Christ is not the literal King, then it is not His kingdom. We do well not to be deceived into thinking otherwise.

But because we approach a subject that has been so misrepresented, we need to address some of the misconceptions, though, of course, one cannot hope to address them all! And unfortunately, there are a significant number of these misconceptions that must be addressed so that we can better discern the truth of the kingdom.

The King Is Here

Mark records, “Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the good news.’” (Mk. 1:14-15) Because John’s gospel account of Jesus’ public ministry begins with the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus rather than Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom and because John never uses the word “repent” and only rarely uses the words “king” or “kingdom” when speaking of Christ, all manner of notions are put forth by “scholars” and “theologians” that depart from the simple truth that Christ is King.

The relative absence of the words “king” and “kingdom” in John’s writings is easily explainable. First, consider the time. John’s gospel was written between 60 and 90 A.D. John’s gospel does not mention the destruction of Jerusalem and some have used that as a reason to believe it was not written before 70 A.D. But this is not necessarily the case since the subject of John’s gospel is the life, execution and resurrection of Christ (33-34 A.D.), events that were concluded long before the sacking and destruction of Jerusalem. The burning of Rome (64 A.D., an event blamed – perhaps rightly – upon “Christians”) and the following waves of persecution were certainly factors that would cause John to find other words that would not be so volatile or subject to misuse by politically minded “Christians” using the kingdom of God (which in reality is not of this world – Jn. 18:36) to overthrow or disrupt the empire of Rome.

Second, John routinely uses words differently from Paul and the other writers but the underlying notions are still there. For instance, Paul uses “elder” or “overseer” and “deacon” while John uses “father” and “young man.” (1 Tim. 3:2, 4-5, 12, 1 Jn. 2:13-14, also see Acts 5:6, 20:17, 28) John’s emphasis, in part because the father was king and lord of his family, is upon the Father-nature of God and the family nature of His children. There is nothing of the Kingliness of Christ and God lost in John’s mind and his contemporaries, especially the political “Christians,” would be forced to rethink their over-emphasis on Christ as King at the temporal expense of Caesar. (see also Rom. 13:1-7, 1 Pet. 2:13-17, Mt. 22:21) That later “scholars” and “theologians” would concoct some hair-splitting distinction between the ideas of a father’s authority over his own family as substantively different from a king’s authority over his realm is only evidence of how successful the devil can be at deceiving people away from the simple truths of God’s kingdom.

Third, one of John’s emphases (though certainly not the only one), especially in the gospel, is upon the humanity of Christ. His gospel was written in response to Gnostic teachers like Cerinthus who taught that Christ only *appeared* to be a human man. Christ was really a divine emanation who took on the *appearance* and not the substance of sinful mankind. John, in emphasizing Christ’s humanity, would rightly prefer words that spoke of the normal human existence. Only a tiny handful of men ever get to be king but almost all men become (or at least have!) a father.

There are also some who, because John does not use the word “repent,” now teach that we need only “believe.” This, as did Marcion, the first major schismatic in church history, results in having to cut away large portions of the New Testament. It is always easier to dismiss the sayings of the Bible that don’t match up to one’s preferred “theology” but the harder way of being guided and enabled by the Holy Spirit to balance or harmonize the seemingly “conflicting” truths is the only way to find the rightly divided, whole counsel of God. (Jn. 16:13, 2 Tim. 2:15, Acts 20:27) It is the only way the people of Christ can be the upright, always perpendicular “pillar of truth.” (1 Tim. 3:15)

Thus we can look at Jesus’ proclamations about the kingdom of God being at hand or nearby enough to touch and take them at face value. The kingdom is here, Jesus said. How can an observer verify and know this to be true? Because the King Himself is here. To begin to recognize the kingdom of God, one needed to already believe Jesus was and is the King. To have eyes, ears, heart and spirit capable of grasping that idea, one must have already rejected his own sinful ways (as the ruling factor of his life) and recognized his inability to change himself by himself. In other words, one needs to repent in order to believe.

Seeing and Entering In

Many passages of the New Testament speak of entering the kingdom. Let us consider these before we attempt to define what it is that is being entered into.

- Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God... Most assuredly, I say to you unless one is born of water [i.e., naturally or physically] and the Spirit [i.e., spiritually, from above], he cannot enter the kingdom of God... You must be born again.” (Jn. 3:3, 5, 7) Nicodemus was a Pharisee, one of those zealous separatists (“Pharisee” means “separated”) who kept themselves apart and aloof from those “sinners” who did not, as they did, observe every minute law of tithing and ritual purity. Nicodemus, like the Pharisee of Jesus’ parable contrasting the tax-collector (Lk. 18:11-12), probably did not think he had any sins to repent of! Yet Jesus’ talk with this Pharisee, who had felt it necessary to come to Jesus under the cover of darkness and secrecy (Jn. 3:2), ends with a discussion of the condemnation that is upon men who are doing evil who hate to have their actions seen in the light. (Jn. 3:20) To enter the kingdom is to be changed from darkness into light. (also see Col. 1:13) Nicodemus, one of Israel’s top teachers yet who could not even grasp the concept of being born again, had some sins in his own life to repent of before he could believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

- Jesus said to His disciples, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted (changed) and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt. 18:3) The Amplified Version offers four characteristics of little children that are well worth considering: “trusting, lowly, loving, forgiving.” But let us notice that being converted or changed (repentance, belief, new birth) precedes as well as accompanies turning toward the characteristics of little children. It is by this *process* we may enter into the kingdom of God.

- Jesus also said to His disciples, “Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” His dumbfounded disciples then asked Him, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus answered, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Mt. 19:23-26) The rich man, susceptible to and overloaded with “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth” (Mt. 13:22), is unable, apart from the power of God, to enter the kingdom of God. It should also be noted that Jesus’ sayings and the disciples’ question demonstrate that “entering the kingdom” and “being saved” are the same thing in the teachings of Jesus. It is only later “scholars” and “theologians” who have concocted a separation of “the gospel of salvation” from “the gospel of the kingdom.” The New Testament knows *nothing* of a salvation apart from the Kingship of Christ. (Heb. 5:9, etc.)

- When Paul preached, he preached the kingdom of God, “testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus

Christ.” (Acts 20:21, also see v. 25, 28:30-31) The prominent “keynote” or “bottom line” of his preaching was “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22) Though many modern “scholars” and “theologians” promote a trouble-free, pain-free “gospel” (thus only proving they are accursed – Gal. 1:7-9), the New Testament *assures* us that “*all* who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12) and instructs us to arm ourselves with the expectation of suffering and to rejoice in the extent that we share in Christ’s sufferings! (1 Pet. 4:1, 13) Suffering is a *requirement* for entering the kingdom of Christ and we are wise to embrace that idea sooner rather than later.

- At the close of what is popularly (if somewhat inaccurately) known as “the Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus taught, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” (Mt. 7:21) Luke records Jesus, in perhaps the same situation, as asking the people, “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?” (Lk. 6:46) In the parable of the two sons, the father asked each son to work that day in the vineyard. The first said he would not but later regretted it and changed his mind and went while the second son said he would go but never did go. Jesus then asks, “Which of the two sons did the will of his father?” and the obvious answer, “The first,” is given. Jesus then says to the chief priests and elders of the people who had confronted Him in the temple as to the source of His authority, “Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and prostitutes enter the kingdom of God before you. For John [the Baptist] came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward regret it and believe him.” (Mt. 21:23, 28-32) *Doing* the will of the Father – and not just calling Jesus “Lord” or “King” – is a requirement for entering the kingdom. The first and foremost work that we must do is believe. (Jn. 6:29) From this faith will flow all the subsequent works that are *required* to accompany salvation, the works that demonstrate the health and life of our faith in Christ (see Jas. 2:17, 22, Heb. 6:9, Eph. 2:10), the absence of which works demonstrates that we have been deceived and blinded and are in the process of forfeiting our inheritance. (2 Pet. 1:9, Heb. 12:15-17, 25) This *is* the reality of the kingdom we are inheriting, a kingdom which cannot be shaken. (Heb. 12:28)

- Jesus said to His disciples, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things [that you need for life] shall be added to you.” (Mt. 6:33) One man, volunteering to follow Jesus, said, “I will follow You, but let me first go and say goodbye to those who are at my house.” But Jesus said to him, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Lk. 9:61-62) Following Jesus and being a citizen of His kingdom and gaining His eternal life is a *commitment*, not a convenience or a part-time addition to one’s self-centered life.

Understanding the Mysteries

When Jesus began teaching about the kingdom of God, He did so by using parables, His disciples asked, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” (Mt. 13:10) Mark’s gospel reveals that they were also asking about the meaning of the parable of the sower and the seed. (Mk. 4:10) Jesus’ answer reveals the purpose and points at the way to understand His meanings behind His seemingly simple stories. Jesus said, “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to those who are outside, all things come in parables...” (Mk. 4:11) or, as in Matthew’s account, “..it has not been given [to them].” (Mt. 13:11) Jesus goes on to explain, “I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.” (Mt. 13:13) The disciple of Christ who is in the kingdom has been given the ability to know and understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God. The one who must turn to the works of “theologians” and “scholars” in order to rationally reason out and intellectually try to understand what Jesus meant in the parables is looking for insight and wisdom in the wrong places and only demonstrates that he is not in or at least not yet fully functional in Christ’s kingdom.

Jesus then asks the disciples a question that shows they were not yet using what had been given to them. Jesus asked, “Do you not understand this parable [of the sower and seed]? How then will you understand all the parables?” (Mk. 4:13) Jesus then goes on to explain the parable and its hidden meanings. He similarly tells and explains the parable of the wheat and tares when the disciples do not yet understand that teaching. (Mt. 13:24, 36-37) But Jesus gives them a handful of more parables and then asks them, “Have you understood all these things?” And they answer, “Yes.” (Mt. 13:51) How did they start understanding these things when only a few stories before they had required a complete explanation? They had been given the right and the ability to know what the stories meant and they were beginning to use that God-given ability. As Jesus would tell them later, the Spirit of truth would guide them into all truth. (Jn. 16:13) – these beginning stages of training in the ways of the Spirit would prove essential when opposition would arise as they walked the same path their Master was on.

We must also recognize that even though the disciples were beginning to understand the mysteries of the kingdom, they did not yet understand all. They certainly did not understand yet the need for Christ to be crucified – Peter got himself soundly rebuked for trying to tell Jesus how determined he was that such a thing should never happen. (Mt. 16:21-23) When Jesus warned the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees and they reasoned among themselves that He was saying this because they had forgotten to bring bread, He reproved them sharply: “Why do you reason because you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened?” (Mk. 8:14-17) Jesus then uses the same language He used to describe the people to whom He spoke to only in parables: “Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember? ...How is it you do not understand?” (Mk. 8:18, 21) It was only after they again used their spiritual eyes and ears that “Then they understand that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” (Mt. 16:12) And it was only when Jesus appeared to them after His resurrection and “He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” He had fulfilled “which were written in the Law of the Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning [Christ]” (Lk. 24:44-45) that they began to understand, because it had now been given to them to know, what the real mission of Christ was all about.

Now they would know that when Jesus had said that some were standing there who would not die before seeing the kingdom of God (Lk. 9:27), they would recognize that three of

them had seen the kingdom of God when Christ was transfigured before their eyes and Moses and Elijah “appeared in glory and spoke of His death which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” (Lk. 9:30-31) The kingdom of God would not be a visible, temporal, earthly kingdom but would instead be something they could perceive, understand and experience within and among themselves. (Lk. 17:20-21)

This is also why, when Jesus saw that the scribe truly understood the significance of the two laws Jesus had cited as the greatest commandments, He said, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mk. 12:32-34) Understanding the teachings of Christ *as He intended them to be understood* is the sign that Christ’s Spirit of truth is one’s Teacher and that Christ is indeed one’s Lord – and having Christ as one’s Lord or King is the sign that one is truly in Christ’s kingdom and on the path that leads to eternal salvation and life.

The Substance of the Kingdom

There are only two descriptions or “definitions” of the kingdom of God given in the New Testament and both are given by Paul. He wrote:

“The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 14:17) and

“The kingdom of God is not in word but in power.” (1 Cor. 4:20)

Instructions like these are given to those who have not yet fully grasped that Christ’s kingdom truly is not of this world. Followers of Christ’s teachings, not yet functioning in the other-likeness of His spiritual kingdom, could become confused enough to start fires in Rome that would fulfill prophecies of “the destruction of Babylon” on that very date. Such confused followers could learn and memorize various creeds and dogmas – and then persecute to death others who do not share every jot and tittle of those creeds and dogmas. Such followers who were ignorant of and unacquainted with the spiritual aspects of following Christ could be easily convinced to sit passively and hear sermons while they do little or nothing to advance the kingdom of God, all the while believing themselves to be “saved and on their way to heaven!”

“No lie is of the truth,” John wrote. (1 Jn. 2:21) “God is not the author of confusion,” Paul wrote. (1 Cor. 14:33) And James wrote that “confusion and every evil thing” would be present wherever there are hidden agendas of self-seeking and envy. The “wisdom” behind having secret agendas such as envy and self-seeking (the motives that prompted the Jews to crucify Christ – Mt. 27:18 - and to oppose and persecute Paul – Acts 13:45), James says, “does not descend from above [from the kingdom not of this world], but is earthly, sensual, demonic.” (Jas. 3:15-16)

Paul wrote, “We speak wisdom among those who are mature...” (1 Cor. 2:6) – that would be “those who by reason of use [the usage of their spiritual eyes, ears and hearts to see, hear and understand the secrets and hidden truths of Christ’s kingdom] have their senses trained to discern both good and evil.” (Heb. 5:14) Paul continued, “We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery [a divinely withheld or revealed truth], the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory...” (1 Cor. 2:7) And James wrote, “The wisdom that is from above [from that kingdom not of this world] is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality [class distinctions] and without hypocrisy [play acting].” (Jas. 3:17)

Again, the kingdom of God is that realm where Christ is truly King. And though there are only two “definitions” of the kingdom given, we can see that Christ’s kingdom is characterized by light and truth and genuinely divine wisdom. Any context or arena characterized and dominated by other things is *not* His kingdom. Run, do not walk, to the nearest exit!

The Keys to the Kingdom

Jesus rebuked the lawyers (scribes), saying, “You have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in [to the kingdom of God] yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered.” (Lk. 11:52) The scribes and Pharisees, with their manmade traditions that formed a “hedge of protection” around the law, had cast aside the real key of knowledge of the kingdom of God and replaced it with a counterfeit of the real thing. The modern day “church” has similarly replaced the simple truths of Christ’s gospel of His kingdom with creeds, doctrines and dogmas, replacing life in the Spirit with routine “church” attendance, sermons and various “ministries” (works) that are used as credentials to “prove” that one is “saved and on their way to heaven.”

Jesus said, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom...” (Mt. 16:19) Because this was said to Peter, some, trying to justify their worldly hierarchy authority structure, have tried to say that the keys were given only or at least primarily to Peter. The Catholic sect, spring-boarding off of Rome’s prominence as the imperial city, the large number of Roman Christians (perhaps as many as 30,000 in the middle of the third century) and historically inaccurate reports of Peter and Paul being the founders of the assembly in Rome, later declared that Peter was the first “pontifex maximus” (the old heathen title that means “the ultimate bridge” between men and the gods) even though this title stands in direct conflict with what Jesus had taught. This teaching about Peter was first used to justify the position and practice of the first real Pope, Leo I, in 461 A.D., four centuries *after* Christ!

Jesus said, “Do not call anyone on earth your father [“pope” is directly derived from “papa,” “father”]; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ.” (Mt. 23:9-10) By claiming Peter (or Paul or any other man) as one’s father, one rejects God as one’s Father. By claiming Peter (or Paul or any other man) as one’s teacher, one rejects Christ and the Spirit of truth as one’s Teacher. The spiritual eyes, ears and heart lie dormant and unused and men relied on their own reason to decide what was right in their own eyes (Jdgs. 21:25) as men chose which leaders (“bishops”) to follow and place in positions of power that have no basis in the New Testament. Jesus said, “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over [their subjects], and those who are great exercise authority over them. *But it shall not be so among you.*” (Mt. 20:25-26 – emphasis added) The “bishop” rose from the ranks of the elders, corrupted the gospel and drew followers after themselves – precisely as Paul prophesied they would. (Acts 20:30)

The keys to the kingdom of God were not given only or even primarily to Peter. Those who use Jesus’ statement about the keys to confer special status on Peter and his supposed “successors” have failed on two fronts. First, they fail to recognize that the keys of the kingdom are simply the way to open the door into that realm where Christ is truly King. The keys of the kingdom *are* the very things we have been discussing up to this point: repentance, belief, new birth (conversion, translation), the ability to discern and understand the mysteries, an ear to hear what the Spirit says to God’s people and a heart that pursues the will of God above all else.

Second, they have separated the keys from what is said before and after. It is always dangerous to isolate a truth and then push it so far that it is no longer counterbalanced by the

other truths that constitute the whole counsel of God. When Jesus asked His disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus replied,

“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My ekklesia, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom, and whatever you bind on earth will be already bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will already be loosed in heaven.” (Mt. 16:15-19)

This one answer to Peter’s having received the revelation that Christ was the Son of God has several parts. Even the light by which we have been examining the kingdom of God shows us how extensively this passage, indeed a key part of the gospel, has been the special target of the enemy’s deceptions.

Examining the Deceptions

It is not just Peter to whom the keys – the right and ability to enter and experience the reality – of the kingdom of God are given. They are given to *every* individual who spiritually receives the revelation from the Father that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

It is not Peter upon whom the ekklesia (the English mis-rendering is “church”) is built. The ekklesia is the people of Christ who have been called out of this world’s darkness to live in and attend to the needs and affairs of Christ’s kingdom of light. The ekklesia is composed of those people who have received the revelation that Jesus is the Christ, have repented of their own sin and self-reliance, believed in Christ, have taken up their cross and are following after Him, both individually and corporately with others in the ekklesia. Thus the prison gates of death and darkness, designed to imprison souls and prevent the light of Christ from shining on them, will not overcome the citizens and warriors of the kingdom of light.

As has already been said, it is not just Peter to whom the keys of the kingdom are given. The keys – the right and ability to enter and experience God and His rule of righteousness – are given to all who will receive and obey God. This is particularly visible when we come to see and understand what Jesus meant about binding and loosing. J.B. Phillips, a spiritually-enlightened, gifted and talented translator of the New Testament, wrote of this passage:

“There is a very curious Greek construction here, viz. a simple future followed by the perfect participle passive. If Jesus had meant to say quite simply, ‘Whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in Heaven,’ can anyone explain why the simple future passive is not used? It seems to me that if the words of Jesus are accurately reported here, and I have no reason to doubt [that they are], then the force of these sayings is that Jesus’ true disciples will be so led by the Spirit that they will be following the heavenly pattern. In other words what they ‘forbid’ [bind] or ‘permit’ [loose] on earth will be consonant with the Divine rules.

“If a simple future passive had been used it would mean an automatic heavenly endorsement of the Church’s actions, which to me, at least, is a very different thing.

“In the pertinent verses of John’s Gospel (Jn. 20:22-23), it is quite plain that ‘holy spirit,’ of which Christ is giving His disciples a first breath, so to speak, (for the Holy Spirit in person was not given until Pentecost), would be the factor by which alone human beings could perform the Divine function of forgiving or not forgiving sins. There is again no ground for supposing that celestial endorsement automatically follows human action, however exalted.” (*The New Testament in Modern English*, Note 3, p. 552)

Authority among the people of Christ is not based on titles or positions. Indeed it is precisely as the apostles said to the wrong-headed and evil-hearted Jewish rulers: “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29) It is the responsibility of every man, woman and child in Christ to hear Christ for him or herself (Jn. 10:20, 1 Jn. 2:27, Heb. 8:10-11) and to obey whatever God is saying no matter through whom He says it! Any person – whether “pope,” “priest,” “pastor,” “elder,” “apostle,” “prophet,” whatever – who permits or forbids something inconsistent with God’s will, quite simply, is to be ignored and God is to be obeyed.

This is no license for rebellion or lawlessness. It is simply the personal responsibility God places upon every individual who takes hold of the keys of the kingdom of God and seeks to enter that realm where Christ is truly King. It is the priesthood of every believer (Rev. 1:6, etc.) taken from the realms of theory and “theology” and put into literal practice. It takes Jesus’ statement, that there is one Teacher, Christ, and the rest of us are all equal brothers (Mt. 23:8), at face value and embraces it in practical obedience and faith.

Christ has not given His blanket endorsement to every thing done in His name. In fact, the more lawlessness and evil one does in His name, the more certain will be that one’s eternal dismissal from the kingdom of Christ and God. (Mt. 7:23, also see Mt. 13:41) Possessing and using the wrong keys – keys of darkness, deception and death – does not get anyone into Christ’s kingdom of light. Only the right keys, used appropriately at the right doors, will bring us into that realm where Christ is truly King.

Let he who has ears hear.

20. The Message of the Kingdom

One of Jesus’ best known parables is the sower and the seed. What may have been overlooked, though, is a basic spiritual understanding of what the seed really is. When Jesus began to explain the parable – that explanation being a privilege reserved for those to whom it has been given “to know the mysteries of the kingdom.” (Mt. 13:11) – He said, “When anyone hears the message *of the kingdom...*” (Mt. 13:19 - emphasis added) This is the seed that is planted in the soils, the hearts of men: the message of the kingdom of Christ and God.

What is the message of the kingdom? Put succinctly, it is that the King of everything stands before you and commands you to repent of all sin and selfishness and enter into the road that leads to eternal life through obedience to Him. In short, the message of the kingdom is that Christ is King.

Paul wrote, “And He died for all, that those who live should *no longer live for themselves, but for Him* who died for them and rose again.” (2 Cor. 5:15 - emphasis added) It is a basic requirement upon *all* those who hope to experience Christ’s resurrection life to live *only* for Him. The “pastor,” no matter how eloquent or learned in the Scriptures or well-intentioned at

heart, who uses the pulpit to gain followers (and their attendant affluence) to himself, is not spending his life living for Christ – he lives and preaches and presents himself as a godly man chiefly for some benefit to himself (no matter how he manages to convince himself and his followers otherwise).

Peter wrote that the saints – the average, ordinary persons called out of this world’s darkness and into Christ’s light – were “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that *you may obey Jesus Christ* and be sprinkled with His blood.” (1 Pet. 1:2 - emphasis added) This was so central to the preaching of Peter that he included it in his salutary greeting! It is a basic element in God’s offer of salvation that those who would partake of that salvation must obey the King. That this message of the kingdom differs so greatly from the “gospel” preached at many a “church” – which “gospel” lures people in by appealing and catering to some desire in their hearts and which enables them to practice, in the name of Christ, whatever “religion” seems right in their own eyes to whatever degree that suits their own tastes and passions – is damning evidence that the “church” is something other than the work of God among men.

Jesus said, “When anyone hears the message of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.” (Mt. 13:19) One can spend one’s life at many a “church” and never once hear the gospel presented as a clear command to repent and obey the King. Those “churches” which give lip service to the kingdom of God but do not direct their attendees to practice close, personal obedience to the King, often present their version of the gospel of Christ in such a way that one could almost be excused for misunderstanding the message of the kingdom!

Paul wrote, “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Cor. 2:12-14)

How does the wicked one (the devil, the demonic) snatch away the message of the kingdom? In our day and age, first by obscuring the simple message of the kingdom (the King is here – repent and obey!) behind smoke screens of “theology,” “philosophy of ministry,” denominational preferences and procedures, etc. – in a word, “church.” These things are very capable of causing carnal, natural men – men who have attached themselves to their favorite teacher, “pastor,” “apostle,” “prophet,” whatever title their spiritual guru prefers (see 1 Cor. 3:4) – to dismiss the need to repent of sin and self and to live in strict obedience to the only King as being mere foolishness.

Jesus spoke of a second type of hearer: “he who hears the message [of the kingdom] and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the message, immediately he stumbles.” (Mt. 13:20-21) The message of the kingdom is not a simple presentation of words, ideas and facts. Yes, words, ideas and facts (particularly historical facts) are employed but that is not the most essential element.

Paul wrote, “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the word of God.” (Rom. 10:17) Whether that message is spoken directly to the heart of a man by God’s Spirit or whether it is a message spoken by men, or whether that message of God’s Spirit rests on the life of the speaker or simply rests on the words of God *in spite of* the speaker’s wicked heart or sinful

lifestyle or the speaker's own bondages to error (whether gross spiritual sin or even demonic error), all this is immaterial to the hearer. It is the message spoken by the Spirit of God to the inner spirit of the man which operates in the hearer's heart. Wherever and however the Spirit of God has contacted a hearer with His message of the kingdom, with the hearer's act of surrender and submission, the new life in the Spirit is begun.

Far too often, however, this new life - upon being hammered with fearful threats of the dangers of "falling away" (falling mostly away from the "church," that is) - is coerced to practice routine attendance under spirit-numbing teachings and sermons and the new life is soon squelched. Should this new spark of life resist and rebel against the bondages of "church," the leadership is all too well equipped (and often demonically assisted) to bring pressure on any dissenter who dares to challenge their established institution. Why, questioning the right of a "pastor" or "apostle" or "bishop" to exercise authority over other believers is tantamount to questioning the deity of Christ or blaspheming the Holy Spirit in many man-made "Christian" hierarchies. Under this level of pressure (from spiritual "experts" no less) many an immature, baby believer has crumbled under the tribulation and persecution and quietly become a faithful "church" member. Others have simply abandoned both the "church" and God and resubmitted their loyalty to the world and their own self-centered agendas.

Jesus spoke of a third type of hearer: "he who hears the message [of the kingdom], and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the message, and he becomes unfruitful." (Mt. 13:22) Again, the message of the kingdom is the spiritual command to repent and obey the King and Head, Christ Jesus. But what are "the cares of this world"?

Jesus said, "Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." (Mt. 6:31-33) This too is the message of the kingdom: the Father of the King has promised to faithfully provide the necessities of life for the followers of Christ who obediently seek first God's kingdom and righteousness (what is right in God's eyes). The writer of Hebrews reminds us of God's way: "Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him." (Heb. 10:38) The sin of unbelief - that God will not take care of us - will cause the message of the kingdom to be unfruitful.

The deceitfulness of wealth is equally capable of keeping the message of the kingdom (that Christ is the King to be personally obeyed) from being fruitful and bringing forth a harvest for the King and His Father. Wealth is quite capable of deceiving us into thinking we are in obedience to the Father just because we are currently enjoying an abundance of things and a lifestyle of comfort and ease - or that the one who is not currently enjoying abundance or who is suffering in some way is somehow disobedient to God, perhaps even under His judgment.

The "church" assists in helping the deception of the followers of Christ by teaching the "tithing" - the means by which the clergy (who have no place in Scripture except to be condemned) enjoy a fully-funded (by carnal means) life of "faith." The "tithing" is a means by which the ignorant sheep can give a standard percentage and do with the rest as they please - doing what is right in their own eyes (lawlessness) with the portion they are taught that God has placed no requirements on. Not to mention that, in the "church," "tithing" is para-voluntary. Any "church" member who resists clerical pressure with enough in-"church" political clout can attend for free if they really choose to - or else they can go to the mega-"church" down the road and remain anonymous for the entire time they wish to attend "church." This is nothing but obedience only to the personal wishes of the individual - subtle but pure lawlessness.

The New Testament obviously teaches differently. We are no longer our own but His because He bought us with His own blood (1 Cor. 6:20) and *everything* we do is to be under His authority and dominion! (Col. 3:17) The multitudes of luxuries, excesses, baubles and gadgets – and especially the multitudes of “church” buildings that serve chiefly to divide the people who claim to follow Christ – bought by those who claim to be His, are going to be a great weight for many on judgment day because they were obtained, first, in disobedience to His Spirit and, second, at the expense of the sufferings of orphans, widows and the least of Christ’s brothers.

Jesus spoke of a fourth type of hearer: “he who hears the message [of the kingdom] and understands it, who indeed bears fruit [for the kingdom]...” (Mt. 13:23) Jesus intricately linked the kingdom of God and doing the will of God. (Mt. 6:10) When we understand the nature of having a sovereign king – that the king issues commands and the subjects do what the king wishes – we can readily see that the kingdom of God among men is wherever men choose to do the will of God.

Paul wrote, “The kingdom of God...is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 14:17) These are the essential, core elements of God’s kingdom. Whenever men are truly choosing to do God’s will, truly seeking first God’s kingdom, there men will practice righteousness (what is right in *God’s* eyes), they will be at peace with God and one another and they will be experiencing the joy that comes from living rightly with and in the Spirit of God. Anything less or anything other simply indicates that someone is not seeking first God’s will and kingdom.

The first fruit that a genuine follower of Christ will bear for the kingdom of God is individual. This is the transformation of his character into the likeness of Christ. (Gal. 5:22-23) During this process of being made like Christ, of doing what is right in God’s eyes, his interactions with others will bring forth fruit for God’s kingdom, the corporate aspect of his life in Christ. His interactions with those of like spirit will be characterized by peace and mutual submission in the fear of the Lord (Eph. 5:21) even as his interactions with others of a different spirit (even those who claim the name or teachings of Christ) will more resemble Jesus’ relations with the Pharisees – stormy and turbulent as the kingdom of God clashes with the kingdoms of men and the devil.

Many have taught this parable throughout church history, separating the analogy away from the message of the kingdom. It is often taught that the seed is “the gospel” (meaning an evangelistic sermon of some sort) or that the seed is “the Word” (meaning Jesus Himself by His Spirit coming to live in one’s heart). And there are elements of truth contained in those ideas but the specific words that *Jesus did use* point directly at a number of errors which many now routinely practice in His name. Error and spiritual malpractice will always ensue whenever we fail to genuinely seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.

Let he who has ears hear.

21. The Eternal Gospel

Sometimes when we read the book of *The Revelation* – perhaps because so much information regarding such huge pictures comes at us so quickly and in very few words – we can easily miss some detail or fail to grasp the profound significance of some sparsely described event. In this chapter, we intend to examine one such passage:

“Then I saw another angel flying in mid-air, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth – to every nation, tribe, language and people.” (Rev. 14:6)

The Messenger

In the face of the decades-old worldwide effort of the “church” to “evangelize” the world through “church” planting, radio, television and the internet, why would it be necessary for *an angel* to proclaim the eternal gospel of Christ? Surely the work of all those “pastors,” “apostles” and “evangelists,” not to mention all the traveling hucksters and talking heads will have done that work already! No, the work of proclaiming the eternal gospel has either (as we will see shortly) been botched by these “evangelists” or the work of men (as must always be true) has come up short in some way in comparison to something of God’s standards.

There are some who put forth the idea that God is simply and only taking away every possible excuse from the men who refuse to repent and obediently turn to Him – that not even some isolated group on some remote island could claim to have never heard the eternal gospel of Christ. While it is always dangerous to insist absolutely on linear connections and temporal continuity in the Revelation – many indeed do so at great risk of deceiving themselves – and while there is some measure of validity in this idea, we should notice that this angel comes *after* the mark of the beast has been mandated worldwide upon *all*. (Rev. 13:16) There is not much likelihood that any people will have been missed by the demonically-driven worldwide government that is mandating this mark – that is, there is simply not likely to be any isolated, uninformed, unreached, untouched group of people.

It would also seem that the work of the second beast (the one that rises from the earth – Rev. 13:11) occurs either just before or concurrently with the Lamb’s appearance “on Mount Zion” with the faithful 144,000. (Rev. 14:1) It is after this that the angel we have been discussing flies around the whole world proclaiming the eternal gospel. (Rev. 14:6) It is a *third* angel (of which we have been discussing the first angel in a series of three that are sent out at that particular time) who warns of the dire consequences of taking the mark and worshiping the beast. (Rev. 14:9-10) If everyone on the earth had already taken that mark – particularly those who would otherwise respond in faith and obedience to the angels’ proclamation – there would be no point to either of these proclamations except to solidify and confirm God’s judgment against men. While this is sure to be true of many, even most, who will hear these angels’ proclamations (after several more of God’s dreadful, final judgments, we are told that men still will not repent and turn to God – Rev. 16:9, 11, etc.), it is also uncharacteristic of the God of mercy and grace who always reserves for Himself a remnant (Ezek. 6:8, Rom. 11:4, etc.) to have this angel proclaim the eternal gospel *only* to bring judgment upon *all* who hear his proclamation. Knowing the character of God, it is therefore most likely that men are only beginning or are at least still in the process of implementing the mark when these angels proclaim their messages – and it is equally likely that at least *some* (even if just a tiny minority) will respond in faith after hearing the eternal gospel proclaimed by this first angel.

Though some of the prophecy prognosticators – those who make their own guesses and intellectual deductions about the meanings and interpretations of prophetic predictions and seek to become wealthy or famous thereby – see the only possible interpretation of “the Lamb standing on Mount Zion” as Christ having returned (even though He doesn’t do so until much later – Rev. 19:11) and being physically present in earthly Jerusalem. But this is not necessarily so.

The writer of Hebrews tells us, “You [those who have heard and been presented with the gospel of Christ] *have come* [past tense] to *Mount Zion*, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.” (Heb. 12:22) If the readers of the book of Hebrews – who were by no means dead or “raptured” – had “come to Mount Zion” while they lived upon the earth (a metaphorical usage of the name), then why cannot Jesus – who can be wherever He pleases at any time (Jn. 20:21, 26, etc.) – also “come to Mount Zion” in some spiritual or metaphorical sense? That is, why cannot “the Lamb standing on Mount Zion” refer to Christ’s return to the actual Headship over His people, His body, His ekklesia? The “church,” which cannot even admit to having dismissed Christ as its Head, would certainly not be able to come to such an interpretation but that does not keep it from being true. In the face of the end of the age being characterized by apostasy and lawlessness (Mt. 24:10-12), it is a profound thought worthy of some contemplation that those who must endure to the end (Mt. 24:13), Christ’s “remnant,” will somehow also have to conform to the description given of “the 144,000.”

If we look at the description of the 144,000 who stand with Him “on Mount Zion,” we find they are pure, obedient, honest and holy. (Rev. 14:4-5) Is this not what the people of Christ were always supposed to be? (see Phlp. 2:15, Tit. 2:12, etc.) The writer of Hebrews describes God’s new covenant that is mediated by Christ as God writing His laws *on the hearts* of Christ’s followers so that they can be His people and He can be their God. (Heb. 8:10, also see 12:24) The Lamb and the 144,000 (a number of completion – twelve twelves – and not likely to be a literal number) standing “on Mount Zion” could refer to the return of the genuine people of Christ into the reality and purity of the new covenant as it was originally intended by God.

These people would be those who have rejected the apostate “church” in which those who do not love the truth perish because they have allowed Satan, through their own lawlessness (men doing what “is right in their own eyes” because Christ is not really their king – see Jdgs. 21:25), to take the headship of their assembly. (see 2 Ths. 2:4, 12) Indeed, the 144,000, who are described as “those who did not defile themselves with women” (see Rev. 14:4 – the only “women,” plural, in the book of Revelation are the prostitute daughters of Mystery Babylon - Rev. 17:5) may very well be those who have never submitted themselves to a “church.” In the face of the apostasy where Satan sits as lord over deceived assemblies characterized by strife, greed, confusion, selfishness and hatred, Christ leads and maintains His “remnant” who are pure, obedient, honest and holy.

It is against this backdrop of worldwide governmental economic and political and religious control that the Lamb and the 144,000 take their stand “on Mount Zion.” It is against this same backdrop that the angel comes as a messenger to the whole world carrying the eternal gospel. And just to show how limited our understanding of the Revelation has been – this “angel” may in our temporal reality simply be the corporate “spirit” of the 144,000 in the same way the seven ekklesias of chapters 2 and 3 have a corporate “spirit” (“angel” – Rev. 2:1, etc.) that is responsible for repenting of their corporate sins and that presents itself routinely before God.

The Message: Fear God

As we reflect upon all the various renditions of “the gospel” that have been presented at “church” and on the radio, television and internet (which run the gamut from realistic historical presentation to well-reasoned research to impassioned pleading to downright bizarre and unbelievable extravaganzas and stunts), let us move on to consider what the angel proclaims because what he says at that time *is* the eternal gospel of Christ! The angel cries in a loud voice:

“Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come. Worship Him who created the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.” (Rev. 14:7)

Fear God? There are some today who preach and practice a “gospel” of “grace” and “peace” with the “God of love” and these people would be religiously and mortally offended to hear this message preached! In their “doctrines” (teachings) and “theology” there is no place for the fear of God – a condition and attitude which Paul lists as the epitome or culminating proof of being under the power of sin. (Rom. 3:18) These boastfully proclaim, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with *punishment*. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” (1 Jn. 4:18) And that is their final stand on the matter.

So, how do we reconcile this seeming contradiction – the eternal gospel *commanding* us to fear God and John instructing us about perfect love? The answer is “Both,” and the explanation is found in recognizing the dual source from which a believer in Christ can draw his life: the Spirit and the flesh. If we draw our life from the Spirit of God, we will love one another because “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.” (1 Jn. 4:16) John then goes on to give the above instruction regarding perfect love casting out all fear of judgment and then says, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And [God] has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.” (1 Jn. 4:20-21) Many of the teachers of “grace” and “love” and “peace” don’t really love God or their brother. Instead, they have refashioned their notion of “God” into something that tolerates their sinful, fleshly, particularly religiously so, condition – and then they extend that fleshly tolerance onto any other human being (so long as they don’t have to get too close to them) and call that “love.” In truth, it is just another religious “Christian” travesty.

The one who relies upon the flesh as the source for his life (or some portion of it) – and there is no one who does not sin at one time or another (1 Jn. 1:8) – has great reason to expect punishment. If he is to remain a legitimate son of God, he can expect to receive corrective discipline or punishment from God to turn him back to the way of holiness. (Heb. 12:10) Jesus still *promises*, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.” (Rev. 3:19) The one who persists in his sin to such a stage that he “tramples the Son of God underfoot, treats as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that set him apart and made him holy, and insults the Spirit of grace” has “no sacrifice for sin remaining but instead has only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God,” a category to which such a persistent rebel has returned himself. (Heb. 10:26-29) Christ Jesus “became the source of eternal salvation for all who *obey* Him” – not *disobey* Him! (Heb. 5:9, also see 2 Cor. 5:15) Those who live their life in disobedience, whether wickedness (outright evil and wrongful ways) or lawlessness (whatever is right and good in a man’s own eyes with no regard for what God says on the matter), have great reason to expect punishment! It is still true that “the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” (1 Pet. 3:12)

Trying to explain to someone exactly what it means to fear God is no easy task in part because it is not exclusively an intellectual concept but is also a spiritual and an emotional concept. Defining the fear of God is much like holding a handful of sand – just when you think the sand is securely in your hand, you find it is escaping from some crack on the other side of your hand. To fear God is to respect Him but the fear of God is more than mere respect. To fear

God is to be in awe of Him but awe alone can inspire a fear that paralyzes. To fear God is to reverence Him but reverence apart from genuine love and emotional adoration for God can be an onerous, even hateful duty. In short, exactly what the fear of God is and how wondrous it is can only be taught to the human spirit by the Holy Spirit of God. And this “transaction” is not an intellectual one but rather a turning of the whole being (mind, will and emotions) toward God in humble adoration that includes reverence, awe and respect. Such a response is most natural for those who have had some genuine encounter with the reality of God. Those who have never truly encountered and experienced God may teach and preach their diluted notions about the fear of God but these will only be speaking things they have learned from some man and will probably never be able to recognize the impoverished condition of their own soul.

Glorify God

The angel adds a second instruction to the first:

“Give glory to God.” (Rev. 14:7)

God, by His own nature and existence, is glorious beyond our ability to fathom or comprehend. Why then does the eternal gospel of Christ command us to give glory to God?

The idea behind the phrase “give glory” or “glorify” is that of “enhancing the reputation of” or “raising one’s esteem or opinion of.” Since God is infinite and vastly transcendent over men, to glorify God is for us to raise our estimation or to cause others to raise their estimation of who and what God is, raising our or their appreciation of God’s worth and value upward toward the infinite and transcendent attributes of our most worthy God. To glorify God is not to proclaim absurdities or to assign to Him qualities that are not really His – rather, to glorify God is to come ourselves or bring others to a more accurate appraisal of His wondrous nature.

Jesus still says to His followers, “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Mt. 5:16) Because the end of the age is characterized by lawlessness (men doing whatever is right in their own eyes) and the love (the self-sacrificial, giving, caring and nurturing attitudes and acts) has died down and gone cold (Mt. 24:12), divinely initiated good deeds will stand out in stark contrast to the darkened, selfish and self-centered world that most often seeks only to buy and sell and gain their daily bread or their cherished luxuries and toys. (Rev. 13:17, Lk. 17:28, etc.) The true follower of Christ is to do many good works, not as his reason for living nor as the basis of his salvation, but because these good works enhance God’s reputation among men. Jesus said, “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.” (Jn. 15:8) That only a small percentage of those who claim to follow Christ actually do good works that raises other’s estimation of God’s worth and value is an indication of the extent of the apostasy that prevails at this time. Rather, because most who claim to follow Christ are as divided and divisive as the world, perhaps even more so, and so many “Christians” find ways, often “theological,” to avoid obedience and especially suffering, the way of truth is instead blasphemed. (2 Pet. 2:2)

There is perhaps no greater paradox within the gospel of Christ than the fact that how we respond to suffering is what most displays and constitutes and communicates our estimation of God’s worth and value. Peter wrote, “If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their [those who reproach you] part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. ...if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.” (1 Pet. 4:14, 16) Suffering according to

the will of God (1 Pet. 3:17, 4:19) is not a popular topic for preaching at “church” but it is a real part of the real gospel. “Christians” have huddled for so long in their ivory towers and done so little to change their world that for the most part the world simply ignores them because they pose no spiritual threat to the evil that is in the world. But wherever saints begin to surrender fully to Christ and God, the enmity of the world and the demonic and devilish rulers of this world is not far behind.

When the angel proclaims that men should give glory to God, most will continue on in their wicked ways. There are global climate changes to correct (or at least use to control what men perceive as the stupid masses of humanity) or utility bills to pay or movies to watch and, if any religion is to be practiced and pursued, lawlessness or even the worship of demons and the practice of sorcery (see Rev. 9:20-21) provides more power for day to day existence than does following this God who is glorified when men suffer well. Even though the hour of God’s judgment is upon men (Rev. 14:7), men still choose to turn away from the true Most High God and follow after gods of destruction and vice that allows the man to believe he is pursuing his own way in life. The fall and depravity of man is tragic indeed.

Worship the Creator

The angel adds a third instruction:

“Worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water.”
(Rev. 14:7)

We must not suppose that this refers only to God the Father because Christ was present and participating in the creation as well. (Jn. 1:3, Col. 1:16, etc.) To worship is to bend the knee, to bow before and recognize the superiority of the one bowed to. It is not just a kind of religious music to sing at religious meetings – in fact, if the life is not lived worshipfully, that is, in subjection to the Kingship of Christ and God, songs sung to God are mere hypocrisy and yet another abomination to Him that will only add to the judgment God will render to that individual. (Mt. 12:36-37)

Worship, for the true follower of Christ and God, is to be restricted to God alone and stern warnings are given against worshipping, that is, bowing the heart or knee and living in obedience to, any one or any thing other than God.

- “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon [money, wealth, riches].” (Mt. 6:24)

- “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry... You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?” (1 Cor. 10:14, 21-22)

- “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark on his forehead or on his hand, he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the

presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.” (Rev. 14:9-11)

- “Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day [of Christ’s return and final installation of His kingdom] will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing that he is God... And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” (2 Ths. 2:3-4, 11-12)

Fear God. Glorify Him. Worship Him only. This *is* the eternal gospel of Christ which the first angel takes around the world. (Rev. 14:6)

Babylon Is Fallen

A second angel follows the first and proclaims:

“Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.” (Rev. 14:8)

Again we are presented with a huge picture in very few words and we are confronted with multiple layers within this prophecy. There are those who would say this is only a prophetic warning of the dire calamity that will later come upon the city that is called “Babylon.” Though various prophecy prognosticators, those who earn their living or their preeminence by arguing or promoting this or that prophetic interpretation, insist that Babylon is only Rome or just the Roman Catholic “church” (or any of the various other theories about “Babylon’s” identity as put forth by these prognosticators), few take into account the vast scope of this “woman” named “Babylon” (see Rev. 17:5)

- “She” (this picture of her as a woman is figurative and not literal) has made *all* nations drink of her wine. (Rev. 18:3) There were nations long before Rome became a world empire and long before the Pope in Rome assumed his role of dominance and world-leadership.

- “In her was found the blood of prophets and saints, and of *all* who were slain on the earth.” (Rev. 18:24) Whoever and whatever this “woman” named “Babylon” is, “she” was around and had a part in every murder, including Cain’s murder of Abel (see Gen. 4:8), that has ever occurred – long before there ever was a Rome or Roman Catholic “church.”

These facts about “Babylon” do not change the fact that Rome and the Roman Catholic “church” are facets or expressions of Mystery Babylon, but rather point out that Mystery Babylon is something that transcends these historical entities. Consider the following seeming contradictions:

- Babylon is a physical city that burns in one hour as is witnessed by ordinary men all around “her.” (Rev. 18:9-10)
- Babylon is “that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth.” (Rev. 17:18) The prognosticators could argue endlessly as to whether this is a literal reference to Rome (or some other city or nation) or a figurative reference to a spiritual entity who dominates this world’s rulers, both human and angelic. Who knows, maybe *both* sides of this argument are right!
- Babylon is a *place* or *thing* which the people of God are commanded to “come out of...lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues.” (Rev. 18:4)
- As we have already touched on, Babylon shares in the guilt from *every* murder. (Rev. 18:24)
- *All* the nations were deceived by her “magic arts” or “sorceries.” (Rev. 18:23)

From these descriptions, we can see that “Babylon” is not just limited to one historical expression – that is, no one single historical expression encompasses all that “Babylon” is – yet each historical expression is, in varying degrees, a representation and manifestation of Mystery Babylon. “She” is everything from the spirit of false religion (the motive behind Cain’s murder of Abel – see Gen. 4:5) to the practice of abominations (“church” rituals that replace the true way of following Christ and God - Col. 2:8, etc.) to the proliferation of spiritual “prostitutes” (denominations, groups that practice religion for profit whether that profit be financial gain or emotional enablement – see Rev. 17:5). In our time, the spirit of false religion is the driving force behind most of what men call “church.”

Though the ultimate fulfillment of the prophetic warnings culminates in the destruction of the physical city (whether that be Rome or some other place), we can still, because of the vastness and intricacy of “Babylon” in all our lives, draw some conclusions. When these angels make their proclamations, Christ has resumed His stand “on Mount Zion” in the face of worldwide political, economic and religious control. As a result, gone are the ways in which Christ’s remnant previously fell victim to the deceptions of false religion. The remnant, who have kept themselves pure, know only to follow Christ where He leads. (Rev. 14:4) They know nothing of by-laws and denominational loyalties – they know Christ. They have no need for men to teach them (1 Jn. 2:27) – they know the Lord’s voice for themselves (Jn. 10:27) and God’s laws are written in and obeyed from their own hearts. (Heb. 8:10-11)

Make no mistake – being one of Christ’s remnant will be costly in the days when these angels make their proclamations. Immediately after the eternal gospel is proclaimed, the downfall of Babylon is pronounced and the warnings against taking the mark and worshiping the beast are given, a voice from heaven says to John,

“Write: ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.’” (Rev. 14:13)

Getting Personal

The purpose of this writing is not to put forth yet another prognostication or interpretation of prophecy. The purpose is to stir us toward a greater overcoming of the wicked influences that are exerted upon us that keep us from being obedient to Christ and God. Thus we can look at this from a very personal perspective.

We must re-examine our faith. Is it consistent with the eternal gospel of Christ that commands us to fear God, glorify Him and worship Him only? Or are we caught up in some religious counterfeit that diverts us away from the one and only true gospel?

It is only when we are actively obeying the eternal gospel of Christ that we will see the counterfeit “Christian” religion begin to drop away from our lives. No longer will we be driven by those subtle mis-beliefs taught to us by men, themselves unwittingly and in varying degrees under demonic influence. Rather we will live by the words that proceed from the mouth of God. (Mt. 4:4, etc.) Fallen indeed will be the influence and effects of Babylon from our lives.

Then will come the change from bowing down and giving in to the economic pressures and standards of this world. Finally recognized will be the differences between the legitimate needs of life in this body and the excessive luxuries the world deceives us into thinking of as necessities. Technological gadgets (cars, computers, phones, etc.) will be utilized as tools to build and further *God's* kingdom among men and no longer be collected as toys and trophies that display our wealth, “wisdom” and “good taste.” We will no longer bow the knee and obey this world’s standards of living.

All these things will bring us into conflict with those who persist in selfish and wicked living. They will demand their own right to be vile even as they seek to deny us our right to be righteous and good by the power of Christ and God. And those “church”-ites who mistakenly claim to follow Christ are the most likely to be our worst persecutors! (Mt. 24:10, Lk. 21:16, etc.)

The eternal gospel of Christ is not some doctrinal nicety which we can pick apart and choose which parts (if any) that we like. It is a declaration from God which requires obedience on our part if we would enter into the benefits offered therein. The eternal gospel of Christ is the opportunity for men to escape from this evil and wicked age. (Gal. 1:4, Tit. 2:12, etc.) Those whose lives are still characterized by sinful, selfish or even devilish wickedness should not consider themselves participants in Christ’s eternal life – no matter how many times they go to “church” each week, nor how many New Testament verses they can quote, nor even what title (“pastor,” “apostle,” “prophet,” whatever) they attach to their name. Lawlessness (doing what is right in one’s own eyes) is still contradictory to God’s righteousness (2 Cor. 6:14) and is still grounds for dismissal by Christ on the last day. (Mt. 7:23)

Only One Gospel

There are some “theologians,” doctrinal hair splitters, who take the phrase “the eternal gospel” (Rev. 14:6) and separate it from other phrases like “the gospel of salvation” (Eph. 1:13) or “Paul’s gospel” (Rom. 2:16) and concoct any number of “gospels” supposedly taught in the New Testament. The danger in this is that while there may be certain aspects of the multi-faceted but one single gospel emphasized by each of these phrases – aspects that can be

legitimately and separately weighed and considered in our thinking within our hearts and minds at various times. But when we actually begin to practically or spiritually separate these aspects into two or more “gospels,” these actually work against and take us far from the oneness that is God and the gospel. (Eph. 4:4-6)

The institutional “church” has long since practiced – whether by “theological” intent or simple spiritual negligence – what can only be called a “two step gospel.” We will examine this in more detail in the next chapter but we need to examine it in the light of Christ’s eternal gospel. The first step of the “church’s” false two-step “gospel” is to follow a “gospel of salvation” in which anyone who says “a sinner’s prayer” becomes “saved.” The “convert” may continue to live as he or she pleases and may attend the “church” of his or her preference as much (or little) as one pleases and do as much (or little) *for* God (who is, after all, quite incapable of doing anything without our help!) as one pleases. This first step of this “gospel of salvation” denies Christ His legitimate place as King and Lord and Head over His people in all things (Eph. 1:22) and virtually guarantees that none of these participants in this “gospel of salvation” will ever make it into the kingdom of God where His will is sought with diligence and perseverance. (Mt. 6:10, 7:21, etc.) This “two step gospel” is popular at “churches” that refute and ridicule our responsibility to live in obedience to God, but it is not God’s way to eternal life.

When Jesus first began to preach, He said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Mt. 4:17) We should note also that John the Baptist preached the same message (Mt. 3:2) and when Paul encountered converts in Ephesus who, after hearing Apollos, who “knew only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:25), had been baptized “Into John’s baptism” (Acts 19:3), Paul simply, as Aquila and Prisca had done for Apollos (Acts 18:26), explained to them the way of God more accurately - he did not change the teachings of either John or Jesus. Paul said to these Ephesian converts, “John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.” Paul then baptized them in the name of the Lord and laid hands upon them and the Holy Spirit came upon them. (Acts 19:4-6) Repentance has always been at the core of all preaching of the gospel. (see Acts 2:38, 3:19, etc.)

The idea behind the word “repent” is substantially the same as the angel’s proclamation of the eternal gospel, commanding all who hear to “Fear God and glorify Him and worship Him.” (Rev. 14:7) Repentance is more than a change of mind, it is an about face, a change of direction in life, a change of purpose, “no longer living for themselves, but living for Him who died for them and rose again.” (2 Cor. 5:15) It is a full 180 degree turn away from self and toward God. Repentance is a denial of self in all its devious manifestations and a following after God unto true holiness and righteousness.

When John the Baptist preached the same message of repentance, he said, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” Another interpreter translates him as saying in effect, “Go and do something to show that your hearts are really changed.” (Mt. 3:8, NKJV and Phillips’ translation) In our season of apostate churchianity, there is no shortage of people claiming to be “saved” but few are those whose lives are characterized by fruits that are worthy of repentance. Few indeed practice or even teach the fear of God, glorifying Him or worshiping the Creator. This lack of worthwhile fruit calls into question whether these are truly entering into God’s eternal and holy life which He gives through Christ Jesus.

It does absolutely no good for anyone to have a “faith” that does not move that person toward obedience to God. If we don’t repent – change from what we used to be and do in order to become what Christ made us to be and do – what kind of belief do we actually have? James

says that such “faith” does not save but is, in reality, dead. Even the demons believe there is one God and they tremble – but they certainly will never be saved! Faith must work through the good deeds God prepared for us beforehand that we should practice them if it is to be perfected or brought to completion, the salvation of our souls. (see Jas. 2:14-24, Eph. 2:10, Heb. 10:39)

The gospel – the eternal gospel that calls us to repent and live fearful, godly and holy lives – is the only hope men have to attain to eternal life. God still *commands* all men everywhere to repent and live their lives subject to His Kingship. (Acts 17:30, Heb. 5:9) Anything else is mere “church,” mere deception, a mere strategy of the devil to lure us away from the precious inheritance we have in Christ. Let no one deceive you with empty words. (Eph. 5:6, Col. 2: 8, Mt. 24:4)

Let he who has ears hear.

22. The Two Step Gospel

The devil has concocted what is perhaps his most pernicious deception from the doctrines of eternal salvation. One can easily observe the fruit of this false gospel – it is most readily seen in those who preach or espouse the doctrine of eternal salvation but have nothing of the Spirit or life of Christ within them. If you disagree with anything these people say, they respond with snide, sarcastic or even rude retorts to display your stupidity for ever disagreeing with them and to shame you into silence and submission. The source of this strange dichotomy has its roots in a two-step “gospel.”

Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life.” (Mt. 7:13-14)

There are so many errors and misconceptions floating around about salvation that one cannot hope to address them all. But let us consider this saying of Jesus in the light of other Scriptures that touch on the same issue:

- There are two gates, two ways, two destinations. Adam faced this same choice in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:16-17, 3:22), Moses presented the Israelites with this same choice (Dt. 30:15-20) and Jesus pressed this choice upon His disciples. (Jn. 6:66-67)

- The broad gate opens to the broad road that ends in destruction. The many works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21) are the characteristics of those who have gone this way and these are excluded from the kingdom of God. (also see Eph. 5:5)

- The narrow gate is small and opens to the narrow road that leads to life. The singular fruit of the life lived on this road, made possible only by and through the power of the Spirit of God, is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Gal. 5:22-23) Why is this list the *singular* fruit? Because they are the only valid expression of the life and Spirit of Christ coming out from within. They are the living water that flows forth from the depths of one’s innermost being. (Jn. 7:38)

- To enter the gate is to be born anew from above. (Jn. 3:5-7) This transaction (Jn. 1:12) or translation (Col. 1:13) places us upon the road that leads to eternal life. Christ's life has been given to us but we must choose what we will do with that life. "Everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him." (Mt. 25:29) The life of Christ *is* the large sums of money given to the three servants and we do well not to mistakenly assign any other interpretation to that parable. (Mt. 25:14-15 and following)

- Eternal life is found at the end of the narrow road. We have abundant life now (Jn. 10:10) and "theologians" like to assure us that, no matter what we do or say or how we live, we have that eternal life now and no one can take that eternal life away from us. But this is not entirely accurate. We who have the Spirit of Christ do have His life within us (Rom. 8:9) and for we who are His sheep, no one can snatch us out of the Father's hand (Jn. 10:28-29) nor can any thing separate us from the love of God that is in Christ. (Rom. 8:38-39) But the one who refuses to pursue holiness will not see the Lord (Heb. 12:14) and those who are godless and immoral will, like Esau, forfeit their inheritance. (Heb. 12:16-17) Anyone who shows up for the wedding feast of God's Son who is not appropriately and obediently attired in a wedding garment as was provided for him will be removed and cast out into the darkness. (Mt. 22:12-13)

- The narrow path that leads to eternal life is the will of God. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven." (Mt. 7:21) He also said, "Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple." (Lk. 14:27) Jesus Christ is the author or source of eternal salvation for all who *obey* Him (Heb. 5:9), not for those who disobey Him.

It is here that we can see the deceptiveness of the "two step gospel." It is taught or practiced in different ways but the result is that the people are compelled to enter the gate but not to walk the path. In many cases, one cannot even be certain they've even come in through the right gate (Jn. 10:1-2) but it is very evident that the path they take has nothing to do with crosses, sufferings or the life and Spirit of Christ. Yet these are the very ones who are most likely to know the words of the Bible verbatim, giving yet more evidence that the letter, even of the New Covenant, kills, whereas the Spirit of God gives life. (2 Cor. 3:6)

Corrie Ten Boom has wisely observed, "The growth of the Christian life does not stop at the first surrender any more than marriage stops at the wedding ceremony." (*Each New Day*, Oct. 14) How ludicrous it would be to think that one should live one's married life at the altar or bench in front of the preacher, priest or judge where one first said one's wedding vows and were pronounced man and wife! Entering the gate, coming into the newness of life that is in Christ, is only the first surrender. Many more surrenders are to come as we put our flesh to death (Col. 3:5) and live as slaves to righteousness (Rom. 6:18) living *for* Him who died for us. (2 Cor. 5:15)

The deadly evil quality of the false "two step gospel" is most visible when the people are taught to take the first step – some even euphemistically refer to this as "fire insurance," a virtual

“get out of hell free” card – and these “accept” or “receive” Jesus as their “Savior.” How gracious *of them!* But the second step – where Jesus is truly enthroned as King and Lord – is neglected and ignored. Those who actually take this second step often soon find themselves unwelcome or even estranged at their “church” Under the “two step gospel” deception, those “believers” who have taken the first step – or at least done outward signs like saying a “sinner’s prayer” (which cannot be found in the New Testament) or joining a “church” (which cannot be found in the New Testament either) or baptism (which is supposed to be an outward sign of inner repentance and entry into the new life in Christ – Gal. 3:27, etc.) – are not required in any way to take the second step toward obedience and the subjective reality of the Headship and Lordship of Christ Jesus. The devil has been so successful at separating the term “salvation” from ideas of *responsibility, duty* and *obedience* that some “theologians” now preach “faith alone” and “eternal security” and deride what some now call “Lordship theology”! It is all part of the devil’s scheme to get us off the path, the will of God, that leads us to eternal life!

There are various aspects to the will of God that we must pursue but these are readily divided (for our understanding, that is) into two categories – individual and corporate – yet even this division overlaps each other when we recognize that above all things we are to be conformed to the likeness of Christ. (Eph. 4:22-24, etc.) With this conformity to Christ governing our pursuit of the will of God, we can also see that both our individual and corporate pursuit of the will of God readily divides into two categories – general and specific. That is, we are all, individually and corporately, called to purity (1 Ths. 4:3), honesty (Eph. 4:25), obedience to God (1 Jn. 5:3), good works (Tit. 2:14), submission to one another (Eph. 5:21), etc. – and, for those who have the Spirit of Christ and have read anything of the New Testament, these general requirements are pretty much a “no-brainer.” Knowing the will of God specific to each individual and corporate body, however, can be more difficult to know and requires a progressive intimacy with God and persistent willingness and even insistent demanding for God’s will to be revealed and brought about in our life. And though the will of God involves aligning our choices with His, perhaps the most difficult aspect to submit to (largely because it goes beyond our ability to know and understand) is how we ourselves actually *become* an expression of His will. That is, by virtue of what we become in Christ, we – with or without words, with or without our conscious awareness of what is going on – have a divine impact on the people and circumstances surrounding us.

How far can we deviate from the will of God, or how much sin can we practice and still be saved? About the only answer that can be given to these questions is: Are you willing to wait until judgment day to find out whether you have deviated too far from His will or practiced too much sin? Think about that one! But know also that the question of “how far?” and “how much?” are the questions the flesh or the demonic will raise in opposition to the truths expressed here. These questions, which have no quantifiable answers and certainly no answers that we could make a religion out of, can still remind us of our duties and responsibilities before God. But to respond to these questions in fear or anxious dread is to misunderstand the *process* of being saved. “Saved” is a past-tense word and there is no possibility of our being eternally saved until we are beyond the realms of time and stand in the infinite present of eternity. Until we are actually there, however, the work is not complete and requires our diligence and attention. (see 2 Pet. 1:5, Phlp. 2:12, etc.) In this life, we make our choice to enter the gate and then we follow through on that decision by walking the road that takes us to our destination, eternal life. We receive affirmation or denial of our progress toward eternal salvation by accurately recognizing which road we are on.

If we believe anything else, we must dismiss Christ's words as meaningless and consider Him to be just another foolish and mistaken teacher of philosophy and religion. Or we can simply receive the truth, take up our cross and walk the path that He has chosen for us to follow. The choice is ours but we must not delude ourselves into thinking we have any other alternatives before us.

Let he who has ears hear.

23. The Test of Obedience

The New Testament is replete with less than subtle descriptions by which we can know whether we have entered into a genuine life with Christ or whether we have settled into the comfortable and comforting apostate counterfeit men most often call "church." One such description was given by the apostle John when he wrote:

"And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar and the truth is not in him." (1 Jn. 2:3-4)

There is a current tendency to relinquish Christ the King of His personal Lordship over every individual believer. No longer is He a King who gives commands and expects explicit obedience. He is just some kind of super-pal who has ooey-gooey sentiments towards us and who would never dream of doing anything that would cause us hardship or trouble or pain. This false "Jesus" (popular at many "churches" – many home-"churches" included) produces only undisciplined and immature pseudo-"Christians" at best and full-blown apostates fallen from the faith at worst. The truth is, however, the King still gives commands and still expects explicit obedience – a fact that the disobedient and apostate will find out when it is far too late to change either their behaviors or their eternal destinies!

Jesus gave one such command when He said,

"A new *commandment* I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (Jn. 13:34-35)

How did Jesus love us? He obediently went to the cross and died there because it was His Father's will that He should suffer and die so as to become the propitiation (satisfaction, purchase price) against God's righteous judgment upon fallen and wicked men. Had Jesus subscribed to the notion that God never leads us into suffering and hardship, we would have no means of salvation! Instead, He leaves us with the *command* to obey God, even to the death if necessary, and serve others' needs as God so directs. He is not commanding us to practice blind, vicarious "charity" nor "random acts of kindness" but rather to perform the good works and actions which He Himself has prepared beforehand for the genuine follower of Christ to routinely and regularly practice. (Eph. 2:10) There are specific actions which are going to be required by God for us to do if we are to be true followers of Christ – actions which will cost us something and may cost us everything we have or which this world offers us. Yet it is this self-sacrificing care for others which lets all men know we truly belong to Christ. If this love is

absent from our lives, we are practicing disobedience to the King of light and will one day reap the consequences.

James recognized the necessity of caring for one another and used it as a foundational example to instruct his readers about the nature of faith. “If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?” (Jas. 2:15-16)

Love must be more than words and it must meet real needs or else our “love” is merely self-serving philanthropy that bears no eternal fruit for Christ’s kingdom.

John also recognized the deep nature of genuine godly agape love. He wrote: “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We shall know by this that we are of the truth...” (1 Jn. 3:16-19)

If we have something some other follower of Christ truly needs and we don’t share it with them, it is only evidence that we are not genuinely and truthfully following Christ but have instead bought into some deceptive counterfeit.

Another *command* given by the King is found in the preaching of Paul. “Truly, these times of ignorance [idolatry] God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent.” (Acts 17:30)

Repentance is the act of turning away from sinful and selfish actions and attitudes and turning toward obedience to the things which God says are right and true. Mere words are inadequate – we must actively obey God in spirit and in truth. (Jn. 4:24, Lk. 6:46)

John the Baptist came in advance of the King, *commanding* all who would hear to repent and make straight the path the King would take to enter into their hearts. (Lk. 3:4) His message included the warning to “bear fruits worthy of repentance.” (Lk. 3:8) The chief fruit of living by the Spirit is love. (Gal. 5:22) Peter places love as last in the list of the steps to attaining to spiritual maturity (2 Pet. 1:5-7) and Jesus warned that “because lawlessness [doing what is right in one’s own eyes] will abound, the love of many will grow cold.” (Mt. 24:12)

The “church” is busily separating people who claim to follow Christ into opposing camps based on differing “theologies” and practices which appeal to varying individual tastes. Atop this inherent divisiveness, the “church” often teaches the false, tolerant “Jesus” – a demonic teaching which brings no (nor often even allows for) discipline or suffering whereby the “church” attendees might begin to spiritually mature. As a result, love – the genuine badge of truly belonging to Christ – is virtually non-existent in “church” circles. This is as true of those who have abandoned the “church” institution that “meets” within the walls of the “church” building as it is of those who have stopped “meeting” in specialized buildings and have opted for home meetings but have nonetheless retained the superficiality and Nicolaitan authority structure of the institutional “church.” As Loisy so astutely observed, “Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God but it was the Church that came.”

Leaving the false “church” behind is not enough – one *must* move on into obedience to Christ and God, the kingdom of God. Getting out of the “church” is easy enough – getting “church” out of our hearts, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors is the really hard task. If we would but obey the *commands* to love one another and to genuinely repent, most of the flesh-stained garments we wear and even flaunt would become abominable even to ourselves.

Let he who has ears hear.

24. Who Is My Neighbor?

This was the question asked by a certain lawyer (scribe) who possessed a great deal of understanding about the ways of God. He had posed a question to Jesus so as to test Him. Let us notice, as we pass by, that Jesus did not rebuke the man for “daring” to test Him! “Teacher,” he said, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Lk. 10:25)

Here is a question on which the validity of every teacher hangs – the answer one gives to this question places one in the realm of truth or the realm of error, the realm of light or the realm of darkness. If a teacher does not have genuine insight into how to obtain eternal life, he is not to be listened to. Period. Sadly, in our day when teachers are heaped up by the thousands, most seem more qualified to stand in front of the door to the kingdom of God, declining to enter in themselves and denying access to those who follow after them. (see 2 Tim. 4:3-4, Mt. 23:13)

Jesus, instead of answering this lawyer directly, puts the question right back to the lawyer. “What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?” (Lk. 10:26)

Few today seem to grasp that the Law of Moses is a codified description of the nature of God. It was not a complete description and, if one chose to do so, one could (either intentionally or misguidedly) distort and manipulate meanings of words and argue “theological constructs” according to the “context” (which could mean whatever one had been taught or pretty much whatever one wanted to presuppose about a given topic or idea) – just like today. God gave the Law as a means by which men could enter into relationship with the Person of God – a means which was opened more fully in Christ Jesus. (Mt. 27:51, Heb. 7:18-19) In Christ, we are not subject to this Law (Rom. 7:6, Gal. 3:24-25) but the one who lives his life routinely breaking commandments of the Law is not living in obedience to the Spirit of God. For the genuine follower of Christ, the Law remains, as it were, an objective standard, a mirror by which we can gauge the genuineness of our life in Christ.

The lawyer answers his own question rather well. “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself.” (Lk. 10:27) The man is quoting from two separate scrolls (Dt. 6:5, Lev. 19:18) and there is nothing in the Law that specifically identifies these as even related in a list, let alone as the two most important elements of the Law for attaining to eternal life. This event (or other encounters very similar to it) is also recorded in two other gospels. In Matthew, Jesus gives this as His reply to testing by the scribes and says further, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Mt. 22:40) And in Mark, when the scribe agrees that these are the two most important commandments and expounds wisely on Jesus’ answer, Jesus responds, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mk. 12:34) If we can recognize that loving God with all that we are, have and do and loving our neighbors is our first and second duties, we have come very near to the kingdom of God. We are at the threshold of encountering His very heart for mankind.

In Luke, Jesus simply agrees with this lawyer’s rendering of the Law. “You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.” (Lk. 10:28) Jesus is not offering this man a different way to God or even leaving open the door to obeying the Law so as to inherit eternal life. Anyone who genuinely loves the one true God will find his way to Jesus. (Jn. 6:45) The one who truly loves God with all he has, does and is and who loves his neighbor as much as he loves himself knows his need for God’s power and grace to actually and regularly do these things. This is not a salvation-by-works gospel but rather a salvation-that-works gospel.

But the lawyer didn't really want to love God with all of himself nor did he want to love his neighbor. He wanted to justify himself in the sinful, wicked condition of his own heart. He wanted to separate people into categories which he approved of. Thus he could "love" those kind of people who met his approval and he didn't have to have anything to do with the kind of people he didn't like or approve of. "Wanting to justify himself, he said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" (Lk. 10:29)

Jesus said that in the end times, "Many will be offended (Greek *skandalizo*, stumbled)..." (Mt. 24:10) and "...lawlessness [doing what is right in one's own eyes] will abound..." (Mt. 24:12) These two go hand in hand. Because they have stumbled and fallen from the faith (even as they maintain faithful "church" attendance and whatever "good works" which they practice so they can confirm to themselves that they are indeed "good people"), they will do whatever seems right and good in their own eyes. And because others don't do what is right in these first people's eyes (something which they can't or won't explain to others but expect them to just *know*) they will be offended and feel justified in hating and betraying one another. (Mt. 24:10) This is precisely the same attitude concealed in the lawyer's heart which Jesus addresses in His answer.

"A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side." (Lk. 10:30-31) The priests were the ones responsible for carrying out the rituals and sacrifices whereby the people expressed their obedience to God. When the priests were obedient to God and served Him with fear and respect, the people had a clearer picture of God they could see and hear and talk to. But when the priests acted in selfishness and self-serving ways, as depicted in this story, God was mis-represented.

In today's religious context, the priest is most analogous to the "pastor." This is not because the "pastor" fills a role prescribed in some order of New Testament priesthood – the genuine New Testament priesthood embraces *every* true believer in Christ. (1 Pet. 2:9-10) In the people of Christ there is no single class of person set aside for leadership. The "pastor" is a religious leftover; as one writer said it well, "The Pastor is simply Priest writ large." The "pastor" is a religious aberration, a misguided counterfeit of the method Christ would use to bring the people to spiritual maturity. But the "pastor" is probably the closest modern equivalent to the priest in Jesus' story. And Jesus said the priest, in spite of his profession of supposed closeness to God, walked right on by the wounded man. The lawyer, as did most of Judaism in Jesus' day, considered the priests to be the best, the most respected and respectable, the cream of the crop of their religion, society and culture.

Jesus continued, "Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side." (Lk. 10:32) The Levites were those who serviced the temple. Since every part of the body of Christ is supposed to be serving one another (Eph. 4:16), the closest modern counterpart would be a good "church" attendee. They have something of a name that they belong to Christ but in reality they are dead. (Rev. 3:1) These too are quite able to see the hurt, wounded and dying man and walk away without getting involved. (see 1 Jn. 3:17)

"But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day when he departed, he took out two denarii [two days' wages], gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay

you.” (Lk. 10:33-35) Let us note well how the Samaritan, a man not under God’s laws (in the eyes of the lawyer) and a man often hated by those who claimed to be under God’s laws (a contradiction most often overlooked or missed by most Jews, perhaps even this lawyer), actually obeyed and fulfilled the law to “love one’s neighbor as oneself.” This Samaritan, the lowest class to which Jesus could refer to (in the eyes of the lawyer), acted in accordance with God’s highest laws whereas those who were considered of the highest religious and spiritual order failed to follow this second-most commandment of God. The priest and the Levite, comparable to today’s “pastors” and “church” people, had acquired nothing of the inner nature of God in spite of their positions and years of handling the word and things of God. Proximity is no guarantee of godliness – or salvation! In the kingdom of God there is no credit for time served!

Jesus asked the man, “So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?” (Lk. 10:36) Here Jesus asks this lawyer, who had demonstrated enough wisdom to rightly discern the first- and second-most important laws of Moses, to render an opinion. And even the lawyer had to concede how loving the third man was. “He who showed mercy on him.” Notice, though, the hold this man’s pride has on him. He can’t even bring himself to call the man a Samaritan – he probably would have choked on the word! Jesus simply tells the lawyer, “Go and do likewise.” (Lk. 10:37)

Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (Jn. 13:34-35) And John wrote, “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.” (1 Jn. 3:10)

Moses’ law required the followers of God to love their neighbor to the extent that one loved one’s self. The Samaritan in Jesus’ story provides an excellent example. If the Samaritan had been wounded, he would have bandaged his own wounds or paid someone to tend to his wounds if he were unable. He did exactly what he would have done for himself.

But Jesus raises the bar for His followers by giving them a different standard by which to compare one’s actions. “As *I* have loved you,” he said, “love one another.” How did Jesus love us? He went to the cross, took our penalty upon Himself and died in our place. In the context of Jesus’ parable (and were He trying to make this point from the story), the Samaritan would see the bandits lying in wait, submit himself to the beating and robbery and the first man would go on his way unmolested.

If our love is not of this caliber, we have great reason to question the reality and depth of our life in Christ. It is more likely that we have absorbed a counterfeit, a form of godliness, a false religion that cares little or nothing of the woes of nearby orphans, widows and the leasts of Christ’s brothers as we proudly display our “Christian” labels and facades while we have nothing of the life-changing power of God. (see 2 Tim. 3:5, Jas. 1:27, Mt. 25:40, 45)

Let he who has ears hear.

25. In the Way

The parable of the wheat and the tares holds a unique place in the New Testament. It is one of the very few parables where Jesus explicitly detailed out the key elements to understanding the meaning. As such, we need to pay attention to the meanings *He* assigned to them and recognize them, not as mysterious, debatable ideas, but as truths which Christ Himself

gave for the edification (strengthening, building up) of His body, His people, whom He has called out of this world's darkness and caused to enter into and attend to His kingdom of light – that is, His ekklesia. ([1577] Greek word poorly translated “church” – see Col. 1:13, etc.) We must pay attention to the details Christ gave or we will misinterpret this parable and misapply these truths, even preventing some of His ekklesia from being what He intends and desires them to be.

Let us first notice the end of the story. When the tares are removed, “*Then* the righteous [sons of the kingdom] will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Mt. 13:43, also v. 38) It is only *after* the tares are removed that we see the greater manifestation of the real nature of God's kingdom. Thus we can see that a primary characteristic of the tares is that they stand *in the way* of God's kingdom being manifested among men. As Jesus rebuked the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, the tares “shut up the kingdom of God against men; for [they] neither go in [themselves] nor do [they] allow those who are entering to go in.” (Mt. 23:13) Luke records this saying in a different way, giving it a different emphasis, perhaps as it was given on a similar but different occasion. As Jesus said of the lawyers (scribes), the tares “have taken away the key of knowledge. [They] do not enter in [themselves], and those who are entering in [they] hinder.” (Lk. 11:52)

It is a terrible thing to stand in front of the door to the kingdom of God and fail to enter. This is a tragedy of immense proportions. Yet it is exponentially worse to do this while barring another person's entrance into the kingdom! The kingdom of God is that realm where Christ and God are actively and carefully *obeyed* (Mt. 6:10) – this *is* the essence of a king over his kingdom! – and a tare is one who, even as he routinely uses the name of Christ and God, diverts people away from actually obeying the commands of Jesus. Whereas Jesus said, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations...teaching them to observe [know and obey] all things that I have commanded you...” (Mt. 28:19-20), the tare corrupts and perverts the truth (perhaps most or even only with his notions that he has the right, a “special anointing,” “gifting” or “calling” and God has given him the right and duty to tell other people how to live and be, especially around and *under* him! – Mt. 24:5) and draws followers away from Christ and after himself. (see Acts 20:30)

This is precisely what occurred in the first and second centuries as bishops arose from the ranks of elders and drew followers after themselves and their own teachings. The Catholic bishops were the most successful as they perverted the ideas of unity and leadership to mean attachment to the very visible hierarchical authority structure centered in Rome – and these were able to subordinate or ostracize any and all who did not bow down to that notion. This is the parent and pattern that the “church” “pastor” comes from! And all this is exactly as Paul prophesied would occur!

As the power to suppress, excommunicate and even execute has slipped from the Catholic “church's” hands, men have had to resort to the double standard of “believe and practice as we do or go find (or start) a place where they do!” This is the means by which their own divisiveness can be tolerated. Since Christ is not their true King but rather their “denomination” (sect, heresy) is formed around their own preferred “doctrines,” “creeds,” and “theology” (most often a corrupted compilation of truth and error), these tares must have a way to build up their own fiefdom that doesn't require *too much* from the affluent customers who come to have their ears routinely itched and scratched by the religious, swelling words that roll so eloquently from the tare's mouth. (2 Tim. 4:3-4, 2 Pet. 2:18) This too was warned against by

both Jesus and Paul though the concepts have been somewhat obscured through poor translations and even greater ignorance of what the words mean.

Jesus warned, “Because lawlessness (Greek, *anomia* [458]) will abound, the love of many will grow cold.” (Mt. 24:12) Lawlessness, put simply, has the capability of rendering even the chiefest of Christian attributes virtually lifeless. *Anomia* is literally “no law” and it refers to the absence of any outside source or standard by which one is expected or required to order his life and conduct. This idea is perhaps best captured in the description of the Israelites during the time of the judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” (Jdgs. 21:25) The time of the judges – strikingly similar to this time of rampant denominationalism and sectarianism – has been described as a time of apostasy, warfare, decline, violence, moral decay and anarchy – traits curbed or accentuated according to the spiritual disposition of the reigning king. (1 Ki. 13:33, 14:22, 2 Ki. 18:3-4, etc.) The devolvement of Christianity into churchianity only shows that Christ is *not* the King over most, if not all, that is done in His name!

Paul warned that those who routinely practiced the works of the flesh would not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal. 5:21) Included in his list of the works of the flesh are four of the “church’s” cornerstones:

- *Contentions.* (Greek *eris* [2054]) Every “church” must contend, at least in its own pulpit, for its own peculiar or denominational doctrines and “theology.”
- *Selfish ambitions.* (Greek *eritheia* [2052]) The man or group at the top, either in attaining to or maintaining their grasp on the top spot, must be motivated by selfish ambition – otherwise Christ would be the true Head.
- *Dissensions or divisions.* (Greek *dichostasia* [1370]) The double standard, believe and practice as we do or leave, is the most basic building block in all of churchianity. Paul said to avoid those who cause them. (Rom. 16:17)
- *Heresies.* (Greek *hairesis* [139]) The idea of grossly aberrant religious error worth burning someone at the stake for is a later *Catholic* addition to the meaning. The original meaning is simply that of a forming one’s own party or following. We now call these “denominations” and believe them to be a good thing.

Put bluntly, we will not see the kingdom of God come forth in our midst while we follow or submit to a man, a “ministry” or an organization that is built upon or driven by these *sins*. Quite simply, the “church” stands in the way of the kingdom of God. We can choose one or the other but we cannot have these sins in our lives and see the will of God done on earth as it is in heaven. The counterfeit “church” and the kingdom of God are mutually exclusive of one another.

When we recall that Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God but it was the *ekklesia* (and then the “church”) that came into existence, we can see that the primary reason the kingdom of God did not come into the preeminence but was overshadowed by the Romish hierarchy was that the bishops had arisen and stood in the way. Because the bishops first taught and then practiced Nicolaitanism ([3531] “conquer over the people” – Rev. 2:6, 15), the people accepted the ways

of contention, selfish ambition, dissension (division) and heresy (sectarian) – and therefore progressively the kingdom of God was left far behind, remembered only in the pages of the New Testament and nostalgically longed for from time to time by some saint or mystic. This problem still haunts and plagues the people of Christ to this day.

When we further explore the roots of the office of the “pastor” (traditionally, bishop), we find that he was also called a “pontiff” – literally, a bridge between the people and God. In effect, this title *boasts* that the man stands in the way of the people attaining to the fullness of God’s plan for them. He was – and still is – aided in this deception by standing on a platform (a picture made complete, for those who can see it, by having a cross or some other symbol of Christ or God behind him in some place entirely unreachable by the people unless they go through the “man of God” in the pulpit) with all his volunteer victims seated at his feet as he speaks whatever he – or in many cases, the demonic within him – wishes. In this way, the passive listeners have their ears scratched as they are told fables – stories that use words and names from the Bible but don’t require the listener to actually know *or obey* Jesus Christ! (2 Tim. 4:3-4)

Though the shepherd (Greek *poimen* [4166], poor English translation “pastor”) is listed in a group of specially graced (or gifted) individuals who are to train and equip the saints - *every* believer – to do the works of service (to one another, to the poor, orphans and widows, etc. – Eph. 4:11-12, Jn. 15:12, Jas. 1:27), today’s “pastor” and the “church’s” professional staff are now expected to do those works. Where this laziness and neglect of one’s individual responsibilities to God are practiced as “truth,” great “theological” excuses are manufactured. “Grace” is nearly always invoked and any effort toward obeying the commands of Jesus is condemned as “legalism” or “self-effort” toward salvation. Jesus’ command to “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...teaching them to *obey all things that I have commanded...*” (Mt. 28:19-20) is simply “theologically” explained out of existence or just never brought up as a topic in the “pastor’s” “sermons.” Jesus still says, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?” (Lk. 6:46) This is the *form* of godliness of which Paul wrote that has no power to make a person actually godly (resembling the character or attributes of Christ and God) – from these kind of “brothers” we are to turn away! (2 Tim. 3:5)

Some who are reading this will dismiss it as judgmental foolishness, never realizing that such a response only indicates that the demonic holds great power over them and is keeping them from coming into the light of truth. Others will reject it on the basis of “Well, even if it’s true, don’t uproot the tares!” (see Mt. 13:29) Such a response has the appearance of wisdom and of being obedient to the truth but is a deception nonetheless. Consider:

- The tares were planted “while men slept.” (Mt. 13:25) Those who are awake (see Mt. 25:5-7, Rom. 13:11, 1 Cor. 15:34, Eph. 5:14) are not to follow after blind leaders – we may simply leave them to their own destruction because every plant not planted by the Father will be uprooted soon enough. (Mt. 15:13-14, 13:41-42)
- The tares, by virtue of their place in the pulpit and over the people and of their allegiance to a sinful division (denomination, even the so-called “non-denominational” ones!), are those who are to be avoided. (Rom. 16:17) Because the lives of the tares are not characterized by true divine love and righteousness (what is right in God’s eyes), we can know they are children of the devil (1 Jn.

3:10) and we can turn away from their impotent, lifeless churchianity (2 Tim. 3:5) and draw near to God anyway. (Jas. 4:8)

- The servants who are first told not to uproot the tares but who are later sent to uproot them and deliver them to a fiery furnace are *angels*. (Mt. 13:29, 41-42) No mere man *can* uproot a tare and deliver that person to a fiery furnace except perhaps by literally murdering that person – a tactic completely foreign to the New Testament and entirely contradictory to the commandments and ways of Christ Jesus!

It is neither necessary nor commanded that we even attempt to “uproot a tare.” Leaving them alone (Mt. 15:14), avoiding them (Rom. 16:17) and turning away from them (2 Tim. 3:5) *are* what are commanded to do. And it is precisely here that we can take our first step toward true spiritual maturity – going forth to meet Christ outside the camp of men’s ideas and “theologies,” bearing His reproach and following Him wherever He leads us. (Heb. 13:13, Lk. 9:23, Rev. 14:4) This *is* the road that leads to life – anything else is merely some man’s “church,” just another lane in the broad highway that leads to destruction. (Mt. 7:13-14)

Let he who has ears hear.

26. The True Tabernacle

The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as the “Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not men.” (Heb. 8:2) Among the many insights we might glean from this short statement, perhaps one of the most important would be to recognize that there is such a thing as the Lord’s *true* tabernacle (temple, sanctuary). By implication, anything that is not really of His true tabernacle but yet still claims to be something of it must, by necessity, be either a fraud or a counterfeit, a mere imitation of the real thing. There are some, being immersed in a counterfeit and unaware of their deceived state, who ridicule the existence of a false “body” or “bride” of Christ. Such people, never having been trained or inclined to hear the voice of God and to seek the heart of God on every matter, base their judgments on appearances, always excusing themselves as “better” than those other “Christians” who meet down the road or, when they tire of one brand of “Christianity,” concoct their definition of “spirituality” in reaction to the apostate abomination they’ve just stepped away from, never realizing that they themselves are as bad or worse than what they’ve left behind.

A second important aspect we should glean is that the true tabernacle of Christ is built by Christ and not men. Herein lies the clearest indicator by which we can evaluate what kind of structure we have come to.

- If we come to a building made by human hands, we can be certain it is *not* God’s house. (Acts 7:48, 17:24)

- If we come to a group where one man is magnified above the others (“super-apostle,” “patriarch,” “senior-pastor,” etc.), we can know without doubt we have come to the fiefdom of some man and not the kingdom of Christ and God. (Mt. 23:8)

- If one man must always be *the* teacher or “worship” leader who must always be center stage in the limelight, we have found a show, an entertainment, a mere form of godliness that is void of (or at least inhibits) the life-changing power of God. (3 Jn. 9, 2 Tim. 3:5)

- If we can come and go among the group and do as much or as little *for* God as we care to – or if we are pushed toward the exit and “encouraged” to go find others who think, believe and practice the “Christian” religion the way we want to – we can know that we have entered into a place that practices lawlessness, what is right in their own eyes. (Jdgs. 21:25) It is not likely that we will find much, if any, of God’s righteousness in their midst. (2 Cor. 6:14)

- If we come to a group who uses music (so-called “worship”) to first “set the emotional mood” of the people, no matter how accurate any teachings might be afterward, those insights will be lost amid the soulish noise and excitement stirred up by the music.

- If we come into a setting where all religious acts of “worship” are governed by a liturgy (written or unwritten order or agenda for the meetings) we can know that we are observing a counterfeit of Christ’s true tabernacle because *He*, not some piece of writing, is the *leitourgos* (the Greek word from which the English word “liturgy” is formed [3011]), the Minister of the sanctuary. (Heb. 8:2)

The fascinatingly transcendent thing about all this is that a sincere seeker of God can still actually learn about and meet Him in any of these false expressions of the way of following Him. A sincere seeker will not be able to remain long in such a place once God begins to take away the veils and scales from his eyes, but one can certainly obtain some truths and even encounter God in any of these settings. This is why there is a recurrent returning to the cry to “Come out and be separate” (2 Cor. 6:17-18, Rev. 18:4) throughout all of church history as the Spirit has stirred various men and groups to recognize the sinful, wicked or even apostate condition of groups who stubbornly insisted on being recognized and treated as “*the church*.”

What will the true tabernacle of Christ erected among men of our time look like? It is not enough to say that they will *not* be like the examples used above – we must have some concrete, discernible traits to examine and weigh.

- Orphans, widows and the “least” (poor, outcasts) of Christ’s brothers will be received and treated with honor and respect and their spiritual, emotional and physical needs will be tended to. (Jas. 1:27, Mt. 25:37-40) The rich are by no means excluded but neither are they treated as the special, central figures in the meeting. (Jas. 2:2-4)

- A sincere and divinely-guided love for one another will be the agenda for all who come in contact with one another. (Jn. 13:34-35, 1 Cor. 12:24-25, Gal. 5:13, etc.)

- Unanimous consent, agreement and seeking of the will of God in all things will be the chief characteristic attitude. (2 Cor. 5:15, 1 Cor. 1:10, etc.)
- Two or three people are more likely to be the participants rather than groups of 20, 100 or 1,000. (Mt. 18:20)

What do we do to find or attain to such fellowship? The only answer is that we must follow the Lord Jesus Christ wherever He leads us. Whether He leads us into glorious unity with a number of fellow believers or leads us into a dry and lonely and seemingly endless wilderness, our duty is to follow and obey. He knows our needs – He indeed knows our need for genuine fellowship – and He knows how to satisfy and fulfill our needs. We, on the other hand, most often do not even know the difference between our needs and our desires – and too often, we don't even know the difference between the desires of the Spirit and the more subtle lusts of the flesh! (see Gal. 5:17) If we, apart from the leading of God, seek to find even a good thing like genuine Christian fellowship, we are more likely to end up practicing idolatry rather than obedience.

What do we do if we find ourselves in some false or contaminated expression of “following” Christ? Though the Lord does indeed call on us to come out and be separate and different, how and when to make our exodus are issues that only He can resolve for each individual. Occasionally and for a certain season, some rare individuals are called to return to various “church” groups, most often as a witness against certain practices or as “pillars” for others in that “church” to lean upon and gain some genuine fellowship. Groups that serve the homeless or the poor and meetings that draw in addicts of various kinds, for example, are often snubbed by the rich and powerful members of a “church” but these groups and meetings can also be the only place in that “church” where genuine Christian interaction occurs. Again, the only answer to all this is to simply follow Christ wherever He leads us.

John was surprised when he saw the great prostitute. (Rev. 17:6) We are not told why but one aspect of his amazement must surely be that the great prostitute grew alongside the holy bride of Christ (see also the parable of the wheat and the tares – especially Mt. 13:30) and bore the trappings of claiming the name of Christ even as “she” drank deeply of the blood of the saints and the martyrs (witnesses) of Jesus. The true “tabernacle” and the false “tabernacle” will say many of the same things and even be involved in many of the same kinds of activities. The differences are spiritual and they are spiritually discerned. Jesus still commands His true followers, “Do not judge according to appearances, but judge with righteous judgment.” (Jn. 7:24) Jesus still warns His true disciples, especially those alive at “the end of the age,” to “Take heed that no one deceives you.” (Mt. 24:4)

Christ's redeemed remnant must be those who are pure, obedient, honest and blameless. (Rev. 14:4-5, 1 Jn. 3:3, Heb. 5:9, Eph. 4:29, Phlp. 2:15, etc.) If our lives do not match up to this kind of description (apart from our progressive and occasional battles with some sin we still carry in spite of our desires otherwise – see 1 Jn. 1:8), then perhaps it is *we* who are not yet ready to be Christ's true tabernacle and only when a sufficient amount of purifying work has been performed in us will we be “safe” to bring into contact with others of His true tabernacle – and the longer we avoid the purifying wildernesses He would lead us through, the longer it will be before we will see the unity and beauty of the real body of Christ.

Building the Temple

Moses was commanded to take care “to make all things according to the pattern shown [him] on the mountain.” (Heb. 8:5) Moses’ tabernacle and the rituals of worship associated with it were to be a living and ongoing picture of God’s redemptive work among men and the Jews “were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed.” (Gal. 3:23) We enter and remain in Christ’s true tabernacle by obedient faith. Christ is not merely some pattern we are to follow and imitate (see Jn. 13:15 and 1 Pet. 2:21 for the *only* two places where Christ is said to be our example) – rather He is to be the Head of *all things* to those who are part of His true tabernacle. (Col. 1:18, Eph. 1:22-23)

We are also instructed to take care how we build upon the foundation that is Christ. (1 Cor. 3:10) If we use “gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw” – each of these things being something that can trace at least its origins back to the Creator – our work will be tested by fire and if our work survives we will be rewarded. But if our work does not survive we ourselves will remain though we will suffer loss. (1 Cor. 3:12-15)

Many teachers, especially those who teach absolute “eternal security,” like to stop right there and have us believe that reward or loss are the only two possible outcomes for those who would build on the foundation of Christ. Paul, however, goes on in his analogy of building to present to us the third alternative by saying, “Do you not know that you are the temple [tabernacle] of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? *If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him.* For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.” (1 Cor. 3:16-17 – emphasis added)

If anyone’s work as a builder upon the foundation of Christ actually introduces defilement – something which cannot be traced back to God but can be traced either to the demonic (1 Tim. 4:1) or to the vain and evil hearts of men (Mk. 7:21-23) – God promises here to *destroy* him, an alternative very different from that of the one who suffers loss but is saved as if through fire. (1 Cor. 3:15)

This is why Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (Mt. 7:21-23)

Those who dismiss this warning as not referring to followers of Christ have missed the point entirely. These are people who profess the Lordship of Christ – they call Him “Lord, Lord.” These are people who *in the name of Christ* publicly speak the words of God saying in one form or another, “This is what God says.” These are people who *in the name of Christ* cast out demons and they have been successful enough at it to think it belongs on their spiritual “resume”! These are people who *in the name of Christ* perform miracles of one sort or another and have seen enough power flow through them to think they are operating in some gift of the Spirit. This is not only “Christians” – this is “Christian” leadership material! These are those who routinely, if not professionally, build upon the foundation of Christ

What is the defilement that causes these builders to be dismissed from the Lord’s presence? Jesus says they have practiced lawlessness, a trait He later said would be a primary characteristic of the end of the age. (Mt. 24:12) Lawlessness (Greek, *anomia*, literally “no law” [458], is best summed up as what is right in one’s own eyes just as righteousness is best summed up as what is right in God’s eyes. (see 2 Cor. 6:14)

With this dire consequence in view, we need to hear again Paul's instruction that "the temple of God is holy" (1 Cor. 3:17) as well as the writer to the Hebrews' warning "without [holiness] no one will see the Lord." (Heb. 12:14) To be holy is to be "set apart" for God's use. In practical terms, holiness is simply obedience to God. It is because the builders who will be ultimately dismissed choose to build whatever is right in their own eyes (lawlessness) rather than build according to God's "pattern" (holy obedience to the Christ and the leading of His Spirit) that these builders have only succeeded in building a false "tabernacle." These have constructed a tabernacle that is erected by men and not by the Lord.

At the beginning of his analogy about builders, Paul gives the "secret" to gaining God's approval on our construction efforts. "For we are *God's fellow workers...*" (1 Cor. 3:9) Only those works that can truly be said to be accomplished in co-labor with Christ and God are those works which will erect the true tabernacle that God erects and not men. Co-laboring with Christ is the only possible means whereby we might gain reward as well as keep ourselves from bringing some form of defilement among the people of Christ, God's true and only tabernacle. That so many are heaping up defilement and so few seem to know how to remain pure says much about how far we have fallen.

Let he who has ears hear.

27. What Do You Seek?

Young John was a seeker. Whatever he was seeking, he hadn't found it as son of a wealthy fisherman who fished in the sea of Galilee and who had at least a second, perhaps first, home in Jerusalem. That was why, in about the sixteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar in Rome, John was not fishing in his father's boats nor visiting the important buildings in Jerusalem where, if he wasn't recognized, he was at least a frequent enough observer that he knew how to look like he belonged there. No, John was in neither of these places where he probably should have been, at least in his father's opinion. Instead, he was in the Judean wilderness with the wild-eyed, roughly-dressed prophet they called the Baptist.

One day, a Galilean man, walked up to the Baptist and was baptized by him. The Baptist identified this Galilean as "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" and "the Son of God." (Jn. 1:29, 34) When this Galilean came back the next day, the Baptist again called Him, "The Lamb of God." John and his fishing partner Andrew (who was also here in the Judean wilderness) left the Baptist and walked after Jesus. "Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, 'What do you seek?'" (Jn. 1:37-38) It is very apparent that John didn't even know what he sought – nor did he and Andrew know exactly what they had found. Andrew told Peter they had found "the Messiah" (Jn. 1:41) – but it would be only three years later that Andrew and John would see their Messiah hung on a cross and they would be devastated. (Mk. 16:10) It is not hard to imagine that Jesus' first question to him came to John's mind when the Baptist wanted to be reassured that Jesus was the Messiah and Jesus asked the crowd, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" (Mt. 11:7) And since, decades later when John wrote his Gospel he would still remember even the time of day when Jesus asked, "What do you seek?" (Jn. 1:39) – it is actually difficult to believe that John did not dwell on this question many, many times when Jesus' body was still in the tomb.

Consider the turmoil that John's soul was in. For three years, Jesus had told His disciples not to overtly call or publicize Him as the Messiah. Seeing their very few numbers and knowing the brutality with which Rome eradicated those who rebelled and yet knowing in their hearts that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah-King, they must have concluded this was just some sort of clandestine training period which would end with them having seats of great power and authority in return for their having faithfully followed Him in His "obscurity." (see Mt. 20:21) Why, only a week before His crucifixion, the crowds at Jerusalem had welcomed Him openly as the Messiah-King. (Lk. 19:38) What was it John had sought that had made him vulnerable to this now-dead charlatan? But then the resurrection came and John, with the other disciples, became witnesses of His glory and power. (Jn. 1:14) Whatever it was that John sought, from his persistent endurance under persecution and torture and his consistent witness to Christ's resurrection throughout the rest of his life, it is quite evident that he found it in the God who loved him. (Jn. 21:20)

Most people who are confronted with this question, "What do you seek?", at least know that they want, even need, an answer in life. But the nature of humanity after the fall is such that, though we believe there must be an answer and we are confronted routinely with the inescapable fact that we have questions, we have great difficulty even knowing what the question is. What we seek is an answer to questions we're not exactly sure what they are! Some seek

- meaning and significance,
- security and safety,
- peace and contentment,
- belonging and connection,
- wholeness and satisfaction,
- love and fulfillment.

These, like John, are seeking to find out who they are and where they fit in. Their frustration at finding no answers within drives them to prophets like John the Baptizer and to Messiahs like Jesus. How fortunate John was to find the true – so many have found false prophets and false messiahs and been content with these deceptions. But John found the truth and wrote it down, with the help of God, so "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ [the Messiah], the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." (Jn. 20:31)

But Jesus came to show that one cannot look at one's self and find life, that one cannot simply "express" one's self (as some today use the term) and be what one was made to be. Jesus clearly showed that the only way to really live was to die. Jesus said, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mk. 8:34-37) This is the "price" we must pay for Christ's salvation as one cannot be *saved from* one's sinful, wicked self while simultaneously *holding on to and retaining* one's sinful, wicked self! One can be the unregenerate, unchanged "old man" of the flesh or one can be the new creation in Christ – but one cannot remain both.

We should note well the response that Jesus gave to Andrew and John in contrast to the response He would give to the men who would later volunteer to follow Him. When Andrew and John are asked, "What do you seek?" they answer with a question of their own, "Where are You staying?" Jesus responds, "Come and see." (Jn. 1:38-39) But when someone else said to

Him, “Lord, I will follow You wherever You go,” Jesus answered, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” And when another said the same thing but wanted first to say goodbye to his family, Jesus said to him, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Lk. 9:57-58, 61-62) At least Andrew and John’s question, which differs from the first’s boastfulness and the second’s reservations for his family, showed that God had already been showing them that the foundations of their lives were not as sturdy and trustworthy as they would want and need. As Jesus would later teach His disciples, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.” (Jn. 6:44) Andrew and John’s question – unlike the other two “volunteers” – showed, at least to Jesus, that they were in the process of being drawn to the Father.

Jesus also said to His disciples to seek *first* the kingdom of God and the things that our Father knows we need would be given to us. (Mt. 6:33) Though Jesus gave this teaching in the context of material possessions, there is no reason to believe this does not apply to our emotional needs as well. Is not our Father the “God of *all* comfort”? (2 Cor. 1:3) As we progress into our life in Christ, we will experience deep desires, perhaps even frustration, some of which comes from the Spirit of God. Paul wrote, “For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up in life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God...” (2 Cor. 5:2-5) Just as God drew us *to* Christ, He continues to draw us deeper *into* Christ. This causes us to be seekers, sometimes of what we know not, but the point is not to make us frustrated seekers (though frustration may exist for a time) but rather to prepare us to receive reward for God rewards “those who diligently seek Him.” (Heb. 11:6)

This *is* part of our human existence after the fall. Paul also wrote, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. And not only they, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.” (Rom. 8:18-23)

John did not “find himself” or the answers he needed by looking at himself. He found what was lacking in his life by looking to Jesus. John, after being with Jesus and following Him by His Spirit for many more years, would be the one who most emphasized the need to love one another as Christ loved us. “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” (1 Jn. 3:16) The strength Christ showed by voluntarily going to the cross (“Your will be done, not Mine” – Mt. 26:42) is the strength of character He imparted to John and the same strength of character He will impart to us after we submit to His Kingship.

If we seek ourselves – any part of our fallen, flesh nature, no matter how small or subtle – we will never find God. We will be like the rich young ruler who had sought to obey God’s requirements all his life. But when Jesus touched upon the one thing he couldn’t bring himself to let go of, he walked away from Jesus. (Mk. 10:20-22) How many “pastors” and travelling “apostles” and televised talking heads today do not follow Jesus because they cannot give up their “ministries” from which they derive their own satisfaction for power, prestige, preeminence

or significance? How many “church”-ite “pew potatoes” refuse to leave their pew (let alone their “church”!) because they think they still need to be “fed” and they can’t find any better ear-scratching spiritual guru at any other “church”? (see 2 Tim. 4:3-4) How many who know enough to make their exodus from the “church” balk at having to endure the wilderness because that’s where Christ says they need to go? How many of these who refuse to follow Christ into and through the wilderness imagine themselves “leaders” in the body of Christ because they *call* their little house “church” ekklesia?

Whatever we give up we will be more than compensated for – of that we can be certain. Jesus said, “*Everyone* who has left houses or brothers or sisters or fathers or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.” (Mt. 19:29) Whatever it is that we unconsciously seek – rather, whatever our lack within actually is for which we perceive our neediness if not our actual need – it will be satisfied and filled by Him “who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23) if we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. If we are unwilling to put Him first and foremost and indeed as our all, then we are walking in unbelief, doubting that He will keep His word to preserve us and provide for us as we take up our cross and follow after Him.

Jesus said, “Which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and sit down to eat?’ But will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’” (Lk. 17:7-10)

Anyone who thinks he brings something of value, worth or use into the kingdom of God does not yet know himself as he ought. There is *no* good thing that dwells in our flesh. (Rom. 7:18) The new man is “created according to God in righteousness and true holiness.” (Eph. 4:24) It is our privilege to put off the old and put on the new but our simple obedience to God leaves us no room to boast. If we think we have something to boast of, it is only evidence that we have failed miserably in putting off the old and are seriously deluded about what the new is!

All that we bring into the equation of God and man is need. In our flesh we don’t like this but the sooner we come to the recognition of our moral and spiritual bankruptcy, the sooner we can reject our flesh, be changed and filled with His fullness. This is the example we see in John and it is his testimony that we too can believe and have this same life in Christ. If we have no such life, the fault is ours and ours alone. God has never – and never will – turn away those who diligently seek Him. Rather, He rewards such as these. (Heb. 11:6)

Let he who has ears hear.

Section IV: Pressing On

28. Provision, Power and Presumption

“Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan [where He had been baptized by John] and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness...” (Lk. 4:1) So begins an aspect of Christ’s work on behalf of mankind that is often overlooked and rarely attained to by those who claim to be His followers. Jesus’ first act, upon being filled with the Spirit is to be led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Since few have attained to this aspect of the life of Christ, at least in its entirety, we have failed to see the pattern as it is distorted and prevented in modern churchianity.

As we seek to apply this episode to our own lives, we must first recognize what the wilderness represents. Most of us have only become acquainted with the idea of the wilderness after we have left the “church,” that organized, institutionalized counterfeit of the bride and body of Christ, as suddenly we are ostracized and alone with only a vague sense of the Shepherd somewhere ahead of us, leading us into places and situations unknown and uncomfortable to us, to say the least. When we remember that Christ proclaimed the kingdom of God but it was first the ekklesia and then the “church” that came into the preeminence, we begin to see the role the “church” has played in causing us to neglect the leading of the Spirit so as to prevent us from following the Shepherd into the wilderness. The “church” is the castle of Beelzebub from where the devil and the demonic discharge fiery arrows in the hopes of killing any before they can enter the gate or progress far along the way that leads to eternal life. (*Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan, p. 21, also see Mt. 7:13-14)

Yet the wilderness is just a beginning. In the wilderness, we must face down the tempter and the temptation. It is a time of testing – testing as to just where our loyalties are. Rarely are these temptations recognized as having any place in the life of the normal or average believer – in part because we have allowed the idea of the usual “church”-ite to become our idea of the normal follower of Christ, but, even when we come to learn the fallacy of this deception, also because we succumb to one or another of these temptations and fail to press on to the fullness of the life of Christ or because we somehow believe that these kinds of temptations were reserved for the Christ alone and are not part of the life of Christ to be reproduced in each of us. We remain stranded, as it were, in the wilderness or else we return to Babylon or even Egypt rather than follow the Shepherd wherever and into whatever He leads us. The temptations, however, do conform to a recognizable pattern, though it is a pattern that is perhaps more understandable *after* or near the end of one’s time of testing is complete much more so than when one is first entering the wilderness!

Provision

Jesus “was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tested for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry.” (Lk. 4:1-2) This hunger is not the hunger of having missed a meal or two – this hunger is the stomach beginning to digest itself. This is a time of literal danger, even the possibility of death, if the fasting is continued.

“And the devil said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.’ But Jesus answered him, saying, ‘It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.”’” (Lk. 4:3-4) Here we see the faith that Jesus had in His Father being

tested. Later, He would teach, “If a son asks for bread, will his father give him a stone?” (Mt. 7:9) Jesus so deeply learned that His Father would provide that it became a deep part of His teachings. Also being tested is Jesus’ determination to do the will of God no matter what the cost. (Psa. 40:7-8) If God allowed Him to die here, so be it – it was more important to Jesus to receive His bread from His Father’s hand rather than to use His power to independently produce food for His survival. After the devil’s temptations are concluded, we do see that the Father *is* faithful and He sends angels to serve Jesus’ needs. (Mt. 4:11)

It is precisely here that we may begin to see what the genuine follower of Christ is called to and how the “church” derails a follower away from Christ. When Christ taught His disciples how to pray, He instructed them “Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” (Mt. 6:11-12) Just as Christ relied on His Father for His daily bread, indeed His very life, so too He instructs us, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things [that your heavenly Father knows you need] shall be added to you.” (Mt. 6:32-33) This interactive reliance on the Father is what the temptations in the wilderness is meant to test and bring forth, first in Christ and subsequently in every true believer who obediently follows the Lord wherever He leads.

The “church,” in its various manifestations, presents a health and wealth and prosperity “gospel” that says a believer ought to be healthy, wealthy and prospering. If he is not, then he is presumed to be in sin, demonized (under a “spirit of poverty”) or even under God’s judgment. Even where this blatant error is rejected, there is often a subconscious suspicion that these things are still somewhat true. A poor person, in spite of what the New Testament says (Jas. 2:5, etc.), just couldn’t possibly be living according to the will of God. In this way, the “church” demonstrates its enmity to the way of the cross of Christ.

Power and Position

“Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, ‘All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours.’ And Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.”’” (Lk. 4:5-8)

Here we see Jesus’ loyalty to the heavenly Father being tested. Satan was offering Jesus a shortcut to the seat of power. Jesus, as the Son of Man, was to be given the power and authority over all these kingdoms (Dan. 7:13-14) but the way of the Father entailed a cross, a shameful, painful death. If Jesus took Satan’s offer, He need only bow a knee to Satan. But Jesus, for the joy set before Him endured the cross and its shame (Heb. 12:2) – even at this early stage of His work, He knew He must do only the will of God and not take any path offered to Him by the adversary Satan. The stakes were much higher than Jesus taking a seat of power – the Father was bringing forth a family *and* a kingdom which, if the demonic rulers of their age had understood the hidden wisdom of God, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor. 2:8) Jesus kept His will set on the Father’s will, even though ultimately it cost Him His physical life, and He gained an equality with God that could not be grasped and a name that is above all names. (Phlp. 2:9) By refusing Satan and submitting to God, Jesus gained everything that Satan in his rebellion against God thought to take. (Isa. 14:12-14)

Knowing the propensity of man to seek shortcuts and to send a Moses up the mountain so as to avoid coming face to face with God (Dt. 5:5, etc.), the “church” is designed to be a seat of

power (in spite of Christ's command that "it shall not be so among you!" – Mt. 20:25-26, etc.) so that some men usurp authority not meant for them to have and others submit to that usurped authority. It was not long after Christ's ascension that men became spiritually careless and brought in rules, canons, liturgies and bishops who drew followers after themselves and away from Christ to one degree or another – exactly as predicted. (Mt. 13:25, 25:5, Acts 20:30) After two thousand years, the idea of the kingdom is perverted or ignored, few if any are even able to be genuine ekklesia and the "church" is more influenced by pagan Greek practices, Babylonish trappings and demonic power than by the Bible and the Spirit of God. In short, the "church" is the great falling away from the faith that occurs before the return of Christ. (2 Ths. 2:3) By giving men a readily attainable (through personal charisma, worldly education and power-grabbing techniques, that is) seat of power (which some denominations even call "the seat of Moses"!), both the man in authority and those who seat themselves at his feet are progressively enslaved to the schemes and devices of the devil. Since the prison gates of death and darkness cannot prevail over those determined to escape into the light of Christ's kingdom (Mt. 16:18), church history is filled with instances of people (with varying degrees of appropriateness and success) "coming out" of Babylon (Rev. 18:4) or "Christian" idolatry. (2 Cor. 6:17, 1 Cor. 5:10-11)

When the Lord taught His disciples how to pray, He said to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (Mt. 6:10) Nowhere in the New Testament did Jesus ever delegate authority to any of His followers to be lords over the others. The "pastor" as chief executive officer or president is simply not found in the New Testament. Rather, the whole notion, as was already pointed out, is *forbidden!* The true elder is to be an *example* of what it means to follow Christ as King (1 Pet. 5:3) and the one who serves all. (Mt. 23:11, Jn. 13:14-16) Christ's kingdom or realm is that sphere wherein He is actually the King – that is, He is actually obeyed. The "church" uses Him as a figurehead while it goes on to pursue its own understandings, agendas and, very often, one man's quest for power so that he can do something "good and beneficial" (in his own eyes, at least) for those he lords over. (see Lk. 22:25-26) As a result, the kingdoms of mere men are established (to the destruction of many) and the kingdom of God does not come into our midst because the traditions of men still have precedence over the will of God. (Mt. 15:6)

Presumption

"Then [Satan] brought [Jesus] to Jerusalem, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here. For it is written: "He shall give His angels charge over You, to keep You," and "In their hands they shall bear You up, lest You dash Your foot against a stone.'" And Jesus answered and said to him, 'It has been said, "You shall not tempt the LORD your God.'"'" (Lk. 4:9-12)

Here is perhaps the most sophisticated, multi-layered temptation that Satan directs at Christ and we need to examine the various levels of this subtle trap. On the surface, it is merely a challenge for Jesus to defy death and presume upon God's protection for His life. But on a more subtle level, Satan is offering Jesus a chance to die before the people in a manner more visible, more palatable and more likely to draw followers – especially if there is to be a resurrection involved. The man who could leap from a tall building, get up and walk away must be the Messiah! On an even more subtle level, Satan is tempting Jesus to presume upon His own special calling as the Messiah and reach out and grasp equality with God. (see Phlp. 2:6) On yet a fourth level, Satan quotes Scripture (twisting and distorting the meaning) in an attempt to get

Jesus to rely on a Satanic interpretation and thus go on to commit an act independent of God. If Jesus fell for any of these four deceptions, this too would be presumption – that Jesus could interpret the Scripture apart from the leading of the Spirit of truth.

On the surface level, Jesus' answer comes from the law which included a reference to a place called Massah. (Dt. 6:16) This was where Moses was instructed to strike the rock and water gushed forth. The place was then called both Massah (“Tempted”) and Meribah (“Contention”) “because of the contention of the children of Israel [against Moses], and because they tempted the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” (Ex. 17:2, 6-7) Jesus' answer to Satan was simply, “It is wrong in all circumstances to test God.” By refusing to fall for either of the other aspects of this temptation – to risk suicide so as to gather followers, to be the Messiah apart from God's will and way, and to misapply the Scriptures – His simple, straightforward answer rightly divided the truth of the matter on all levels and He overcame the tempter who then “departed from Him until an opportune time.” (Lk. 4:13)

Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” (Mt. 6:13) The follower of Christ who prays in this manner (not just mouthing the words but obeying the intent and meaning) can expect to have to face the temptation to presume upon God's protections – but that same one can also expect to overcome the tempter. This is as true for the follower of Christ who has never attended a “church” as it is for those who must forsake and overcome all the carnal and demonic contaminants after leaving the “church.”

As the epitome of these deceptions, there is perhaps no more subtle snare set for the people of Christ than the doctrine of eternal security. This doctrine arose from the perceived need to institutionalize the teachings of the New Testament. The doctrine says, in effect, “You've been chosen by God as His elect – you will not surely die the second death. Sin as much or as little as you choose, you're eternally secure.” Some have even scoured the New Testament, finding phrases like, “He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Heb. 13:5) or “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.” (Jn. 10:28), never realizing how demonically misapplied their interpretations and applications are.

The writer of Hebrews, in a series of short, closing instructions, wrote: “Let your conduct be without covetousness, and be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we may boldly say: ‘The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5-6) The instruction is first about trusting in the Lord's provision and refusing to fear what men can do to us. (also see where this quote is from: Dt. 31:6, Josh. 1:5) It has absolutely nothing to do with eternal salvation!

Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.” (Jn. 10:27-28) In order for a person to receive eternal life from Jesus, they must *hear His voice and follow Him!* This *is* what Jesus said! Many “churches” and “theologians” go so far as to ridicule the notions that a believer even *can* hear the voice of Jesus – those who believe and hear Him are just so bad for “church” business and stability. These actually dare to think for themselves and question the words of the status quo “pastors” and “theologians”! Why, those who follow Christ (note well the differences between those who arrogantly claim to follow Him as distinguished from those who bear the fruit of His Spirit as they follow Him apart from the teachings of men and demons!) think themselves to have a mandate to “*come out*” of the “church” and all of its leftover contaminants!

Instead of having the people draw real comfort and security from their intimate relationship with Christ the Shepherd, the “church” must give them a replacement – a *doctrine* that says they’re eternally secure whether they hear and follow Christ or not. Knowing doctrines out of the Bible is the replacement for actually hearing and knowing His voice and the replacement for actually entering into eternal life.

In essence, Satan has taken the people of Christ to the pinnacle of the temple of Christ’s body and bid them leap off – and many have foolishly done so.

A Persistent Problem

Presumption has always plagued man’s attempts to know God. Every act of God to reveal Himself is answered by man’s presumptions about the things of God. The New Testament records Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:3), Simon Magus (Acts 8:20) and the seven sons of Sceva (Acts 19:13) as but three instances of men presuming upon the things of God. The Israelites presumed upon God’s protection and support, daring to go up and fight the Amorites after God in judgment had said that generation would die in the wilderness. (Dt. 1:42-44)

Perhaps the most prevalent expression of presumption is pride or, more precisely, arrogance. This was the constant theme of Satan’s temptations of the Christ – “If You are the Son of God...” In effect, Satan is saying, “You’re something special, Jesus. Treat yourself right according to what You are.” Paul, who as Saul in his presumption that he knew the way to please God had murdered followers of Jesus (Acts 9:1, etc.), would later write, “For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.” (Rom. 12:3) Because “no lie is of the truth” (1 Jn. 2:21), the way to overcome the deceptive temptations, especially presumption, is to remain soberly honest about what we are – in both the flesh and the spirit. Paul also wrote, “O wretched man that I am!” (Rom. 7:24), recognizing the devastated condition of man apart from Christ, but he also wrote, “But by the grace [power] of God I am what I am... I labored more abundantly than they [the other apostles]...” (1 Cor. 15:10), recognizing what the power and call of God in Christ Jesus had transformed him into.

The “church,” because it does not allow the Spirit of truth to shape and define its role and purpose, must presume to know the things of God. Thus the “church” is filled with arrogant “theologians” and teachers who presumptuously speak the things of God as if they understood His meaning, intent and purpose – exactly as prophesied. (2 Pet. 2:10) This is perhaps the most extreme fulfillment of those “having a form of godliness but denying its power.” (2 Tim. 3:5) These are like the Jews who opposed Paul and Barnabas by contradicting the truth and reviling against God’s true messengers and actually opposing God’s truth and purpose. (Acts 13:45) These have no love of the truth (2 Ths. 2:10) but insist that their own understandings and doctrines are the absolute truth and no arrogant or worldly argumentative tactic will be left unused to show how stupid their opponents are for not believing the lies they believe. Any “theologian” who does not speak in love and humility is not a true servant of the Lord. (2 Tim. 2:24-25)

The Power of the Spirit

Jesus refused to use His power independently of the Father. He refused to take any shortcut to the throne His Father had promised Him. He refused to rely on any understanding or application of Scripture other than that given to Him by the Spirit of truth. As a result, the tempter left Him and “Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee” (Lk. 4:15) and He

“began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.’” (Mt. 4:17) The miraculous flow of power to overcome sickness and disease (Mt. 4:23, etc.) and even the elements (Mk. 4:41) were the evidences that He truly was the King.

The power of the Spirit is absent from the vast majority, perhaps all, of “churches” because Christ is not truly the King and Ruler of all that is said and done – even though virtually everything is done as if it did have His personal approval. The power of the Spirit is not present in many “ministries” for the same reason – those “ministries” that fail to conform to Christ’s likeness, kingdom and agenda but still exhibit supernatural power are suspect, more likely to be fueled by Satan’s power than Christ’s. (2 Ths. 2:9) This is why when Christ, by the power of the Spirit proclaimed the kingdom (and His role as King), the people in the synagogue (very similar to the “churches” of today) rose up in anger and tried to kill Christ whose very existence challenged all their religious presumptions. (Lk. 4:28-29)

But for the disciple still in the wilderness, the public display of power is a thing of the future. The power of the Spirit is available now to enable the believer to overcome the temptations the “church” systematically places before us. Let the believer who has succumbed to or who is yet to face these challenges in the light of truth not despair. Continue to pray as the Lord instructed, continue to listen to His voice and follow Him wherever He leads. Allow the Spirit of truth (and Him alone!) to reshape your understanding of spiritual truths and matters. Resist the devil (in the power of the Spirit and not with the arm of the flesh!) and he will leave you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you who have been sinning and purify your hearts you who have been both carnally and spiritually minded. (see Jas. 4:7-8)

This is the way to the power of the Spirit and few indeed there are who have found it.
Let he who has ears hear.

29. Whose Kingdom Is It Anyway?

Perhaps the most accurate, over-arching view of the intricate workings of the kingdom of God ever given to men was that given to Ezekiel. When he was first chosen by God to be a prophet, he was shown a vision of four living creatures who were each attended by “a wheel in the middle of a wheel.” (Ezek. 1:16, 19-20) How do we know the creatures and wheels represent the kingdom? The beauty of the description is that we *don’t* know that it is a picture of the kingdom – we cannot know, apart from God revealing something to us, what or all that this picture signifies! There is no interpretation of this vision ever given. There is no “proof text” that carnal men can latch onto and say, “See! *Here* is the kingdom of God! This is how we build it!” Only those whose spiritual eyes can see will recognize the similarity between the four living creatures with the accompanying wheels and the living Word of God embodied in the body of Christ, going wherever He wishes and simply being the people willing to obey Him (the King and His kingdom) and remaining completely undeterred from His own internal purpose by any outside interference or resistance. (Ezek. 1:12) That many, even those among the people who claim to follow Christ, won’t be able to see this is simply evidence that very few have been taught to see with their spiritual eyes. Thus this picture of the kingdom of God, given from God’s perspective as it were, is not really all that useful (or usable!) to men who are rooted in time and are most often unable to see through the spiritual fog and dust clouds that surround their lives. Yet this picture serves as an excellent starting point for trying to describe God’s kingdom

because, as we grow more familiar with God's ways, we find that the mystery of His will does indeed resemble a wheel within a wheel.

Further, it really does absolutely no good whatsoever to even try to gain any kind of independent, objective, outside view of the kingdom. When the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come, He replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you (or, in your midst)." (Lk. 17:20-21) In effect, Jesus was saying, "While you're so busy looking for an outward, visible 'kingdom,' you're missing the fact that the kingdom of God is here, now and right among you. You're judging according to appearances and not seeing with righteous discernment."

John, who more so than the other gospel writers avoids the use of the title "King" (perhaps in an effort to shift focus away from any possible misuse of "King Jesus" to overthrow Caesar and Rome or, more likely, because "Father," especially in a patriarchal society like Israel's, encompassed and even in some ways surpassed "King" as a useful picture of what Christ and God is to His people), still felt it important to record Jesus' words to Nicodemus: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. ...unless one is born of water [physically] and the Spirit [reborn spiritually from above], he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (Jn. 3:3, 5) Without this transformation into a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), no one can see, enter or even truly begin to understand the kingdom of God.

It is precisely here that we must observe all the conflicting "theologies" and doctrinal "distinctives" of the various "Christian" sects and divisions and set them all aside. It is not that there is no truth whatsoever to be found within the convoluted mass of collective "Christian" thought. Rather, because so much of what is believed to be true was compiled by "theologians" who either never entered the kingdom themselves or else have never waited on the Spirit of truth to be "led into all truth" (Jn. 16:13), the mixture of truth and error is simply overwhelming. One simply must, in this day of deception, contradiction, dissension, divisiveness and lawlessness (especially on the internet!), seek the Spirit of truth and wait upon Him to be led into all truth. Those who refuse to love the truth – whatever and however costly that might be – are those whom God will consign to "strong delusion," enabling them to believe that the lie they prefer is really the one true God. (2 Ths. 2:10-12)

Thus we could easily get caught up in trying to understand the kingdom and thereby fail to enter in. Or we could recognize and rest in the simplicity with which the gospel is structured. Though the kingdom of God is infinitely vast, His judgments are unsearchable and His ways are beyond our ability to figure out (Rom. 11:33), the "front door" is clearly marked. Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep... I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me... I am the true vine..." (Jn. 10:7, 14:6, 15:1) There is no formula, no "sinner's prayer," no religious rite or penance or "church" attendance that magically transports us into Christ's kingdom of light – there is only direct, personal, spiritual encounter with the living God. God has so structured His offer of reconciliation and redemption "that [we] may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing [we] may have life in His name." (Jn. 20:31) If we have had no such encounter, we have great reason to believe we do not have His life – and man-made religious rituals are not *and never will be* (especially on judgment day!) a replacement of the implanted Word which alone is able to save our soul. (Jas. 1:21)

The Mystery of the Kingdom

Jesus said to His disciples, “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables.” (Mk. 4:11) Elsewhere He said, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (Jn. 8:31-32) Jesus promised that the prison gates of death and darkness (Hades) would not be able to overcome His ekklesia, His people. (Mt. 16:18) Thus the only viable strategy open to the devil (who is not able or permitted to forcibly snatch anyone from the hand of Christ and God – Jn. 10:28-29) is to deceive people into believing themselves to have entered the kingdom, to have become true ekklesia, when in reality they have either never entered the gate or have failed to progress along the road that leads to life. (Mt. 7:13-14) This is why we can now observe that Jesus proclaimed an invisible kingdom but it was a very visible perversion of ekklesia (a hierarchically structured, worldly organization which men now most often call “the church”) that has held the preeminence. And this condition has so drastically devolved that any genuine ekklesia is most often confused as to its purpose for existing and the “church” can only be rightly called apostasy and abomination!

The mystery of the kingdom of God is not something we can rationally deduce or scientifically evaluate, test and prove or disprove. For this reason alone, many people refuse to acknowledge God. “Mystery” in the New Testament refers to a “hidden truth” that can only be known and understood when God reveals or discloses that truth. Even the devil and the demonic cannot “crack the code” where God’s mysteries are concerned. Though we can now look at the Old Testament prophecies, for example, and readily see the many, many places where the death and even crucifixion of the Messiah was foretold, “none of the rulers of this age knew [the hidden wisdom of God]; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” (1 Cor. 2:8)

If we have properly entered and know then at least something of the nature of the kingdom in which we have become citizens, it is important that we recognize what kind of people we really are, especially deep inside where God knows the hidden and darkened and deceptive depths of our hearts. (Jer. 17:9-10) Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” (Mt. 5:3) Paul wrote, “For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.” (1 Cor. 1:26) It is a common mistake to look to the eloquence, intelligence or charisma of a man and assume him to be “the man of God for the hour.” Moses was skilled in all the arts of Egypt (Acts 7:22) but did not know the first thing about how God’s kingdom worked and required an additional *forty years* of wilderness training. (Acts 7:29-30) Today’s “pastors” and televised talking heads are skilled in all the arts of Greek sophistry (“wisdom”) and rhetoric (public speaking) but have failed to allow Christ to be the true Head over the people because they stand in His place!

Flesh or Spirit

When the seventy disciples returned rejoicing about the power of the kingdom of God they had wielded over the demonic, Jesus reprovved their exuberance but then went on to say, “I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is but the Father, and who the Father is but the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” (Lk. 10:21-22) Here, if we have eyes to see it, the kingdom begins to take shape as a wheel within a wheel.

Paul clearly wrote that God has “made known to us the mystery [hidden truth known only by divine revelation] of His will...that in the dispensation [administrative outworking] of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him...” (Eph. 1:9-10) Clearly Paul has in view the kingdom of God where Christ has “all things under His feet” and He is “Head over all things to the ekklesia.” (Eph. 1:22)

Yet Paul had just written, “In Christ we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound towards us in all wisdom and prudence...” (Eph. 1:7-8) Paul is saying here that it is by “wisdom and prudence” that we may know the mystery of God’s will (kingdom – a king’s realm is where the king’s will is obeyed! Also see again Mt. 6:10 for the close connection of God’s will and kingdom) – yet Jesus had said that the kingdom realities were hidden from “the wise and prudent.” (Lk. 10:21) How do we reconcile this seeming contradiction?

By recognizing that Jesus is referring to the “wise and prudent” according to the flesh and that Paul is referring to those who receive wisdom and prudence as part of God’s divinely imparted grace (power – also see 1 Cor. 1:30) This is no small difference. “The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are *contrary* to one another...” (Gal. 5:17) “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal [fleshly] mind is *enmity* against God...” (Rom. 8:5-7) And “he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption [death], but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.” (Gal. 6:8) Here is the whole plan of redemption laid out in the simple choice between flesh or Spirit, self or Christ.

Jesus said that unless we repent and allow ourselves to be changed and come to Him as little children – trusting, humble, loving, forgiving are applicable descriptive here – we can never enter the kingdom of God. (Mt. 18:3) So long as we are “rich in spirit” (that is, full of our own flesh’s ability to achieve and do), we are in the wrong kingdom – and we will likely have a long list of “church” credentials to prove it! Until we recognize that we *are* the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind who have been graciously granted place where “better men” (in their own eyes, at least) disdained the invitation of the king (Lk. 14:21), we will not discover the kingdom of God even though we may look for it, even though we may speak of it with our associates, neighbors and “Christian” brothers or even though we may teach “kingdom truths” to all those who belong to our particular version of what we call “the kingdom of God.”

Which Kingdom

How will we know whether a teacher (“apostle,” “prophet,” etc.) is speaking of God’s kingdom or his own? Jesus said, “If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the teaching, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.” (Jn. 7:17) And “My sheep hear My voice, I know them, and they follow Me.” (Jn. 10:27) The one who has truly encountered and knows the Savior and desires above all else to do His will is not much of a candidate for being deceived by the traveling hucksters, frauds and charlatans who come in the name of Christ claiming to have that “special anointing” which gives them the right to lord over others and to tell them how to live and be. (Mt. 24:5)

Jesus said, “Seek [first and foremost] the kingdom of God, and all these things [Your Father knows you need] shall be added to you. Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Lk. 12:30-32) Jesus also said to His disciples who had

continued with Him in His trials, “I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me...” (Lk. 22:28-29) The kingdom of God does not belong to the intelligentsia, the eloquent talking heads who, with great show of “humility” promote themselves and their books and their broadcasts. The kingdom of God belongs to every man who has heeded the warnings and obeyed the wisdom of God so that he may be presented perfect in Christ Jesus. (Col. 1:28) The kingdom does not belong to the lawless and wicked, especially those who use some purported “office” or “ministry” as a cloak to disguise and parade their flesh as the “right way” to follow God.

Paul wrote, “For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them.” (Eph. 5:5-7) It is no coincidence that Paul has to tell the carnal Corinthians, “We speak wisdom among those who are mature [meaning, not *you!*]... We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory...” (1 Cor. 2:6-7) But he could not speak to them as to spiritually mature people but as to immature babies and even carnal pseudo-“Christians.” (1 Cor. 3:1) Paul could tell the Corinthians about his stewardship (management, caretaking) of the mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1-2) and he could instruct them that genuine love far outweighed understanding mysteries (1 Cor. 13:2), but in all of his two rather lengthy letters he shares with them only *one* mystery, the mystery that not all those in Christ shall die but some shall be instantaneously changed. (1 Cor. 15:51-52) That’s it.

But to the Ephesians, to whom he writes but one much shorter letter (less than half the length of one of his letters to the Corinthians), he is able to discuss the mystery of God’s will (Eph. 1:9), the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4), the mystery of Christ and the ekklesia (Eph. 5:32) and the mystery of the gospel. (Eph. 6:19) And Paul speaks of these things as being already at least familiar to them! It is no wonder then that Paul is able to instruct the Ephesians to imitate (more modern renditions of this word made available by advances in technology would be “duplicate, photo-copy, replicate”) the invisible God (Eph. 5:1) but Paul was forced to tell the carnal, immature Corinthians to imitate (duplicate, copy, replicate) Paul, whom they could see, as Paul imitated (duplicated, copied, replicated) Christ. (1 Cor. 11:1) This too is no small difference!

The four living creatures and the wheels that accompanied them were covered with eyes. (Ezek. 10:12) Might these eyes be the eyes that belong to the people, the many members of the body of Christ, and be that great cloud of witnesses that surround us all? (Heb. 12:1) Yet it matters not how well we perceive the whole of the kingdom. What truly matters is that we recognize our responsibility to obey the King (Heb. 5:9) and thus fulfill our place, however great or small that may be, in His kingdom. It is not our place to decide whom we think should belong in the kingdom and then “fellowship” or “serve” only them. If Christ has received someone into His kingdom, that one is my brother or sister in Christ. Period. As such it is my duty to share with them the love, truth and life of Christ that is in me, no matter what that might entail or cost. That this simple kingdom truth is all but lost only demonstrates that lawlessness prevails and the love, the chiefest of divine attributes (1 Cor. 13:13), of the many has all but died. (Mt. 24:12)

The kingdom of God can be discussed and explored for the remainder of our days in this world. And through many tribulations we will even experience the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:22) But we must always take care that we do not stand before the door to the kingdom, neither going in ourselves nor allowing others to enter (Mt. 23:13), taking care that our teachings

and practices do not actually take away the key to truly knowing Christ and inheriting His kingdom. (Lk. 11:52) And let us be ever ready to proclaim the simple message of the gospel of the kingdom of God:

“Repent, for the kingdom of God is here, now.” (Mt. 4:17, Mk. 1:15, etc.)

Let he who has ears hear.

30. Pressing Into the Kingdom

In what may be the least apprehended instruction about the kingdom of God, Jesus said, “The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.” (Lk. 16:16) That we might remedy the lack of apprehension of this instruction, let us consider again exactly what the kingdom of God is:

- That realm of human existence where Christ literally and actually rules and reigns as King. This realm is not a physical place but rather a spiritual condition unlike anything this world, with its systems, kingdoms philosophies and science, can imagine, let alone concoct or manufacture. (1 Cor. 2:14, etc.)
- “The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 14:17)
- “The kingdom of God is not in word but in power.” (1 Cor. 4:20)
- Christ’s kingdom is not of this deceptive and deceived world but a realm of truth. (Jn. 18:36-37)

Jesus’ instruction clearly tells us that John the Baptist stands as the dividing line between “the law and the prophets” and “the kingdom of God.” In one layer of this instruction we can see how Christ came to rescue Judaism from the hyper-traditionalism of the Pharisees and the scribes (“lawyers”), the men learned in the Scriptures. “Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered.” (Lk. 11:52) In this same vein Jesus said that tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of God before they would. (Mt. 21:31-32) The Pharisees and scribes, the leaders of Israel, envious that Jesus was gaining so many followers, plotted against and executed Him. (Jn. 6:14-15, 7:31, 8:30, 11:48, 12:42, Mt. 21:46, 27:18) But *many*, with the personal presence of the Messiah-King, *many* were pressing into the kingdom of God, even though in a few short months, when the Jews succeeded in their plot to kill Jesus, all the sheep of the flock would be scattered (Mt. 26:31) until they were gathered into what Luke would call the ekklesia after the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost. (Acts 2:47)

But Jesus more specifically said that John the Baptist was the line between “the kingdom of God” and “the law and the prophets” and not the aberrations of the scribes and Pharisees. God had said, “Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be

to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Ex. 19:5-6) We know that Israel’s history is a contorted mixture of obedience and disobedience (much like “church” history) but we should notice that some of what was said in the law and prophets was also reiterated in God’s new covenant with spiritual Israel that is composed of all believing Jews and Gentiles (1 Pet. 2:5, 9, Rom. 9:6-8), a covenant in which God says, “I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them.” (Heb. 10:16) Jesus still says, “My sheep hear My voice...” (Jn. 10:27) and “If anyone loves Me, he will obey My word... He who does not love Me does not obey My words...” (Jn. 14:23-24) Though there are significant changes between “the law and the prophets” and “the kingdom of God,” obedience to God is still the primary requirement.

Of the significant changes we could list, there would be the change of mediator, the High Priest in the order of Melchizedek (not Levi – Heb. 7:11) who was Himself the sacrificial Lamb, the propitiation for our sin. (1 Jn. 2:2) But perhaps the most significant change, at least from the standpoint of each individual human being, was that one did not need to be born a Jew, nor even become a Jewish proselyte nor even follow the outward ceremonial aspects of the law. (Eph. 2:11-16) One need only repent and believe and obey. (Mk. 1:15, Heb. 5:9, etc.) Whereas under the law and the prophets one needed only to outwardly keep the commandments and agree with the law’s requirements, in the kingdom one is required to examine and surrender his heart attitudes (Mt. 5:20 and following) and press into the realities of a righteous life in His kingdom.

This change is designed to produce men and women who can be truly described as a special treasure, a kingdom of priests and a holy people who as God’s sons and daughters would bear His likeness and shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. (Tit. 2:14, 2 Cor. 6:18, Mt. 13:43) But the “church” has done the same thing with God’s new covenant that the Pharisees did with the old and has created aberrations of the true way of following Christ and God. Whole “theologies” have been concocted to remove the individual’s responsibility to actually obey God so that any effort or exertion of the will is labeled “self effort to be saved” and a “gospel of works.” And should anyone experience twinges of conscience that their lives are not what they should be, the professional “theologians” or their carnal followers (see 1 Cor. 3:4) are quick to reassure them that because of some previous “decision” or spiritual experience that, of course, they are still saved. No matter how disobedient or self-centered one’s life actually is, these deceivers maintain, “once saved, always saved”!

Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” (Mt. 7:21) Doing the will of God, at times, requires great effort and great exertion of will, not powered by the strength of the flesh but by the Spirit and power (grace) of God. (Phlp. 4:13) It is significant, therefore, that Jesus described the kingdom of God as something that those who were entering were “pressing into.” (Lk. 16:16)

Paul wrote, “Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phlp. 3:12-14) This is the same Paul who, after being stoned and left for dead, exhorted the believers in that area to continue in the faith, saying, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:19, 22)

Peter wrote, “But also for this very reason [because God has given us exceedingly great promises through which we may be partakers of the divine nature], giving all diligence, [you] add to your faith goodness, to goodness knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is short-sighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 1:4-11)

And to the Laodicean believers who were so certain that they were spiritually rich, wealthy and in need of nothing but in reality were wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked, Jesus said, “I counsel you to *buy from Me* gold refined in the fire that you may be rich; and [*buy from Me*] white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed, and [you] anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.” (Rev. 3:17-18)

From these passages we can see that the kingdom of God – that realm where Christ is actively and literally obeyed – will not come into our midst without our direct cooperation with the Spirit of God. We can pray all we want, we can “believe” and have all the “faith” we can muster and we can “wait on God” to demonstrate our “perseverance and endurance” until we are confused, frustrated or even angry at God because He didn’t perform as we expected or demanded. But if we refuse or neglect to obey God’s commands – whether written or spiritually spoken, whether given generally for all or given specifically to a particular individual – we are losing our clear-sightedness, becoming short-sighted and even blind and are in the process of forgetting that we were purged from our sins. (2 Pet. 1:9) This departure from obedience to the King – whether accomplished by willful disobedience and rebellion or by negligence and carelessness – the result is the same and this condition is prevalent in many “churches.”

If we would be secure in His kingdom we must continue to grow. Peter wrote, “You therefore, beloved, since you know beforehand [that those who are not taught by the Spirit of Christ and who are double-minded and unstable twist and distort the Scriptures to their own destruction and that of those who follow after them], beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but [instead of being destroyed with them] grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 3:16-18)

As we approach the question of what the will of God is that we must do to press into His kingdom, we must instantly recognize that we are not to compile a list of “Christian” laws. Rather, we need to hear the King and obey His commands. (Heb. 12:25, etc.) This is the personal interaction for which He created and called each individual – only those who respond in obedience to His leading will be chosen to remain with Christ and God for eternity. (Mt. 22:14) There simply is no list of “do-s and don’t-s” by which we can know that we are doing God’s will – there is a Head who is to be listened to, followed and obeyed.

Thus there may be nothing more dangerous to the well-being of our spirit and soul than to adhere to some standard (of life, religion, “theology,” possessions, etc.) that is in reality in

conflict with the will of God. Though the false gospel of health, wealth and prosperity is popular at many “churches,” there simply is no basis on which to say that the poor are being judged by God (see Jas. 2:5) or that the wealthy are being blessed by God. (see Jas. 5:1-3, 1 Tim. 6:9, Mt. 13:22) The believer who is sick is not necessarily in sin though, like both Jacob and Job, may simply need to learn a deeper lesson in true righteousness. The standards of middle-class churchianity simply must not be confused with the will of God and the ways of His kingdom. We cannot look at some outward appearances of piety or religion, using standards that come ultimately from the world or Satan, to make a righteous judgment. (Jn. 7:24) Any “righteousness” or “holiness” that is judged by mere outward appearances (relying on some worldly or carnal standard) is sure to be a mere form of godliness that prevents the power of God from flowing through the life and conforming the individual to the likeness of Christ. From those who match this description we are to withdraw and turn away from. (2 Tim. 3:5)

To press into the kingdom of God, then, is to move toward ever-greater conformity to the will of God and the likeness of Christ. Any activity, no matter how spiritual, religious or seemingly righteous that activity may be, that does not conform to God’s will or cause us to more resemble Christ is a carnal activity that is really at enmity against God. (Rom. 8:7) Endless sermonizing and routine “church” attendance come into this category. Even “Bible study” that does not bring one into submission to the Spirit of truth and produce genuine spiritual fruit is simply the gaining of knowledge that puffs the learner up (1 Cor. 8:1) and the vanity that keeps the student from ever coming to any real knowledge of the truth. (2 Tim. 3:7) Any “good” thing (at least in our own opinion) that is not practiced in obedience to God is sin (Rom. 14:23) and, if left uncorrected, will lead its practitioner off the road that leads to life and back onto the road that leads to destruction. (Mt. 7:13-14)

The one who wants to be certain that he is being saved should work out his salvation “with fear and trembling” (Phlp. 2:12) – not in fear that God is not willing or able to save but that *I* will not have been willing to obediently put some part of my flesh to death and thereby I resume my rightful place among the recipients of God’s wrath (Col. 3:5-6), fearing that I may place more value on my own desires and lusts than I value the will of God or than I value His glory. The life of a true believer and follower of Christ is that of overcoming sin, self and Satan by the power (grace) of Christ and God. One who is not involved in that struggle should not deceive himself into thinking he is being saved.

But neither should one who is involved in that struggle fall into dismay or despair by believing the accusations of the devil. The presence of even seemingly small amounts of genuine spiritual fruit, of willful choices to obey God, of conformity to the attitudes and desires of Christ should not be discounted – just as a temporary failure to overcome some particular work of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21) should not be given unrealistic weight. The way to eternal life involves a gate and a path – being on that path, however imperfectly or feebly, is all the proof we need to know that we are being saved. To question whether He who began the good work will be faithful to complete His work (Phlp. 1:6) is simply an act of unbelief or to fall prey to the enemy’s deceptions as he uses any means available to keep us from pressing into the kingdom of God.

But perhaps the deepest depravity of fallen man is that we will turn to any person or any thing to keep from being required to personally interact with God. We, like the Israelites, will send “Moses up the mountain” to meet with God and we will sincerely promise to faithfully obey whatever this man says that God has said. (Ex. 20:19) We will pursue any “it,” even the things of God that we find desirable, but we do not pursue holy God in His entirety and for Himself

alone. All our desires and pursuits of God are at least tainted with selfish or ulterior motives. We will embrace a doctrine at the expense of the rightly-divided, whole truth and counsel of God. (2 Tim. 2:15, Jn. 16:13, Acts 20:27) We will claim all the promises of the Bible (often without noticing that our wicked lives completely disqualify us from receiving what God has legitimately promised – and that those promises legitimately found in the Scriptures are quite often very different from what we claim!) We will pray a particular prayer (even repetitively – see Mt. 6:7) or settle into a routine of a particular kind of prayer or engage in any practice that makes us feel “holy,” “spiritual” or “religious” and mistake our warm fuzzy feelings for enjoying God’s approval and presence.

We need to ask ourselves in *what* have we believed. If our answer is not in *Whom* have we believed, then just *what* are we following? A man? A lie? A demonic spirit? Our own self-exalting flesh? If we are not worshipping – that is, living our lives in submission and obedience to – Christ and God in spirit and truth (Jn. 4:24), then we simply are not worshipping Him but rather exalting our self and serving the kingdom of death and darkness rather than Christ’s kingdom of life and light.

Let he who has ears hear.

31. The Kingdom Is the Key

An accurate understanding of the kingdom of God is the key to understanding the collection of writings we commonly call the New Testament. That accurate understanding begins with recognizing that “a kingdom,” as can be found in any common dictionary, is a realm in which the king issues forth laws and commands and the subjects of that realm obey the edicts of the king. Anything else, even a democratic monarchy, is no longer purely the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is nothing if not pure – and it is *purely* a kingdom. Any expression of following Christ and God that does not literally and actually seek and practice obedience to the King – both in His words (the Bible) and by His Spirit (the Spirit of truth, the Word of God) – is a counterfeit “Christianity.”

Churchianity, the great falling away from the faith that comes before the return of Christ (2 Ths. 2:3), is almost entirely separated from the literal and true Headship of Christ and instead follows after its heaped up teachers (2 Tim. 4:3-4) and its “pastors” who claim to have the special sacred anointing that gives them the right to stand and lord over their own “congregation” and “flock.” (Mt. 24:5) This is, in a word, the “church” paradigm. Churchianity most often puts the local “assembly” or “congregation” (formulated most often according to centuries-old errors and deceptions) first and thereby (because of both the misguided methods and misplaced priorities) the kingdom of God (that realm where Christ is truly the King) is not brought forth in our midst. In those few, smaller and more-isolated places where Christ is actively sought and obeyed, the “church” errors and deceptions hold little power over the genuine subjects of Christ’s kingdom.

Having said all this, we must also recognize that a merely intellectual understanding that the kingdom of God is the key to the Scriptures is not enough. Without our ongoing obedience to the teachings and Spirit of Christ, any knowledge we attain will only add to our judgment as we will surely be required to answer for any differences between what we knew and what we did. And the first command that must be obeyed is this: “You must be born again.” Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God...

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water [physically] and the Spirit [spiritually], he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh [physical] is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” (Jn. 3:3, 5-7) Unless we have entered into Christ’s kingdom through this new spiritual birth, any knowledge we gain about Christ’s kingdom will remain fleshly or carnal, a realm of enmity against God. (Rom. 8:7)

In his second letter, Peter is warning the true believer about the dangers which false teachers and their doctrine present. He begins with the greeting, “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord...” (2 Pet. 1:2), then goes on to describe what can be called “the steps to spiritual maturity” (2 Pet. 1:3-7), and then concludes this list by saying, “For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 1:8) At the end of this letter, after all his warnings and exhortations regarding the false teachers and their doctrines, Peter writes, “You therefore, beloved, since you know beforehand [that those who are untaught by the Spirit of Christ and who are double-minded and unstable in their spiritual life twist and distort the Scriptures to their own destruction and that of those who follow after them], beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but [instead of being destroyed with them] grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 3:16-18) Growing – remaining in the process of pressing on toward spiritual maturity – is the only way to be assured of remaining in a position of steadfastness. The “church’s” “pastors” and teachers, many of whom are the very false teachers Peter was warning his readers of, have concocted “theologies” of “once saved, always saved” and “eternal security” which dismiss and deride Peter’s admonition that we need to continue to grow so as to be assured of security in Christ and His kingdom. In many of these “theologies,” “salvation” is a position and not a process. In the New Testament, being saved is a process and the believer who is actively and diligently working out his salvation with fear and trembling (Phlp. 2:12) is the one who can best rest assured that he is being saved.

The “church” is built on the false premise that the tares are and must always be a part of the assembly (see the parable of the wheat and the tares – Mt. 13:24 and following) – and the devil loves that many people who name the name of Christ over their lives believe this lie to be true. The tares are the sons of the devil planted in a field which Christ said was *the world*. (Mt. 13:38) Only by concocting the religious façade of the “church” was the devil able to lure the true sons of the kingdom away from the pure way of ekklesia (the Greek word mis-rendered “church” in most English New Testaments) in the kingdom of God and seduce them into cross-pollinating themselves with the tares. Christ’s true ekklesia is ***and can only be*** populated with believers who have obeyed Christ’s command to be reborn from above. The “church” is, at best, a “mixed multitude” and it is from this impurity that we are called to “Come out from among them...” (2 Cor. 6:17)

The “church,” being one of the devil’s most effective deceptions, most often teaches its members to dismiss outright that the devil is in any way dangerous to anyone. Oh, perhaps he is dangerous to those sinners hanging out at the bars or to those homeless beggars out on the streets doing their drugs and their flagrant sins and maybe dangerous to those folks at the “church” down the street but the devil is “a defeated foe” for anyone who faithfully attends *this* “church” especially if it’s a house-“church”! That this deception is not recognized for what it is stands as the best evidence of just how effective and powerful the devil’s deceptions are. For those who don’t love the truth and who prefer the religious façade of “church” in contrast to living out the

truth and righteousness of Christ's kingdom of light, God Himself will personally send them "strong delusion" to confirm them in their belief of the lie that their abominable spiritual practices are indeed approved by God. (2 Ths. 2:10-12)

Paul clearly told us that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood (human beings) but against *spiritual* beings when we seek to take up arms for the kingdom of Christ and God: "We wrestle...against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Eph. 6:12) This list of the devil's armies arrayed in opposition to the kingdom of Christ and God are to be *wrestled against*, not ridiculed or ignored or dismissed as buffoons and "toothless old tigers." Indeed the devil has been defeated by Christ at the cross (Col. 2:15) and the gates of Hades (the prison gates of death and darkness) shall not prevail against Christ's true ekklesia, those genuinely born-again believers who assemble to corporately obey the King in matters regarding their own temporal circles and spheres of influence. (Mt. 16:18) But the individual who scoffs at and neglects to obey Peter's injunction to "Be sober, be vigilant [watchful]; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pet. 5:8) is well on his way toward being the devil's next "guest" for lunch and may soon become just another of the devil's tools "having been taken captive by him to do his will." (2 Tim. 2:26) Such a one is an excellent candidate for "church" leadership! Indeed the devil and his armies of wicked spirits are much more effective in their "propaganda" war against "church"-ites than they will ever be in any face-to-face conflict they might experience with genuine sons of the kingdom.

When the sons of the kingdom resolve to follow Christ wherever He leads them (Rev. 14:4) and to shake off the contaminants of the devil, the "church" and this world (2 Cor. 7:1), then they "will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." (Mt. 13:43) But so long as true believers voluntarily place themselves at the feet of men and wrangle with one another about which teacher or which doctrine is paramount, the kingdom of God will remain completely out of reach for these deceived and deluded souls. Until Christ is truly the King of our lives – individually and corporately – we will be subjects and servants of some kingdom other than Christ's.

Indeed it has been rightly observed that Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God but it was the "church" that came into being.

Let he who has ears hear – and take care that *no one* deceives him. (Mt. 24:4) Amen.

32. Still Close at Hand

In Elwyn Smith's excellent novelization of the Gospels, Jesus says, "If men are to enter the kingdom of God, they must repent. It cuts them to the heart to confess that they have forgotten God and His righteousness. They hate [Me] for teaching them the truth about themselves." (*Men Called Him Master*, p. 44) Though this particular wording is not found in the Gospels, it readily conveys the truth given by John: "Light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." (Jn. 3:19)

After John the Baptist was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the good news." (Mk. 1:14-15) When Jesus sent out the seventy, whether a town welcomed them or not, the message was to be given: "The kingdom of God has come near to you." (Lk. 10:8-11) The apostles equally proclaimed the things of the kingdom of God. (Acts

8:12, 19:8, etc.) But after two thousand years of church history, traditions and hierarchies of men and all manner of folly and wisdom, spirituality and carnality practiced in the name of Christ and God, it is difficult to recognize that the original proclamation is still true – the kingdom of God is still close at hand. And not only is it still a truth, it is the foremost remedy for the vast majority of the ills of modern churchianity and, as such, pressing into this truth will be fiercely resisted by the enemy of our souls.

Jesus almost never spoke of the ekklesia (again see Mt. 16:18 and 18:17 for the only recorded times that He did) but rather He proclaimed the kingdom of God. However it was the ekklesia and subsequently the “church” which came into being and prominence. The kingdom of God is that realm where Christ is actually obeyed and the will of God is performed. (Mt. 6:10) The ekklesia is Christ’s *people* who have been called out of this world’s darkness to attend to the affairs and issues of Christ’s kingdom in their own locale and sphere of influence. The “church” is that outwardly organized hierarchy built on “delegated authority” (Nicolaitanism – Rev. 2:6, 15) and traditions of men that counterfeits, distorts and supplants the role and functions of the bride and body of Christ. The history behind the devolvement of the ekklesia, which originally held a genuine place and truly served the kingdom of God, and the subsequent emergence of the counterfeit and deteriorating “church,” is the basis upon which a clearer understanding of church history is to be obtained.

Man does not like to be told that he is evil and destined to be judged by an absolutely holy and righteous God. Religious man – those steeped in and confident of, whether overtly or covertly or even in sheer ignorance, their own goodness and righteousness – is especially offended at the notion that his very nature is evil and that holy God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30), to change their minds about themselves and their need for a Savior and to turn their life from the pursuit of self’s agendas and toward the will of God. Jesus’ retort, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Mt. 9:13), is a jab at all who think they have some innate goodness within. Those who think themselves “good” or even “good enough” or “as good as anyone else” are offended that Jesus requires them to recognize themselves as sinners who deserve to spend eternity in hell. Those who have realized their own wretchedness are overjoyed to find Jesus as their Savior but those who refuse to come into the light to see how evil they really are reject Christ as their Savior and Messiah.

Though this truth is most readily seen in the context of receiving Christ as Savior, it is equally relevant in submitting to Christ as King and Lord over every aspect of one’s life. The one who does not recognize his own self-centeredness or who continues in lawlessness (doing what is right in his own eyes – Jdgs. 21:25), sees no need for any other to be the king and ruler of his life. Those who are quite satisfied with the course and output of their life – those content in their wealth or careers or lifestyles – see no reason to submit and surrender to a king. Religious men – content with their weekly visits to the “Christian” temple and with their weekly deposits to conciliate the “God” who demands a tithe and offerings to overlook their sin – will actually deride and dismiss and oppress and even persecute those who dare to suggest that eternal salvation is in any way connected to one’s obedience to Christ and God. Such a thing would be “self-effort” or a “return to law” as a means of being saved! (see however Heb. 5:9)

Jesus clearly warned His followers that repentance was key: “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” (Lk. 13:5) To repent is more than a change of mind. John preached, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Mt. 3:8) and Paul preached to the Gentiles “that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.” (Acts 26:20) After listing the fruit that appears as a result of living one’s life in obedience to the Spirit of God – “love, joy, peace, longsuffering,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” – Paul concludes, “Against such things there is no law.” (Gal. 5:22-23) Repentance is to lead to faith and faith is to lead to obedience that leads to holiness and love in Christ Jesus. Any other religious or “spiritual” course is mere deception.

The writer of Hebrews wrote, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is still called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.” (Heb. 3:12-14) The “church,” that expression of the apostasy, the great falling away from the faith (Mt. 24:10, 2 Ths. 2:3), has promoted teachings (“doctrines”) that comfort their passive listeners in their fallen, sinful, disobedient, lawless and even rebellious lifestyles, promising eternal life and rewards to those who will simply “believe.” These have become “hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13) because, instead of truly repenting of the evil that is in their heart, they have instead obeyed that evil, departed from the living God and returned to whatever religious system, program or “theology” that appeals to their rotting religious flesh.

We may not like to hear that there is no good thing within our flesh (Rom. 7:18) and it may take many years before we can echo Paul, “O wretched man that I am!” (Rom. 7:24) but the sooner we can honestly recognize this as truth, the closer we are to being able to surrender to Christ as Savior and King.

The call to repent because the kingdom of God is close at hand is still sounding because man is still wicked and sinful. Holy God is still extending His offer of mercy and reconciliation through the crucified and resurrected King Christ Jesus. Though centuries of “church” traditions have obscured the simplicity of this good news, the gospel of the kingdom is again being preached as a witness to all peoples because the end of this age is upon us. (see Mt. 24:14) The time to recognize the truth about ourselves and embrace the truth and Lordship of Christ Jesus over our lives is now, while it is still called “Today.” The day when all facades and deceptions will prove inadequate and only those who have done the will of God will be welcomed into God’s eternal kingdom (Mt. 7:21) is imminent.

Repent. Be changed. Produce actions and attitudes that prove that God is at work in you. Serve the King and the family (people) of Christ and God. Cease from deceptive religious “Christian” practices that keep these things from becoming realities in your life, even “Bible study,” if necessary. Being able to answer Bible trivia questions will not serve you well on judgment day if the needs of the orphans, widows and the least of Christ’s brothers whom God placed in your life went unmet! (Jas. 1:27, Mt. 25:40, 45) Follow the Lamb where He leads you. (Rev. 14:4) Anything else is mere deception, mere “church,” designed to keep you from entering, experiencing and inheriting the kingdom of God. (see Eph. 5:5-6, 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Gal. 5:21)

Let he who has ears hear.

33. Ephesians: Paul’s Time Capsule

Bible scholars are often certain that they have a total grasp on “the truth” – however, the simple fact that they are often at odds with one another betrays the reality that too often these scholars have used only their unrenewed intellect (mind – Rom. 12:2) to arrive at “doctrines,” “creeds” and “theologies” they then falsely claim encapsulates “the truth.” Paul’s letter to

Ephesus presents such a case. Some scholars, because many ancient and important manuscripts omit “at Ephesus” (Eph. 1:1) and because the letter addresses no controversy and confronts no specific local issue, insist that the letter is a general letter to be circulated to all believers and was not meant for Ephesus (or even Asia Minor) alone. Some have even used the differences in content and style to question and challenge Paul’s authorship of the letter! One scholar saw it as “an attempt [by a later disciple] to sum up and to recommend to a later generation the apostle’s teaching.” (M. Barth, *Anchor Bible*, p. 57, as quoted in *New Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale, 1962, p. 336) This quote provides an insight into the usual work of Bible scholars – they are often *half* right! If we look more carefully at the whole of the New Testament, we find that the letter to the Ephesians is **Paul’s** attempt to sum up and recommend to a later generation his teaching. When we discover the real truth behind this letter, which is considered by almost all to be “the highest mountain peak” of the New Testament, we may well be surprised at the depth of Paul’s concern for those who lived in the later generation(s) he was writing for.

Consider the overall structure and theme of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. The book divides neatly into two parts: the first three chapters (the chapter and verse divisions were not part of the original letter but are a much later addition) deal with the believer’s *position* in Christ and the last three chapters deal with the believer’s *responsibilities* or *practice* in Christ. The first three chapters reverberate with the phrase “in Christ” (or some equivalent): we are “blessed...with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places *in Christ*,” chosen “*in Him* before the foundation of the world,” adopted “as sons *by Jesus Christ*,” “accepted *in the Beloved*,” redeemed “*in Him*...through His blood” (Eph. 1:3-7), given an inheritance *in Him*, sealed *in Him* “with the Holy Spirit of promise,” (Eph. 1:11-13), made “alive together *with Christ*,” raised up together and made to “sit together in the heavenly places *in Christ Jesus*,” (Eph. 2:5-6), created *in Christ Jesus*, (Eph. 2:10), brought near to God *in Christ* by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:13), fitted and built together *in Christ* as a holy temple and dwelling place for God (Eph. 2:21-22), made fellow heirs and partakers of God’s promise *in Christ* (Eph. 3:6) and given boldness and access to God with confidence *in Christ*. (Eph. 3:12) Paul uses this phrase and idea more in these first three chapters than it is used in any other New Testament book. Why? What is driving Paul to hammer away at this theme?

It helps to know the circumstances under which Paul wrote this letter. The most reliable scholars have concluded that Paul wrote this letter while under house arrest in Rome for two years, a segment of Paul’s life that is recorded by Luke in the book of Acts. (Acts 28:30-31) As such, Paul is under no illusion that he is guaranteed to survive this trial and takes this opportunity to say what still burns in his heart and spirit to the beloved Ephesians. The letter to the Ephesians, then, is an expanded form of his farewell address to the *Ephesian* elders delivered at Miletus some three years earlier – an insight confirmed by comparing the overall message of Paul’s letter with his farewell address. (see especially Acts 20:32)

Paul as Prophet

Let us keep in mind that this man is also Saul, the master over the execution of Stephen (Acts 7:58) whose miraculous conversion (Acts 9:3) and subsequent transformation enabled him to immediately confound “the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ (Messiah).” (Acts 9:22) About seven years after his conversion, Saul had a miraculous vision that he probably shared with the Jerusalem “pillars” who were of “reputation” (see Gal. 2:2, 9) but never boasted of it until pressured to do so (some fourteen years later) by the reluctance of some Corinthians to believe that he was as much, perhaps even more, of an apostle

of Christ Jesus (to the Corinthians, at the least) than were “the most eminent apostles.” (2 Cor. 11:5) Paul was “caught up to the third heaven” – whether in or apart from the body he could not say (a question the carnal, immature Corinthians would consider important – see 1 Cor. 15:35-36) and “heard inexpressible words, which is not lawful for a man to utter” and considered what he heard to be an “abundance of revelations.” (2 Cor. 12:4, 7) We do not have a concise, complete description of these revelations but let us consider a few of Paul’s prophetic insights:

- “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” (1 Tim. 4:1-3)

- “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!” (2 Tim. 3:1-5)

- “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.” (2 Tim. 4:3-4)

- “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed - in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” (1 Cor. 15:51-52)

- “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” (1 Ths. 4:15-17)

- “Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling way comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.” (2 Ths. 2:3-4)

- Peter, after relating that all things would one day be dissolved and replaced with new heavens and a new earth, exhorts his readers: “Therefore,

since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation – as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 3:11-13)

With this often under-emphasized aspect of Paul’s prophetic abilities in view, it is understandable that carnal “theologians” might question the authenticity of Paul’s authorship of the letter to the Ephesians. Paul’s usual inclusion of what Bible scholars like to call eschatology (the study of prophesied end-times events) is absent from Ephesians. Or is it? Let us consider one more prophetic word given by Paul and recognize that it is extremely pertinent to this question precisely because it was spoken to the *Ephesian* elders at Miletus.

“For I know this, that after my departure [after I leave you and after my death] savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse [corrupted, misleading] things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” (Acts 20:29-32)

Prophecy Fulfilled

Even before Paul’s death, this prophecy was beginning to come to pass. Some five years after Paul says this to the Ephesian elders, he writes to Timothy (in *Ephesus!*), “...some have rejected faith and a good conscience and...suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan, so that they may learn not to blaspheme.” (1 Tim. 1:19-20) In another five years, Paul would write to Timothy (who is still or again in Ephesus), “But shun profane and vain [empty] babblings [chatter], for they will increase [lead] to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some. ...Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm... You also must beware of him, for he has greatly resisted our words.” (2 Tim. 2:16-18, 4:14-15) Three “savage wolves” named Hymenaeus, Alexander and Philetus had already come into Ephesus and were causing damage to the flock there.

Let us note carefully how the New Testament adheres to God's standards for prophets. The Lord said to Moses, "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him." (Dt. 18:22) Because the first part of Paul's prophesy (the "savage wolves" who "come in" from somewhere else – Acts 20:29) is recorded as fulfilled in the New Testament, we can be assured that the second part (the men who would rise up "from among yourselves" – Acts 20:30) was also fulfilled, even though its fulfillment is not recorded in the New Testament. The New Testament does not even record the death of Paul, let alone events that occurred after his death – as his own prophecy foretold it would be. (Acts 20:29) But this prophecy was stunningly fulfilled with precision.

From among the elders (Greek, *presbuteros* [4245]), men who took the term "bishop" or "overseer" (Greek, *episkopon* [1985]) and turned it into a position of clerical lordship, spoke of their right to stand in the place of Christ and God in relation to the local assembly (Ignatius of Antioch – died c. 110 A.D.), and drew followers after themselves. Early church history is thus dotted with groups that called themselves Marcionites, Montanists, Novatians, Catholics, Spirituals, etc. after the man or idea (whether error or truth) they followed. (See 1 Cor. 1:12 for the earliest recorded instance of this tendency.) One reason the bishops arose was to combat the influence of the "savage wolves"! But the "cure" was worse than the disease as men stepped in to do a work the Lord Himself could and would do better if the men were not standing in the way!

Jesus said to the ekklesia of *Ephesus* through the apostle John, "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars, and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." (Rev. 2:2-6)

The connections between this letter and Paul's prophecy are substantial. Paul's warnings – three years of diligent, tearful exhortation (Acts 20:31) – had prepared the Ephesians to labor patiently (Tit. 3:8, etc.), to expel wicked people from their midst (1 Cor. 5:12-13) and to test and expose false apostles. (2 Cor. 11:13, 20, etc.) But even though the Ephesians hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, they failed to see that when the bishop arose from the ranks of the elders and took on roles and functions of headship reserved for Christ alone, in spite of the intent to combat schismatic error and preserve visible unity of the Christians, he was still a Nicolaitan drawing disciples away from their first love – Christ Himself – and after himself and/or his own peculiar doctrine or practice. It was "while men slept," Jesus said, that the enemy, the devil sowed his sons, the tares, among the wheat, the sons of the kingdom. (Mt. 13:25, 38-39) And it is the personal Lordship of Christ that both Peter and Jude prophesied that the end-time apostates would deny. (2 Pet. 2:1, Jude 4 – note the use of *despotes* [1203] rather than the usual *kurios* [2962] for "Lord" in these prophecies.) This *is* the main root of the apostasy, the falling away from the faith that occurs before Christ's return!

Apostasy

Paul's usual inclusion of eschatology is not absent from his letter to the Ephesians – it is the driving force and motivation that girds up this towering, highest mountain peak of the New

Testament. But Paul is not using his usual, straight-forward prophetic method because he is not addressing a current, local error – he is addressing, even undermining, a future, world-wide error, the great apostasy, the falling away from the faith that occurs before the great and dreadful day of Christ and God (2 Ths. 2:3), an error that he knows he only foresees in part. (1 Cor. 13:9) Walking what may have been thin lines between speaking from genuine revelation and avoiding ignorance or presumption and not going too far and speaking things not lawful for him to divulge, Paul is inspired to present his highest and most glorious presentation of the truth because it is these parallel truths – the believer’s genuine *position* in Christ and the believer’s *responsibility* to obediently “walk worthy of the calling with which we are called.” (Eph. 4:1) – that are the remedy, the prescription, the cure to overcome the poisonous effects of the last days’ apostasy. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is God’s “time capsule” for the people of the end times who have ears to hear what God is saying.

Thus the first half of Paul’s letter focuses on the believer’s heavenly possessions – adoption, redemption, inheritance, power, life, grace, citizenship, love – all *in Christ* – and has no imperative commands. The focus is entirely on what God has divinely given us. But the second half includes at least thirty-five imperative commands (roughly equal to the number of times Paul uses the phrase or idea of *in Christ* in this letter) that speak of our responsibility to live up to our individual calling in Christ.

Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.” (Jn. 10:27-28) Here we see the same divisions as is present in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians – Jesus promises great and powerful things to those who obey the responsibility He places on them. In this central, essential great and precious promise, He knows His sheep, He gives them eternal life so they will never perish and no one will be able to snatch them out of His hand. But this is only the “heads” side of the coin – the “tails” side is that His sheep hear His voice and follow Him. The “church,” the apostasy, reduces this promise to a doctrine that if one believes *it* (the piece of information) to be true, then one has eternal life – even though the notion that anyone can hear the Shepherd for themselves is ridiculed and the idea that Christ personally leads His sheep apart from the “church” is called heresy and error of the worst kind – these who know this “truth” are “saved.” The devil knows that the “heads” side of this coin is a finished work (Jn. 19:30) and that he cannot touch or change that – so he focuses his work on the “tails” side, deceiving the sheep away from listening to and following Christ the Shepherd. The devil knows that he cannot snatch anyone from Christ’s hand so he uses exalted “bishops” (“pastors,” “apostles,” “prophets,” talking heads under all kinds of labels) to speak misleading “doctrines” (that truly come from demonic spirits – 1 Tim. 4:1) that lure the believer away from his or her first love, Christ Himself, and after the “truths” or “unity” of following the “bishop” who scratches his followers’ ears “just right.” (2 Tim. 4:3-4) A more clever and subtle deception is very difficult to imagine.

Given the depth of Paul’s thirty-five instructions in his letter to the Ephesians, it is impossible here to list out Paul’s complete strategy for overcoming the apostasy he foresaw. But we can certainly list some of the larger ones and leave the diligent, astutely “noble Berean” (Acts 17:11) to scour the letter for the ones more applicable to his or her own life.

- First and foremost, we need a more accurate knowledge of all that God has given us in Christ Jesus. Or as Paul prayed for the Ephesians: “That God would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with

might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Eph. 3:16-19) The one who has Christ living in his or her heart who carefully listens to and follows Him will not be deceived by the slick hucksters and talking heads of the apostasy. (Eph. 4:14)

- We need *all* leadership of Christ’s ekklesia to be an outflow of and from the grace (power) of God that flows from our unity and union with God in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 4:4-7) Each gracing or gifting must be willing to submit one to another or, as even many scholars have noted, the governing (leading) of the people of Christ is local and collegiate – not hierarchical and certainly not delegated nor authoritarian (Nicolaitan)! (Eph. 4:11-16)

- We must no longer live in any darkness but live as children of light. (Eph. 4:17, 5:8)

- We must recognize that Christ intends to present us – His body and bride, His ekklesia, temple and house – to Himself “not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that we should be holy and without blemish.” (Eph. 5:27) We must also recognize that while the provision and power for such a transformation is all His, the wife of the Lamb has the responsibility to clothe herself in righteous acts. (Rev. 19:7-8)

- We must bring all our relationships under His headship. (Eph. 5:21, etc.)

- We must “be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might [and] put on the whole armor of God [Christ Jesus Himself – Rom. 13:14], that we may be able to stand against the wiles (schemings) of the devil.” (Eph. 6:10-11)

These are the main strategies by which we may escape the great falling away from the faith, the apostasy, the “church,” and be the spotless bride of Christ ready for Him at His return. (Eph. 5:27, see also 2 Pet. 3:14-16, Phlp. 2:15, Col. 1:21-23)

Footnotes

As we close out this study, let us note two other unusual facets regarding Ephesus in the New Testament. First, it was at Ephesus that “God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul.” (Acts 19:11) God placed an asterisk, as it were, on Ephesus as a clue for later generations to ponder and seek Him as to why He showed His special approval on the work Paul was doing in Ephesus, a special approval continued on in the New Testament as the letter to the Ephesians stands higher, taller, grander and brighter than any other writing of the New Testament.

Second, it is in the King James (KJV) account of the uprising of Demetrius and the silversmiths at Ephesus (Acts 19:24 and following) that we find the clearest evidence of the confusion regarding the use of the word “church.” Some 90% of the KJV text is taken directly from the work of the brilliantly gifted, even graced, interpreter William Tyndale. Tyndale used

either “congregation” or “assembly” to translate *ekklesia* [1577] – but King James himself specifically instructed (in documents still available today) his translators to use “certain of the old words,” and used “church” as his primary meaning of that instruction.

In the Greek text of this account, *ekklesia* is used three times (Acts 19:32, 39, 41) In the KJV text of this account, “churches” is used only once (Acts 19:37) and this is *not* as a translation of *ekklesia* but instead as a translation of *hierosuleo* [2417] (see *hieron* [2411]) *Ekklesia*, in the KJV, is rendered here as the more appropriate “assembly” but *hierosuleo*, rightly associated with “temple,” is rendered “churches.” And this is the *only* place where any other Greek word is rendered “church” in the KJV! One could almost suspect that some of the 1611 scholars, resisting the king’s arbitrary rules yet not daring to resist too overtly, *deliberately* inserted “church” here where “temple” so obviously belongs, knowing that King James would never catch the “error”! Thus they might enjoy a private laugh on the king and might even enjoy at least a small measure of recognition at some future time. Perhaps they had their own little “time capsule” here too – perhaps not, but certainly God did! What we can certainly glean from all this is the duplicity which was involved in rendering *ekklesia* as “church” in the KJV – and it is preserved in connection with Ephesus.

Paul did not know every detail of the coming apostasy and he knew he foresaw and prophesied only in part. (1 Cor. 13:9) He obviously did not know it would be 2,000 years before his insights about the apostasy would be needed. He would certainly have hoped and trusted, but probably did not know with complete certainty, that his letter to the Ephesians would still be in use when it was needed. The symbology given to John for *The Revelation* was entirely unknown to Paul (as a writing but there are obvious spiritual parallels and insights in both Paul’s and John’s prophecies.) But Paul did know some things that have been forgotten or neglected during the period of two thousand years men like to call “church history.” Paul knew that even though *the many* would fall away from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1) and turn away from listening to the Spirit of truth (2 Tim. 4:4), there would still and always be *the few* - that is, those who would, as Matthew wrote, “endure to the end” (Mt. 24:13), or as John was shown, who would stand with the Lamb upon Mount Zion and follow Him wherever He leads them. (Rev. 14:1, 4), or as Paul himself wrote, would “continue in the faith” and be presented to Christ “holy and blameless and above reproach.” (Col. 1:22-23) He knew these few would have to receive the same Spirit as he and would have to use their spiritual ears to hear what God was saying to His people. He knew he could not help the many but maybe he could present an unpolluted, purer picture of the deeper life in Christ, a picture unclouded by the corruptions he had himself forewarned the Ephesian elders of. (Acts 20:30) Maybe, just maybe, he could leave a gift that would help the few.

Whatever else we might glean from this study, surely we should take away a deeper awareness of the characteristics of the war between God and Satan, a war for the soul of each man whom God touches with His Spirit of truth and righteousness. We should also take away a deeper appreciation and understanding of Paul’s purpose and intent in the writing of the letter to the Ephesians – to counteract the effect of the apostasy that he knew was coming at the end of the age. Let us then review his letter in this new light and use whatever the Lord shows us to help others overcome the darkness and deception that attends the “church” in its final and tragic plunge into death and darkness. Let us freely give our lives to truly being light and truth in this dark and dying world for, as Paul concluded his farewell address and as is always true in the “economy” of the kingdom of God, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35, a quote Paul attributes to Jesus but which is not found in the four gospels recognized in the canon of the New Testament – let the “scholars” make of that what they will but certainly it indicates

that Paul knew things then that we do not know now!) The New Testament remains a spiritual message but the vast majority who read it seem determined to remain intellectual, infantile and even carnal in their understanding. (1 Cor. 3:1, 14:20) Christ is not coming for an immature girl and certainly not a prostitute, but rather for a mature bride who has readied herself in proportion to the respect due her Lord, Master, King and Husband, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is our responsibility *now* to ready ourself or we may be assured that we will be refused entrance into His kingdom when we later discover what we have left undone. (Mt. 25:11-12, Lk. 13:24-27)

Let he who has ears hear.

34. Follow Me

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mk. 10:17) The question would seem to be an evangelist’s dream come true – on a par with having someone ask, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30) Indeed, one interpreter of the New Testament actually translates the rich young ruler’s question as, “What one act shall I do in order that I might inherit life eternal?” (Wuest) But after two thousand years of “theology” and professional “church” “ministry,” why, of course, it’s time to steer the hungry soul down “the Roman road,” have him say “a sinner’s prayer,” counsel him to “go to church on Sunday,” and carve another notch in our leather Bible cover as proof that we’ve done the right thing for this guy. Interestingly, Jesus (as is also true of Paul and Barnabas) did *not* do any of this modern religious foolishness.

Jesus answered the man by pointing him to the commandments – those laws which the young man had obeyed from his childhood. (Mk. 10:19-20) Jesus then, in one of those moments where He demonstrates His ability to know the depths of a man’s soul, pinpoints the one thing that is still lacking in his spiritual life: “One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.” (Mk. 10:21)

In pointing the man to the commandments, Jesus was not suggesting that the man could get to heaven by keeping them. Rather, this man, even though he had kept the law since his childhood, knew in the depths of his being that he still did not have eternal life in his possessions. Jesus was prompting the man to look at the commandments because, as Paul would later write, “The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith (justified from all the things from which we could not be justified by the law of Moses.)” (Gal. 3:24, Acts 13:39) This man who had been well tutored by the law now stood before the Christ – and his money would cause him to reject the Christ (Mk. 10:22) and to return, however miserably, to the tutor which would surely continue to work to bring the man to Christ. Some scholars see the observation that “Jesus, looking at him, loved him...” (Mk. 10:21 – an observation not made by either Matthew or Luke – Mt. 19:21, Lk. 18:22) as possibly being one of those subtle hints dropped by the author, in this case John Mark, that this was his own personal experience. If John Mark was the rich young ruler – certainly a possibility but by no means anything resembling a certainty – it would certainly provide a “happy ending” to the story which the gospel narratives did not see fit to provide. For all we know, the rich young ruler (as did so many of the ruling class of the Jews) could have progressed in his miserable condition under the law, come to hate Jesus as a false claimant to being Messiah and participated in the murder of Christ at Jerusalem. We will never know until we are in eternity what the man’s outcome was.

But we must see that even though money was the tripstone that kept him from Christ, Jesus had given him instructions as to what to do after he sold off his goods and gave it away to the poor: “Come, take up the cross, and follow Me.” (Mk. 10:21) And it is in these instructions that we find the way that leads to eternal life, that condition or process men like to call simply *salvation*.

On another occasion Jesus said to the Jews, “You do not believe [what I have said about Myself], because you are not of My sheep... My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.” (Jn. 10:26-28) This passage is one that is relied on to promote the doctrine of eternal security, another of those inventions of modern religious foolishness. Those who would receive eternal life from Christ must *hear His voice and follow Him* - precisely the same instructions given to the rich young ruler. It is not sufficient to have a *doctrine* that tells us we are “saved” – we must hear His voice and follow Him and in this way genuinely have a *Savior* who comforts and confirms us in this condition and process that men like to call simply *salvation*. When we substitute the doctrine for the Savior, we begin the process the New Testament calls “falling away from the faith” (1 Tim. 4:1) or “neglecting so great a salvation.” (Heb. 2:3), a process that can ultimately end in dire and drastic consequences. (Mt. 7:23, etc.) Interestingly, those who rely on the eternal security doctrine seem to have no problem with judging others, mostly only because they differ in doctrinal beliefs, as “wicked and unsaved” (contrary to Christ’s instructions – Mt. 7:1, etc.) all while they refuse to rely on God’s ability to judge all men, including themselves, according to their deeds. (Mt. 16:27)

Jesus, as He said to the Jews and the rich young ruler, still says that the way of the cross is not optional but is instead *mandatory*. “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” (Lk. 9:23) On another occasion He said, “He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.” (Mt. 10:38) Though two thousand years of “theology” and professional “church” “ministry” has tried to establish obedience to the way of the cross as mere foolishness, the taking up of the cross and following after the Messiah-Savior *is* the power of God to those who are truly being saved. (1 Cor. 1:18)

Fishers of Men

When Jesus called Peter and Andrew, He said, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” (Mt. 4:19) It is not to be supposed that this calling is reserved for Peter and Andrew alone for Jesus also taught, “The kingdom of God is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind.” (Mt. 13:47) Everyone who has entered the kingdom of God through new birth (Jn. 3:5) is called to be involved in the care for souls – for winning new converts to the kingdom and for caring for and bringing to maturity the younger, less mature believers around them.

The command to “Follow Me” is both mandatory and vital for those who embark on this task. This is the “prime directive” which the mature believer is to practice as well as the primary, perhaps even the *only* skill he or she needs to pass on to others – the necessity and ability to abide in and follow Christ by His Spirit. It is from this abiding in and following Him that all our good works must flow. (Eph. 2:10)

Paul lists the “ones” of our life in God: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above and through all, and in us all. (Eph. 4:4-6) From this oneness springs the myriad, manifold grace (mercy *and* power of God) which Paul describes by saying, “But [from this One-ness] to each one of us grace was given according

to the measure by which Christ gives it.” (Eph. 4:7) Paul then goes on to say that Christ gave some people to be expressions of His grace – listing here apostles, prophets, heralds, shepherds and teachers while using other words (as does John) in the lists in his other writings. These people, as they express the grace of Christ to those around them, will equip the saints to do the work of service to Christ, His body (people) and even the world (Eph. 4:11-12), empowering them (by means of their personally partaking of the grace of Christ and God in the work of these people) to attend to the orphans and widows and the least of Christ’s brothers (Jas. 1:27, Mt. 25:40, 45) and to love one another as He commanded. (Jn. 13:34-35) When these people fulfill this work by expressing the grace (mercy *and* power) that comes from their oneness with Christ and God, then – ***and only then!*** – will we see the oneness, (unity, unanimity) of the faith, the oneness (unity, unanimity) of our knowledge of the Son of God, true spiritual maturity and a tangible and visible similarity and resemblance between our lives and that of Christ Jesus. (Eph. 4:13) One of the major reasons the “church” is so divided is because carnal men seek to achieve doctrinal solidarity prior to and apart from the oneness of the Spirit of Christ and God. The “church” has concocted its own “better way” – often in ignorance or in blind obedience to “church” traditions – and, like Cain, they are offended when their carnal offerings are rejected by God. (Gen. 4:5) It is an inescapable part of any true work *of* God that apart from Christ we can do *nothing* (Jn. 15:5) but in and through Christ we can do *all things*. (Phlp. 4:13)

Paul wrote, “I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we [the original apostles] have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit [from the Holy Spirit] which you have not received, or a different gospel [from the original good news of the kingdom of God] which you have not accepted, you may well put up with it.” (2 Cor. 11:3-4) There are many different Jesus-es to choose from these days – any of the “theological” “Jesus-es” of one’s choosing, a culturally bound and therefore spiritually irrelevant “Jesus,” the social reformist “Jesus,” etc., ad nauseam. The gospel of the “church” (which is largely “come to our place, hear our guy speak and do as much or as little as you like *for* God”) is very different from the gospel of the kingdom (“Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” – Mt. 4:17) And the Holy Spirit of God’s kingdom, characterized by “righteousness, peace and joy” (Rom. 14:17), is difficult to find at “church” while one is hard pressed to avoid the spirits of envy, self-seeking and confusion (see Jas. 3:16) and God have mercy on the “poor deluded soul” who dares to seriously question or contradict the overlord who regularly stands behind the pulpit and over the people!

The corruption of the mind by spiritual disinformation is one of the initial strategies of the devil and the demonic against the individual which, if successful, will be used as a concealed springboard from which further deceptions and oppressions will be attempted. This initial corruption of the mind is accomplished in *three* alternatives: a different Jesus, a different gospel *or* a different *spirit*. “Church” denominations that adhere rather carefully to the Scriptures do not readily fall for a different Jesus or a counterfeit gospel – but they are often *ruled* by a different spirit!

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the body of Christ in our time is the lack of ability to spiritually discern. We are not trained to know all men by the Spirit of Christ (2 Cor. 5:16) but instead we are trained to subject one another to our own preferred doctrinal tests whereby we mistakenly think we can judge and know who our true brothers in Christ are. This popular fallacy is both a cause and a result of the carnality which governs the “church” and is a key piece

of evidence of just how subtle and effective the deceptive work of the devil is among the sons of the “church.”

When Paul and Barnabas told the Philippian jailer what he needed to do in order to be saved – “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved...” (Acts 16:31) – Luke’s short record (which even he says Paul and Barnabas went on to more fully deliver “the word of the Lord” to the jailer and all in his household – Acts 16:32) has been used by some modern “theologians” to dismiss the need for both repentance and obedience and to produce an “easy-believism” false “gospel.” “Only believe” is their catch-phrase and any who fall for this deception are indeed ensnared to the point of falling away from the faith.

Jesus still calls upon His true followers to fish for men’s souls and to love those with whom they interact with the totality of their being. The “church” has so complicated the gospel with its works-based counterfeits (that lure in the soulishly willful), its experienced-based counterfeits (that lure in the soulishly emotional), and its knowledge-based counterfeits (that lure in the soulishly intellectual) that one is almost forced to study Greek and become a “theologian” in order to find out what the original text said and meant. Be wary, however, anyone who pursues Greek or “theology” apart from the Spirit of truth (who is to lead us to Christ and into all truth – Jn. 15:26, 16:13) is one who may begin their life in the Spirit of God but become deceived by trying to walk the road that leads to life in the power of their soul and flesh. (see Gal. 3:3, Mt. 7:13-14) The “church” has thus exchanged obedience to Christ and genuine service to one another, to orphans, widows and the poor for the writing and publishing of books and treatises and arguments and apologies and exposes as if the latter were the only right and true way to follow Christ. The “church” thus gathers its followers into its own smug, self-concealed circles that comfort the “church”-ite in their lawlessness (what is right in their own eyes – Jdgs. 21:25), using flattery to hide the fact that blind leaders stand over blind followers leading all toward an eternal pit. (Mt. 15:14) And no one in the “church” seems able to see that churchianity itself is the disease that inhibits the gospel from accomplishing its redemptive and curative work in the world.

Sharing the good news of Christ’s kingdom is much more than speaking the religiously correct words. Those who have only the right words (but the wrong spirit), are those who have only a form of godliness but lack its power. From such as these we are to turn away! (2 Tim. 3:5) We must recognize that the way of Christ can never be properly taught by those whose lives are characterized by and filled with deception, darkness, oppressiveness and hatred. Unless we ourselves live in His light, following and abiding in Him, we cannot teach anyone else the real and true “prime directive” of following and abiding in Him. In this way, truth must come before liberty (Jn. 8:32) and whoever truly believes in Christ must not abide in darkness. (Jn. 12:46, 2 Tim. 2:19) Desiring truth and the will of God is our safeguard against being deceived (Jn. 7:17) and from entering into the apostasy, the great falling away from the faith that occurs prior to Christ’s return. (2 Ths. 2:3, 10)

God now commands *all people everywhere* to repent (Acts 17:30) and He is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” (2 Pet. 3:9) At the resurrection, however, we find that much of mankind will not have their names written in God’s Book of Life and will be thrown into the eternal lake of fire. (Rev. 20:15, Mt. 25:41) Some of these will be believers who in unbelief drew back from the way of salvation into destruction (Heb. 10:39), who having known the way of righteousness, turned from (departed, left behind) the holy commandment given to them (2 Pet. 2:21), and who, by refusing to overcome, caused their names to be blotted out (erased, marked over, *removed*) from the Book of Life. (Rev. 3:5) Jesus

is “the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (Heb. 5:9) – not those who disobey Him! It is part of God’s plan of redemption that we be completely set apart for Him, that our *whole* spirit, soul and body would be blameless (1 Ths. 5:23) and “that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but *for Him...*” (2 Cor. 5:15) The notion that one can live with one foot in the “church” and one foot in the world is a fallacy because the “church” is part of the world. The notion that one can live part of life willfully obeying God’s Spirit and another part willfully obeying the flesh is a demonic deception because “he who sows to the flesh will of the flesh reap corruption [death], but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.” (Gal. 6:8)

Jesus still commands His true follower to “deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” (Lk. 9:23) Those who neglect or disdain to obey this command should not be surprised at Christ’s dismissal at the last day: “I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of unrighteousness.” (Lk. 13:27, 2 Ths. 2:12) If we will not follow Him now, by what right will be able to demand to be received by Him then?

Let he who has ears hear.

35. Furthering the Kingdom

When we look at the fractured landscape of people trying to follow Christ today, we find, in general terms and broad strokes, what some are calling “post-denominational Christianity” (a curious mixture of deceptive churchianity and religious spirituality) and the “out of church” refugees who have fled from all institutional hierarchies. Within both groups, however, there is little focus on personally (individually or corporately) following the King as the only means to truly further the kingdom of God. This only means that various sects and divisions will continue (especially in those groups that have completely departed from the literal and interactive Lordship of Christ over the group – sadly the vast majority of groups that claim to be “Christian”) to proliferate, further devastating the spiritual landscape, preparing many for succumbing to the coming, and even present, Satanic deceptions of the last days.

What is a genuine seeker of Christ, who desires Him and Him alone to be his King, to do? Or, as others have asked at various times of impending hardship and darkness, “How shall we then live?” The first (and truly only) answer to this question is, “Follow the Lamb wherever He leads. Period.” (see Rev. 14:4, Jn. 10:27, etc.) But the danger in this is that we can become isolated individuals who, even if we have only truth in our possession (which may or may not be the case), we have not the strength of the body of Christ to draw upon. What practical guidelines might we use to build or gather (even if only in a “loose network” – see Mt. 13:47 for the appropriateness of this figure) a group that truly furthers the interests of God’s kingdom? And again, we cannot over-emphasize the need to be led into all truth by the Spirit of truth (Jn. 16:13) so that we may truly co-labor (1 Cor. 3:9) with Him who alone builds His ekklesia. (Mt. 16:18)

Perhaps the first issue we need to resolve (or at least contemplate) is,

“What does it mean to have Christ as King?”

Those who have learned to be lawless (doing what is right in one’s own eyes because there has been no king to follow and obey – Jdgs. 21:25) and independent may require years to become a “King’s man,” one willing to obey the King (of life, truth, love, etc. – Acts 3:15, Jn.

18:37, 1 Jn. 4:8-9, etc.) even at the cost of one's own life if necessary. (Mt. 10:39, etc.) Many will have trouble even recognizing that the gospel of the kingdom – that there is a King who is to be followed and obeyed and that one can only remain in the kingdom of God by doing the will of God (Mt. 7:21, etc.) - *is* the original gospel preached by the original apostles. Much work with much patience is required to restore sheep who have been deceived, neglected, malnourished and even abused in modern churchianity.

The second issue, closely related to the first, is,

“How do we help one another submit to the Lordship (King-ness) of Christ?”

This is simply another way of saying, How do we “Consider one another in order to stir up love and good works”? (Heb. 10:24) The answers the “church” might give are not adequate. Our “marching orders” must come from the Head Christ Jesus and not from any man, certainly not from some “pastoral” Diotrephes (3 Jn. 9) who uses the people for his own purposes and advantage. We must know one another first and to do this we must overcome the isolations our culture, economy and technology have placed upon us.

Perhaps the first efforts to gather any group should be based on the pattern of the apostles and the first believers who were filled with the Holy Spirit.

“They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

And yet again, this is not a pattern to be fixed on our calendars as we begin to mail out invitations. First and foremost, we need to seek the King as to whom we should even begin to try to be *ekklesia* with. “The Lord knows those who are His” (2 Tim. 2:19) and He alone can direct us to those whom He has trained (or is training or will be training) to be His loyal subjects and servants. The pattern is given as the most likely way in which He will bring us together. We may need to share some kingdom truths with a friend, a neighbor, an acquaintance or even a total stranger. This is preaching “the apostles’ teachings” – the truth of the kingdom of God that transcends all of men's efforts and teachings which have produced only fractured churchianity and demonically-driven apostasy. Invitations to share a meal may be a way to simultaneously delve further into one another's lives and into kingdom truths. And surely, as soon as any kind of similar focus is found, common prayer should be a regular (as “regular” as our getting together may be) occurrence. While the “church” is content to have only a few “prayer warriors” who meet to pray, the *ekklesia* needs *all* of its members able to effectively wrestle against our spiritual enemies. (Eph. 6:18, etc.) And yet again, each of these activities must be led by the Spirit, especially prayer, because the enemy will surely oppose these efforts to follow only the one true King. *Only* in this way of complete submission to the Holy Spirit will we be able to maintain a pattern of assembly consistent with that of the New Testament.

Because so many who seek to follow Christ have been tainted by their time in “church,” the biggest hurdle to unity and beneficial togetherness that must be overcome will be knowledge learned at “church.” Doctrines that derive from men (Mt. 15:3) or even demons (1 Tim. 4:1) but are held to be sacred, beloved and cherished truths from God (and there are several of these doctrinal deceptions that are aimed precisely at disrupting a group's unity in the Spirit) will quickly rise to the forefront of discussion and we must be prepared to stand against any

deceptions. Reverting to the first two issues – having Christ as our true King and seeking to aid one another in submitting to His Lordship – is likely to always be a good first step in any discussion of controversial doctrines or teachings. And in this age of dissension and deception, *every* truth of God has at least one, perhaps many, counterfeits and distortions designed to derail any individual or group away from the King and His kingdom.

Following are several Scriptural standards by which we can peaceably and corporately seek to glean from the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:16)

- Paul said to the Ephesian elders, “I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.” (Acts 20:27) It is not impossible for even one man to know the whole counsel of God on a matter.

- Paul wrote to his fellow worker Timothy, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Tim. 2:15) Diligent workers who reverently and carefully seek the mind of Christ will be able to rightly divide and apply the word of truth (in accordance with the whole counsel of God) to the situation at hand. (see also 1 Ths. 2:3-6)

- Paul wrote to the carnal (fleshly) and divided Corinthians, “We have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. ...the natural man [who is manipulated or controlled by the god of this world – Eph. 2:2] does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Cor. 2:12, 14) Anyone who remains obstinately unable to receive the things of God which the rest of the group is able to receive is to be restored to spirituality as gently as possible (Gal. 6:1) or, in due course and time, rejected by the *entire* group. (Mt. 18:17)

- Paul also wrote to the Corinthians, “We speak wisdom among those who are mature...” (1 Cor. 2:6) In some rare instances, the situation may truly be beyond the scope of the written words of the New Testament. But more likely this wisdom will be needed in matters that require spiritual discernment so as to rightly divide an issue and appropriately nest it within the whole counsel of God. In the discussion that attends such matters (which may become quite heated), the standard of what godly wisdom is like should be held to in order to keep the discussions from being harmful to the hearers. (see 2 Tim. 2:14) James wrote, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking [for things like preeminence or significance] in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist [are allowed to remain], confusion and every evil thing will be there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” (Jas. 3:13-18) Anyone who insists on

forcing his or her own “private interpretations” (things gleaned apart from the work of the Spirit of truth – see 2 Pet. 1:20-21) upon the group – especially if his views are expressed with acerbic or acidic sarcasm and rudeness – is to be pressed toward repentance or rejected by the *unanimous* consent and confirmation of the entire group. Rejection by the one who has the most Bible knowledge (possibly the most dangerous person in the assembly) only produces yet another Nicolaitan Diotrephes (see Rev. 2:6, 15) and a “majority vote” only brings the minority under the tyranny of the majority – all in contradiction to Jesus’ command that “It shall not be so among you.” (see Mk. 10:42-43, etc.)

- Paul wrote, “I beseech you to have a walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness [humility] and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unanimity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:1-3) The Greek word rendered “unity” in many translations is *henotes* [1775] and is more accurately rendered *unanimity* - unanimous agreement, one accord. (see also Acts 15:22, 1 Cor. 1:10, etc.) Paul wrote, “By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and have *all* been made to drink one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13) and he later wrote to the same people, “I fear...[that] if [someone] who comes preaches [to you] another Jesus whom we [Paul and Timothy] have not preached, or if you receive *a different spirit* which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you may well put up with it.” (2 Cor. 11:3-4) Only one Spirit, that of Christ and God, is to be received if we are to be true *ekklesia* that furthers the kingdom of God. Any group that fails to practice this unanimity of the Spirit is operating outside of God’s purpose that we all be one, as Christ and God are one, so that the world around us might see that Jesus is the Messiah whom God sent to be the Lamb who would take away the sins of the world. (see Jn. 17:21-23, 1:29)

We must take special care to hear what Christ said about our being one. We are to be one so that the world will believe and know that the Father sent Jesus and that the Father loves us too. The purpose of any group then is to corporately reproduce Christ – most often on the scale of two or three. (Mt. 18:20) The purpose of any group is to build up *His* body – in spiritual strength and not just in numbers. Any true leader (those who go before, not those who stand over!) must have as their “prime directive” the words of John the Baptist: “He must increase, but I must decrease.” (Jn. 3:30) Any leader who takes the preeminence to himself and away from Christ is simply another Diotrephes. Every older leader who is a true elder (Greek *presbuteros* [4245] or *episkopos* [1985], in accordance with Paul’s list of characteristics to Timothy and Titus) must look for the servants (Greek, *diakonos* [1249], those who raise a cloud of dust in performing the needed work) who can go and physically attend to the needs brought to the group’s attention. These servants, if they prove steadfast and reliable, are the leaders of the next group or next generation. When a group is too large to gather in one home, we are to simply gather in two or three homes. A group that is too large produces spectators and not participants. Being *ekklesia* is definitely *not* a “spectator sport”!

This *is* the high and upward calling of God in Christ Jesus for any group who names the name of Christ. This *is* the standard by which we should evaluate whether we are being genuine

ekklesia or we have settled for being merely some man's "church." If we are content to be carnal, divided or apostate, it matters not what label we take upon ourselves – our judgment is not sleeping. But if we are going to take His name as our Husband and King, let us always remember that His is a name above every other name and the one to which every knee will someday bow, and that every tongue will someday agree that Jesus Christ is King and thus glorify God. (Phlp. 2:9-11) The key responsibility upon mankind now is to individually and willingly choose to receive Christ as King and thus glorify God with their lives here and now and for the remainder of their days – or else they can wait until their death punctuates their earthly existence and they will then unwillingly acknowledge Christ as King and be consigned to the eternal lake of fire reserved for the devil and his angels (Mt. 25:41) and whoever has so served these masters of darkness (evil, oppression, deceit and rebellion against God) that their name is removed from or never entered into God's Book of Life. (see Rev. 20:15, 3:5) God's judgments upon every individual and work of men will be "true and righteous" (Rev. 16:7, 19:2) and many will be eternally dismissed who believe they have a right to remain in His kingdom. (Mt. 7:22-23) The task before us now is to purify ourselves as He is pure (1 Jn. 3:2-3) and to cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting [completing] holiness in the fear of God. (2 Cor. 7:1) Anything less is mere "church."

Let he who has ears hear.

36. Triumphant Overcoming

The presence of Peter, James and John at the transfiguration (Mt. 17:1, also see chapter 16 "A Picture of the Kingdom") provides a convenient representation of the kinds of followers of Christ who have been, are and will be the true citizens of the kingdom of God. This characterization can be seen to dovetail into Jesus' teaching that "the kingdom of God is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." (Mt. 13:33) The three types of followers –

- the "churched" who are somehow in but not of the "church" (like Peter who wanted to build buildings for Moses, Elijah and Jesus rather than simply listen to and obey Jesus – Mt. 17:4-5);
- the martyrs who give their life in the course of their service to the Messiah-King (like James who was beheaded by Herod – Acts 12:1-2); and
- the spiritual followers who live their lives in faithful service to the King in spite of all circumstances (like John who faithfully served Christ in Ephesus and on the prison island of Patmos and gave to all who follow Christ what is perhaps the deepest picture of Christ presented in the New Testament)

by the time of the end of the age are all leavened in various degrees with the leaven of malice, deceit and hypocrisy that attends the mother of the apostate "church," labeled Mystery Babylon (Rev. 17:5 – though the "church" is only one of "her" works). But even if some who are reading this may have difficulties with this interpretation of these passages (and there are certainly other ways to view these verses), if we have any ability to spiritually discern the things around us, we

find that the genuine believers we do know will fit into one of these categories – a “Peter,” a “James,” or a “John” – just as surely as we find there are those who have refused to resist the challenges their category presents and at least appear to have become only another part of the apostasy, the great falling away from the faith that occurs before the return of Christ. (Mt. 24:10, 2 Ths. 2:3) Each of these types of follower – whether one is a “Peter,” a “James” or a “John” – must overcome the deceptions inherent in that type. Perhaps one of the most common mistakes, especially of those followers of Christ still influenced by the “church,” is to fail to recognize what category one is in and then oversimplify the complexities involved and/or over-complicate the simplicity of it all!

If there is one word that has fallen from common usage in “Christian” circles, it would be the need to overcome. Some even preach that any actions or “works” are merely “self-effort” to be saved or just a return to works of the law so as to be justified before God. But even where this deception is recognized for what it is, the idea that we need to overcome something as an integral part of our salvation experience is not a popular idea. Yet it remains true nonetheless. In the three categories above, the “churched” (the “Peters”) must overcome many deceptions, including the traditions of men (Mk. 7:9), the doctrines of demons (1 Tim. 4:1), lawlessness (doing what is right in one’s own eyes – Jdgs. 21:25 – a mystery, a “secret,” that requires divine revelation to be rightly understood, something that Paul said was already at work in his day – 2 Ths. 2:7), Nicolaitanism (having lords over the people, most often entitled “pastors” or called “committees” - Rev. 2:6, 15), Babylonianisms (the “church” has departed from the New Testament pattern and “coincidentally” devolved into the same pattern as the synagogue invented in Babylon) and other deceptions too numerous to list. The martyrs (the “James”), as has been true in every century, have always had to overcome the devil by “the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and [that] they did not love their lives to the death.” (Rev. 12:11) The spiritual followers of Christ (the “Johns”), in or out of the “church,” must contend with carnal “brothers” who cannot comprehend the spiritual things of God (1 Cor. 2:14) as well as overcome the very human tendencies toward spiritual pride (Gal. 6:1, etc.) and lawlessness. In the end of the age, all nations (or peoples) will hate the real followers of Christ (Mt. 24:9) and anyone who will remain loyal to Christ will be required to face the enmity and hatred of men who will be spurred on by demons who hate us even more – simply because we carry the Spirit of Christ within our being.

These categories can be seen also in the characteristics given in Christ’s seven letters to the seven ekklesias. Each ekklesia is representative of the type of follower of Christ and, as such, the promise given to that ekklesia is also given to the follower of Christ in similar circumstances. (The ekklesias also represent historical developments of the followers of Christ throughout the so-called “church age” but that aspect does not contradict the applications we are making now but rather demonstrates the multi-faceted wisdom of God in a unique and remarkable way.)

- To the followers in Ephesus who had left their first love (Rev. 2:4, comparable to Peter’s desire to build tabernacles rather than simply listen to Christ – Mt. 17:4-5), Jesus said, “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of paradise.” (Rev. 2:7)

- To the followers in Smyrna, the persecuted followers (the “James”), Jesus simply said, “Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life... He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” (Rev. 2:10-11)

- To the followers in Pergamos who had come under the influence of both Balaam and the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:14-15 – “Peters”), Jesus said, “To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.” (Rev. 2:17)

- To the followers in Thyatira who had come under the influence of Jezebel (Rev. 2:20 – “Peters”), Jesus said, “And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations...as I also have received from My Father; and I will give him the morning star.” (Rev. 2:26-28)

- To the followers in Sardis whose works were not perfect (or complete) before God (Rev. 3:2 – “Peters”), Jesus said, “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life, but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.” (Rev. 3:5)

- To the followers in Philadelphia who have persevered in following Him (“Johns”), Jesus simply told them, “Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.” (Rev. 3:11-12)

- To the followers in Laodicea who were “lukewarm” and thought themselves rich and in need of nothing but were in reality “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:16-17 – “Peters.” These qualities are shared with those in the apostasy, a comparison that supports the view that the Laodiceans represent the dominant tendency of the ekklesia at the time of Christ’s return), Jesus said, “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.” (Rev. 3:21)

To every type, category and “flavor” of ekklesia, the followers who claim Christ, the need to overcome something is present. No one gets a “free ride” with the free gift God gives them – that is, no responsibilities, no requirements to obey, no actions to perform or works to accomplish and fulfill. (see also Eph. 2:10) Though detailing what each of these exhortations and promises mean is beyond what we are examining, it is enlightening to note that each of these promises are merely restatements of what we receive when we gain what men like to call simply “salvation.” Simply put, overcoming *is* a requirement that is an integral part of being saved!

“Church” or Kingdom Expectations

As those of us who have been diverted from the kingdom of God by our “church” affiliations and practices seek to come into the kingdom of God, we find it is a very “different kind of ball game.”

- The “church” draws in passive listeners who are expected to avoid gross wickedness (mostly to avoid giving the “pastor” and the “church” bad press) while they support (emotionally and financially) the “pastor,” professional staff and pay for the building that everyone meets in.

- The ekklesia unites with those whom the King draws into their circle and all are expected to aid one another in the process of purifying themselves “from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (2 Cor. 7:1)

- The “church” allows its members to attend lectures (“sermons” and “teachings”) and to do as much or as little purportedly *for* God (who must be impotent and helpless) as they want to do (what the New Testament calls lawlessness).

- The ekklesia expects everyone to think for themselves (1 Cor. 1:10) and exercise their own gifting from God (1 Pet. 4:10-11), enabling *everyone* to speak what God has put on their hearts. (1 Cor. 14:26)

- The “church’s” “gospel” is “Come hear our guy speak or come see what we do and, if you like what you see, come back and participate as much or as little as you like.”

- The gospel of the kingdom is “Repent! The kingdom is here.” And then it is the duty and responsibility of any true citizen of His kingdom to truly present Christ as he or she goes and makes disciples from all peoples, teaching them to observe (obey) all that Christ has commanded. (Mt. 28:19-20)

To overcome does not mean that we must become some superstar “pastor” or televised “talking head.” To overcome means that we remain faithful to what *Christ* requires of us. To overcome does not mean that we passively attend “church” “services” (in or out of the “church” building) and learn more Bible facts that will only add to our judgment because we never *did* any of what we have learned. To overcome means to rely on His grace (power) to enable us to present the Person of Christ to the fallen, dying, decaying world around us. Being a “church”-ite or the follower of our own preferred spiritual guru will not be enough to enable us to persevere to the end. (Mt. 24:13) Only the truly righteous sons of the kingdom will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. (Mt. 13:38, 43)

“The gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations [before] the end will come.” (Mt. 24:14) This true and original gospel will be opposed by the nations, by other religions and especially by the “church,” the apostasy. The kingdom will be built in twos and threes (Mt. 18:20) as it always has been and there may or may not be

any mass movement that people can point to and say “That is the kingdom of God.” (see Lk. 17:22-23) It is in the face of all this that we are called to overcome, persevere and endure.

The message of the “church” is ease, comfort, passivity – but it is deceit and death. The way of the kingdom involves a cross and self-denial (Lk. 9:23) – but it is the way that leads to eternal life. The paradox of the kingdom is that it is “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17) even as we suffer according to the will of God. (1 Pet. 2:20-21) “Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.” (1 Pet. 4:1-2)

Paul wrote, “You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please Him who enlisted him as a soldier.” (2 Tim. 2:3-4) We have been born into a war – the war between God and Satan. And though this war is very one-sided where God and Christ are concerned (as is true for all who abide and remain in Christ no matter how beleaguered we may feel!), those who are negligent, lazy, lawless or disobedient regarding their salvation and the will of God are practicing enmity against God (Rom. 8:7) and will suffer the consequences of their deeds. It is not all that difficult to become a casualty in this war just as it is not overly difficult to be a loyal soldier who overcomes and triumphs over his foes – the flesh, the devil and the enticements of this wicked world.

Kingdom Realities

This is precisely where being a citizen-soldier in Christ’s kingdom differs from other religions. The Muslims, for example, require you to “repent” and be converted to the Islamic religion or they will cut your head off – literally. Those Muslims who kill others to “defend” their religion are said to be accounted as heroes by their god Allah. The citizen-soldier of Christ’s kingdom does not “wrestle against flesh and blood (human beings), but against (spiritual beings called) principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this age and spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly (spiritual) places.” (Eph. 6:12) Though the Muslims work toward the overthrow and destruction of any non-Islamic government and some rogue, misguided, fringe “Christian” cults might advocate for rebellion and revolution, the true citizen-soldier of Christ’s kingdom is instructed to “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s” (Lk. 20:25) and to “be subject to the (civil) governing authorities.” (Rom. 13:1) He is expected to bear “the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.” (Gal. 5:22-23) Even though his is a war only in the *spiritual* realms, he is likely to receive the same treatment Christ received from the governments of this world. It remains a truth that “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22)

The kingdom of God among men is that realm where Christ is actually followed and obeyed. This is the essence of a king over a kingdom. For far too long Christ has been the figurehead over the petty fiefdoms and turfs of mere men. As the kingdom of God is preached, these must fall away and die or the proprietors of these things must take their place among the enemies of God. Either Christ is one’s King or one’s enemy – this too is the nature of a king and his kingdom. Our modern experiments in democracy, republics, socialism and the like may have caused us to forget what it means to have a king and be a citizen in that kingdom but that does not mean that Christ shares in our amnesia. He is still the King whose dominion is without end.

(Dan. 7:14, etc.) That He has allowed men to practice treason, betrayal and all manner of evils in His name for some reason of His own does not mean His kingdom has ceased to exist. It only means that those who have disobeyed Him and those who have remained obediently loyal will one day be rewarded as their actions deserve. The tares, those who are in reality the sons of the devil who cause others to stumble and fall away and who practice lawlessness (what is right in their own eyes), will one day soon be removed and cast into a fire. (Mt. 13:41-42 – interpret that as you will, it does *not* signify a pleasant experience!) The wheat, the sons of the kingdom (v. 38) will continue to shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. (v. 43)

The Master's Return

Jesus' warning is all the more appropriate and pertinent to our day. He said,

“Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has. But if that servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat the menservants and maidservants, and to eat and drink and be drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. And that servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few.” (Lk. 12:42-48)

Contained in this parable is nearly every element that plagues the follower of Christ today. Let us consider these elements carefully.

- “Give them their portion of food in due season.” (v. 42) The “church” would have us believe this is what the man in the pulpit is doing with his regularly scheduled “sermons.” This is “feeding the flock” in their eyes. Picturing one man trying to dispense a handful of grass to a bunch of sheep quickly shows us the fallacy of this idea. Can you say “Pastor Stubs”? Further, “in due season” does not refer to Sundays and Wednesdays at the “church” building. “In due season” means giving milk to babes and meat to adults. (1 Cor. 3:2) “In due season” means exhorting at the proper time, comforting at the proper time, on some having compassion but on others snatching them as from fire “hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.” (Jude 22-23) “In due season” is a function of the timing and leading of the Lord by His Spirit, not slavish obedience to the calendar and clock.

- The servant who is diligently attending to his Master’s business will be *blessed*. (v. 43) Interpret that how you will – it *will be* a pleasant experience, to say the least!

- The servant who begins to beat the servants (v. 45 – whether because they challenge his doctrines and practices or refuse to attend his “church” or to recognize his “delegated,” Nicolaitan authority or whatever other reason he concocts to preserve his deceptions and preferred unrighteousness – see 2 Ths. 2:12) will be cut in two (figurative of the dual streams of power that have characterized his life, of the double-minded state, both carnal and spiritual, that dominated his existence) and he will be assigned his place among the unbelievers. (v. 46) This man who was once saved enough to serve the Master turned back to his own filth and took up his own way of doing things and is ultimately returned to a fate among those who perish – in spite of what his doctrines say! (see 2 Pet. 2:20-23)

- The knowingly disobedient servant will be beaten with many stripes (v. 47) but the ignorantly disobedient servant will be beaten with few stripes. (v. 48) Either way disobedience will be justly punished – interpret that how you will but this too will *not* be a pleasant experience. Much better to be the obedient servant who will be blessed upon his Master’s return.

Jesus’ warning sign of His return and of the end of the age, “Take heed that no one deceive you” (Mt. 24:4) and Paul’s instruction, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21) may well be the two most needed exhortations we need to hear in this season. The “Peters” must overcome the deceptions of the “church” (the worldly institution and pattern) and remain faithful to Christ. The “James” must overcome the devil (Rev. 12:11) and remain faithful to Christ. The “Johns” must overcome their flesh (Gal. 5:17) and remain faithful to Christ. Each must overcome whatever inhibits or prevents them from being conformed to the likeness of Christ. This *is* the high and upward call of God in Christ Jesus notwithstanding the devil’s unrelenting efforts to obscure this with all manner of deceptions, counterfeits and replacements.

Let he who has ears hear.