

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 10, Number 1

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**SPIRITUAL
DOUBLE
AGENTS**

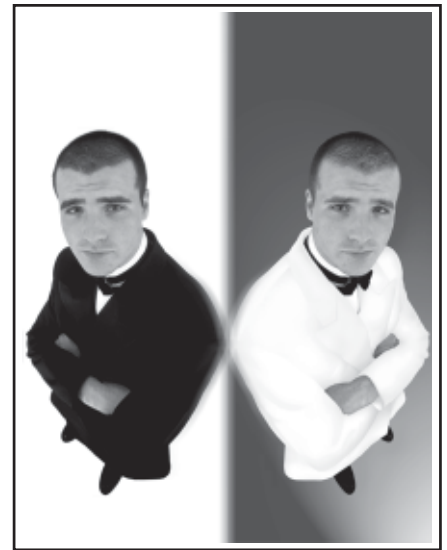
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About Our Cover:

Christianity is a religion that requires whole-hearted commitment. Unfortunately, not all who claim to be Christians give their all. They remain in the church as spiritual double agents—working for both sides in the warfare between God and this present, evil world. Have we fully committed ourselves? **(Stockbyte)**

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Editor-in-Chief

JOHN W. RITENBAUGH

Managing Editor

RICHARD T. RITENBAUGH

Associate Editors

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Graphics and Layout Editor

KRISTEN M. COLLINS

Contributing Writers

**TED E. BOWLING, JOHN F. BULHAROWSKI,
MARK DESOMER, MIKE FORD,
HELMUT J. FRAUND, RONNY H. GRAHAM,
WILLIAM GRAY, PATRICK J. HUMPHREYS,
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HOWARD E. MARCHBANKS, JOHN PLUNKETT,
JOHN REID, MARK SCHINDLER,
SHERLY J. TOGANS, JR., CHARLES F. WHITAKER**

CHURCH OF THE GREAT GOD

PO Box 471846
Charlotte, NC 28247-1846
U.S.A.

4455 Rue de Bullion
Montreal, PQ H2W 2G2
CANADA

(800) 878-8220 / (803) 802-7075
(803) 802-7811 fax

<http://www.cgg.org>

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The Wavesheaf Offering

The Old Testament describes and commands many offerings for the Israelites in their worship of God. We are most familiar with the burnt, meal, peace, sin and trespass offerings of Leviticus 1-5. However, other offerings, required to be given on special occasions, play significant roles in broadening our understanding of God and His way of life. These special offerings focus on specific parts of God's plan.

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable," writes the apostle Paul in II Timothy 3:16. This includes "the begats," the Old Covenant laws and the ritual observances. Within them are principles, patterns and examples of God's way of life. Even though they may not interest us or seem irrelevant to life today, we cannot preemptorily exclude them from God's Word.

All of God's law is a teaching vehicle. The Hebrew word most frequently translated as "law" is *torah*, but *torah* more closely translates into the broader meaning of "instruction." Instruction spans a wide spectrum of information and methods of increasing understanding, including law but also principles, symbols and examples from people's lives. For example, the way Jesus kept

the Sabbath should be understood as *torah* by those determined to follow in His steps. The goal of this broad teaching approach is to reveal God and His plan to us as clearly as possible. Paul writes in Galatians 3:24, "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith."

This teaching theme continues in Hebrews 9:9: "It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience." Later, the writer notes:

For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. . . . But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. (Hebrews 10:1, 3)

The sacrifices and offerings, though sincerely and fastidiously performed over centuries, could never accomplish what the offerers looked to them to do. They are symbols, shadows, of events and processes that have a far

greater scope than most people ever realize. Though they are no longer necessary—because they were fulfilled primarily in the sacrifice of Christ "once for all" (Hebrews 9:11)—they can still teach us a great deal about this way to which we have committed our lives.

Waving the Sheaf

The wavesheaf offering is an easily overlooked offering. Only those aware of the counting required to observe Pentecost notice it because the count for Pentecost begins with the day of the wavesheaf offering. Possibly many of us were once unaware of the wavesheaf offering because the church supplied us with a calendar showing the holy day dates for many years in advance. Since the date of Pentecost had already been determined for us, we were unaware that the count began with the day the ancient Israelites made the obscure wavesheaf offering.

Occurring on only one day each year, the day of the wavesheaf offering is not designated a holy day by

God. But it is far from minor or obscure in its meaning to salvation. In fact, we could say that, *without what it means to our salvation, there would be no salvation!*

The primary instruction regarding the wavesheaf is found in Leviticus 23:9-14:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. And you shall offer on that day, when you wave the sheaf, a male lamb of the first year, without blemish, as a burnt offering to the LORD. Its grain offering shall be two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, an offering made by fire to the LORD, for a sweet aroma; and its drink offering shall be of wine, one-fourth of a hin. You shall eat neither bread nor parched grain nor fresh grain until the same

In the Old Testament, the wavesheaf offering represents a thankful acknowledgment to God as the Giver of the harvest.

day that you have brought an offering to your God; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.

The wavesheaf consisted of an omer of barley, still on the stalk, cut at the beginning of the spring harvest. Since it came from the very beginning of the harvest of the firstfruits, it can be called the first of the firstfruits (Exodus 23:19). A comparison of Exodus 23:14-19; 34:22-26; Leviticus 23:10-11 and Nehemiah 12:44 confirms that each Israelite possessing a harvest was required to give an offer-

ing. A priest then lifted or "waved" each sheaf before God for acceptance. However, while the individual Israelite farmers did bring a firstfruits offering to the priests, the standard, recorded practice during the Second Temple period (the time of Christ) was to perform only one *official* waving of a sheaf by a priest in Jerusalem. This one sheaf and its waving represented all the others brought by individual farmers.

In its setting in the Old Testament, the wavesheaf offering represents a thankful acknowledgment to God as the Giver of the harvest, while dedicating or consecrating it to Him. Its waving set the stage for the rest of the harvest to proceed. In fact, the work of harvesting could not begin until the wavesheaf offering occurred.

Though Scripture specifies the *day* the wavesheaf was to be cut, it gives no specific *time of day* to cut it. Jewish history from the Second Temple period gives an interesting insight. The second-century *Mishnah* affirms that, when the Sadducees controlled the Temple, the sickle was put to the grain just as the sun was going down on the weekly Sabbath (Menahot 10:1-4, Jacob Neusner translation, pp. 753-754). The book,

Biblical Calendars, states, "The Boethusians [Temple priests] reaped [the firstfruits sheaf] at the going out of the Sabbath" (p. 218. Additional information can be found in the section titled "Temple Service," p. 280, as well as in *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services* by Alfred Edersheim, 1994, pp. 203-205). The New Testament's silence on this Sadducean practice—along with its agreement with the ritual's fulfillment in Christ—must be construed as acceptance of its validity.

The priests began to make the first cutting right at the end of the Sabbath,

continuing over into the first day of the week, when the bulk of the work would be done. The ritual, however, was not complete until the sheaf was offered (waved) before God the following morning, or more precisely, between 9:00 A.M. and noon. Some might object to the reaping of the sheaf in the closing minutes of the Sabbath because it is a day of rest when no work is to be done. After one understands the full reason for it, as well as Jesus' direct statement that a priest is blameless in the performance of his required duties (Matthew 12:5), any objections to the practice disappear.

Spiritual Harvests

The spiritual reason is supplied in the New Testament, when a major step in God's plan begins to unfold. The Old Testament situates the festivals of God within the agricultural harvests, but in the New Testament, these agricultural harvests become types of God's spiritual harvests of souls into His Kingdom. The New Testament uses this imagery extensively.

For instance, Jesus says:

Do you not say, "There are still four months and then comes the harvest"? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. (John 4:35-36)

He obviously speaks of a spiritual harvest of people to eternal life. This was His work, the same work He was training the disciples to do also after His death and resurrection. It is this same work in which we all are engaged in varying degrees.

Matthew writes of something similar in Matthew 9:36-38:

But when He saw the multi-

Why Count?

Pentecost is unique among the holy days because it is the only annual feast determined by counting. All the other festivals God commands us to keep on certain dates on the Hebrew calendar, but we must count for Pentecost. Whether we count fifty days or seven weeks or seven Sabbaths from the day of the wavesheaf offering, we must still go through the exercise of measuring the time to keep the feast properly. Why?

God does nothing without a purpose, and His purposes always include giving His people additional instruction for their ultimately eternal benefit. Counting to Pentecost is no exception. Even a cursory examination will expose several fascinating avenues of study.

First, God commands us to count. Counting is a means of calculating sequential items, events and measurements. The Bible equates counting to numbering and measuring, and it becomes a metaphor for judging and evaluating. When we understand what the period from the wavesheaf offering to Pentecost represents, the extended meanings come into play.

Passover symbolizes our redemption from this world and the forgiveness of our sins. Unleavened Bread typifies our lifelong task of coming out of sin and putting on the new man in sincerity and truth. We begin to count on wavesheaf day, which occurs during this period, and the fifty days extend to Pentecost, a festival that prefigures the harvest of God's firstfruits. The fifty days, then, represent the period of a Christian's conversion, the time between his calling and his resurrection to eternal life.

Thus, God wants us to count, number or measure the time of our conversion. This should bring several well-known verses to mind. For instance, Paul considers us wise if we are "redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:16). He cautions the Romans, "And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed" (Romans 13:11). In both instance, he is advising Christians to measure and make use of our time carefully.

A few Old Testament verses may be even more on point. David writes in Psalm 39:4, "LORD, make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am." If we understand just how short our time is, we also realize how weak and insignificant we are next to God and eternity. It forces us to rely upon Him and strive to improve. This is the kind of

attitude that God desires in us and will enhance our growth in character.

Moses, too, makes use of this imagery in Psalm 90:12: "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Properly evaluating our lifetimes builds wisdom in us, and wisdom—the godly use of knowledge and understanding—will make our behavior pleasing to God. Wisdom will help us to prioritize our time properly so we can devote ourselves to what is truly important.

Second, God has us count fifty days. What is significant about the number fifty? Fifty is the round number of years human beings live in a normal adult life (compare Numbers 1:3; Psalm 90:10). Fifty years, then, represents the period during which we live, grow, overcome, bear fruit and prove our devotion to God through trials, tests, blessings, curses and life's other varying experiences. Fifty years corresponds to the span of our conversion.

Biblically, the number fifty has its closest association with two things: the Tabernacle/Temple (in some of its measurements) and the Jubilee. The apostles describe God's church as a temple, and Christians are individual "living stones" within it (I Corinthians 3:9, 16-17; Ephesians 19-22; I Peter 2:5). The fifty days thus symbolize the time it takes to complete the work of building a habitation for God.

Every fiftieth year in ancient Israel, the Jubilee was decreed on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 25:8-9), which, among other things, represents unity, being at one, with God. The Jubilee was a year of liberty, when all debts were cancelled and inheritances reverted to their original families (verse 10), foreshadowing "the restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21). It was also a year of rest (Leviticus 25:11), when no crops were sown or reaped, a foretaste of God's rest (Hebrews 4:4-10). Under this type, the fiftieth day of the count, Pentecost, represents the harvest of Christians into God's Kingdom by the resurrection.

Overall, then, we count to Pentecost for two major reasons:

1. God commands it, and
2. It teaches us to realize and use carefully the ever-shrinking time we have to come "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

In His wisdom, God has us annually take stock of our procession through time so that we will devote ourselves to making the most of it. In doing so, we can gauge our progress toward God's Kingdom.

tudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep have no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”

Another clear reference to a spiritual harvest is the Parable of the Wheat and Tares:

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat. . . . [The owner said,] “Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.’” (Matthew 13:24-25, 30)

In His explanation of this parable, Jesus says, “The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. . . . Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Matthew 13: 39, 43). It is so plain! A harvest symbolizes a resurrection. More specifically and positively, a harvest is a type of a resurrection to eternal life—birth into the Kingdom of God!

Firstfruits of God

Both Exodus 23:19 and 34:26 contain the phrase “first of the firstfruits.” Speaking of the day of Pentecost, God says, “And the Feast of harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field . . .” (Exodus 23:16). Elsewhere, Pentecost is called “the Feast of Weeks” (Deuteronomy 16:10) and “the day of the firstfruits” (Numbers 28:26). If the firstfruits were the early part of the harvest, the “first

of the firstfruits” must surely have been from even earlier in the harvest season. The wavesheaf offering represents this small, initial harvest. From the cutting of the wavesheaf, the count to Pentecost—the culmination of the early harvest—begins.

Though Christ is nowhere called the “First of the Firstfruits” in the New Testament, Paul titles Him “the firstborn among many brethren”

typical Wavesheaf. He was crucified “in the middle of the week” (Daniel 9:27), a Wednesday, and put into the grave near sunset (John 19:31, 38-42). Mark confirms this: “Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the day before the Sabbath [an annual Sabbath, the first day of Unleavened Bread]” (Mark 15:42). The holy day fell on a Thursday, followed by a second prepa-

The resurrected Jesus Christ is the archetypical Wavesheaf. He was crucified “in the middle of the week”, a Wednesday, and put into the grave near sunset.

in Romans 8:29. In I Corinthians 15:20 he clearly links firstfruits—and therefore a harvest—with a resurrection: “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” He then repeats the firstfruits reference, adding us into the resurrection/harvest picture: “But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming” (verse 23).

James further solidifies us as part of the same spiritual harvest as Christ: “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures” (James 1:18). Revelation 14:4, speaking of the 144,000, firmly nails down just who the firstfruits are: “These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.”

The True Wavesheaf

The resurrected Jesus Christ fits into this picture as the arche-

ration day, then the weekly Sabbath (Luke 23:54-56).

Jesus explains in Matthew 12:39-40 that the length of time He would be in the tomb is the sign of His Messiahship:

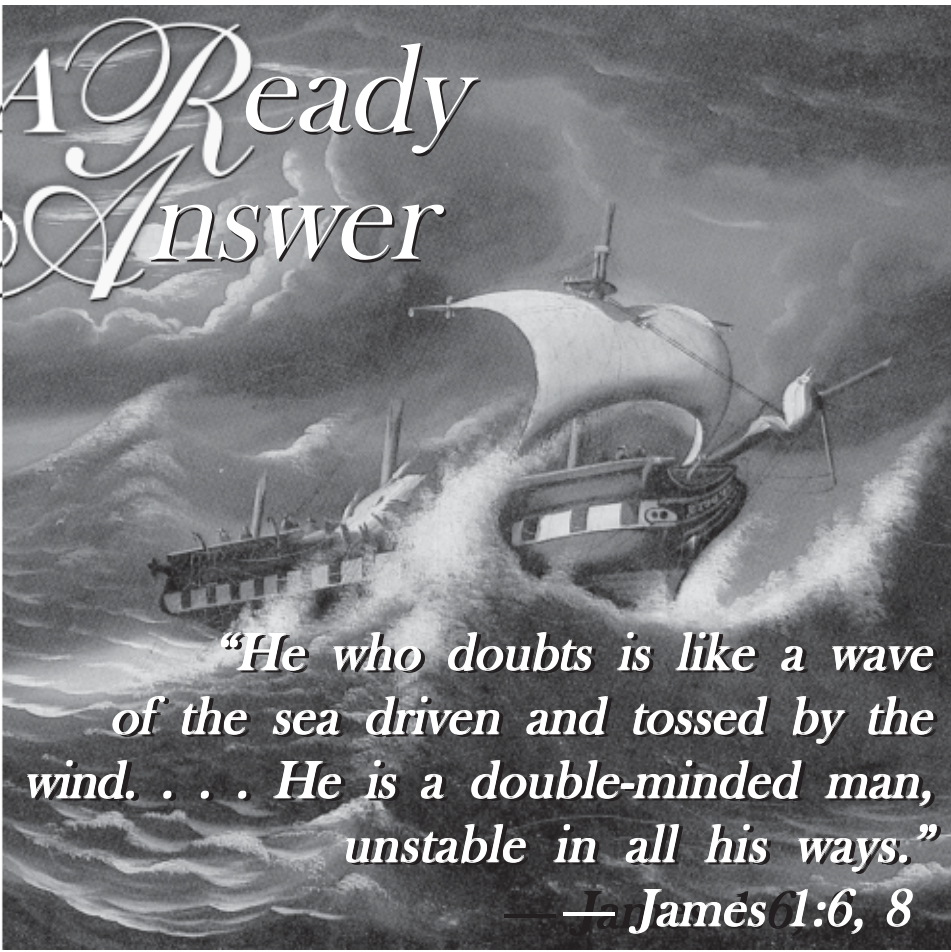
An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Counting three days and three nights from Jesus’ burial in the tomb on Wednesday evening near sunset brings us to Saturday evening near sunset. As the Sabbath was ending, the Father burst the bonds of Christ’s death by the power of His Holy Spirit and resurrected Him as very God.

He was now prepared to be accepted before the Father. But John 20:1 and 17 show that His ascension did not occur until sometime Sunday morning:

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A Ready Answer



“He who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. . . . He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

—James 1:6, 8

Spiritual Double-Agents

Several months ago one of the vice-presidential candidates metaphorically shed his skin like a snake, adopting a new set of issues and principles totally at variance from the ones he had formally championed in his long Senate career. Alarm bells should have gone off earlier when this same individual, like the mythical, two-faced god Janus, on one hand soundly rebuked and reprimanded the President’s shameful and despicable behavior, but then voted to acquit him when it came to the actual impeachment vote.

Recently members of our prior fellowship also metaphorically shed their skins, opting to acclimate themselves to the world’s pagan religious customs. Just a few short weeks ago, people with whom we have rubbed shoulders for many years did things that would have shocked us only a decade ago. One enthusiastic Worldwide Church of God member wrote, “It’s great to see the [Ambassador] Auditorium decorated for Christmas! I got to see the Nativity display in the Auditorium lobby today. It is in between the candelabra’s beneath the

dedication. It is fabulous! My family is looking forward to singing the traditional Christmas carols at the Auditorium services this month.”

Evidently, many people who have attended services with us over the last several decades may have gone through the motions of Christian behavior—but their hearts were never in God’s work or His truth. Some may have attended with the attitudes of keeping their options open—hedging their bets, so to speak. God Almighty has never been impressed with a partial commitment. God describes the Laodicean mind-set as having one foot firmly planted in the world’s culture and the other tentatively in God’s way: “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16).

God Almighty demands that, before He begins to work with us, we make a firm choice and then stick to that choice until we find ourselves composed totally of spirit. Jesus warns his disciples: “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). Of course, we remember Elijah’s ultimatum to the people: “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him” (I Kings 18:21).

God says choose but then burn all bridges to the former way of life. Some of us, I fear, have maintained open-ended options, contingency plans, and escape clauses in our relationship with God. Like the Laodicean, we look at our spiritual contract with a view of finding loopholes and exploiting the blessings. It is apparent that some of us still approach our calling with the attitude of “what can I get away with and still appear to be a Christian?”

Of One Mind or Two?

The initial impetus for exploring this double-mindedness was a continual stumbling over James 1:6-8. Our Creator promises us wisdom—but only under the condition that we do not waver or be

double-minded. I have sweat plenty over these verses through the years, having had to battle indecision. Likewise, when I pray, I have problems concentrating. I have battled doubts and fears when I have asked to be anointed.

But is simple mind-wandering or normal doubts the subject of James' reprimand? Or is it something else? Perhaps mind-wandering, indecisiveness, and doubting are more symptomatic than the actual causes of double-mindedness.

The apostle Paul writes that anyone who comes to God must believe that He is and diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). If we are in a conference with a human being, it is rude to tune him out, fall asleep on him, or become distracted. Some of my students have done that to me—giving me an insight on how God must feel when our minds wander when we pray, study, or meditate. Inattention and mind-wandering, although they are related to double-mindedness, do not seem to be what James had in mind.

The anguished father in Mark 9:24 who says, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" might be accused of being double-minded, but he is not. He desperately wants to believe, and he asks for help. He is not of two opinions.

The Greek word translated "double-minded" in James 1:8, *dipsuchos*, in its literal sense means "double-souled," like having two independent wills. The words "with no doubting" in verse 6 are translated from the Greek words *meedén diakrinómenos*, which describes one divided in mind, who wavers between two opinions.

Some may wonder whether the apostle Paul, when he complains, "For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice" (Romans 7:19), was exercising double-mindedness. This state of struggle that goes on in all of us is not the same as double-mindedness. Paul's mind, he goes on to explain, is focused one way, in one direction (verse 22), but inherent in the flesh of every human being is an innate enmity toward God and His law (verse 23; 8:7).

Just like Paul, we also fail to keep God's law perfectly because we have human nature in us that is perpetually at war with God's Holy Spirit in us.

All of us have a deep-seated desire to be at one with ourselves. We will not realize this desire until we are totally composed of spirit. Until then, we can expect a spiritual tug of war to go on perpetually. As more of God's Spirit flows through us, renewing our minds and displacing our carnality, we will find it easier to keep our carnal nature in check. All of us, I trust, can point to certain areas in our lives that are now under control—but which at one time were not under control. The spiritual struggle occurring in all of us between our spiritual and carnal natures is not double-mindedness.

A Man With Two Minds

Double-mindedness is literally having two separate minds holding contradictory thoughts. Double-mindedness occurs in a church member when he has an implicit or explicit knowledge of God's law, yet deliberately harbors a sin, choosing to conceal it, repress it or ignore it.

James supports this explanation of double-mindedness in James 4:8: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts you double-minded." Anything one willingly does or does not do that is contrary to God's law (verse 17) makes one guilty of double-mindedness. Double-mindedness depends on a knowledge of and a willful intent to reject God's law, as the psalmist writes in Psalm 119:113: "I hate the double-minded, but I love your law." We can see an analogous example in the recent election decisions handed down by the Florida Supreme Court. The U.S. Supreme Court soundly rebuked it for ignoring the real federal and state laws and statutes and willfully making up its own.

On the other side, being synchronized with God's law is equated with singleness of purpose and leads to peace of mind and a feeling of wholeness. The same psalmist writes,

"Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble" (Psalm 119:165).

God's law itself is the vehicle of wisdom that the petitioner requests in James 1:5. It would be absurd for someone to ask to be filled with the spirit of the law and simultaneously be determined not to keep it. Sometimes we inadvertently do this when we ask a minister or counselor for advice on a problem—but have already purposed in our minds to do it our own way. Then when the minister tells us something that goes against what we have purposed to do in our inner being, a highly uncomfortable state of dissonance emerges.

Harboring any secret sin puts a tremendous strain on the nervous system. Psychologists have a name for this emotional/psychological turmoil: *cognitive dissonance*, literally "inharmonious thought." Some time ago, a television program called *ILed Three Lives* aired. It told the story of an American FBI agent, Herbert Philbrick, who posed as a Communist to learn the enemy's secrets. To do his job effectively, he had to diligently keep things sorted out and compartmentalized. The television drama portrayed the mental strain that this professional agent had to endure to live a lie.

People who were once part of our fellowship but no longer worship with us frequently report that they feel more at peace with themselves now than at any time they were in the church. This should not surprise us. When someone tries to submit to God's law with a carnal mind, unbearable cognitive dissonance occurs. The nervous system plunges into a tailspin until it achieves a sense of equilibrium or wholeness. Carnal nature does not feel comfortable in the light of God's law: "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Romans 8:7). The easiest way to find equilibrium is to reject the beliefs that send them into a spiritual dither.

Some people who once sat among us complain about feeling like hypocrites (actors) enduring our services, knowing that, once the services were

over and they were safely out of the parking lot, the mascara applicator would be whipped out and the cigarette lit up. Others perhaps burned in contempt for a spouse or a brother or sister, serving as Satan's double agent.

Alibis and Excuses

We do not need to have the fears we sometimes associate with James 1:6-8. We can take comfort in the knowledge that mind-wandering and normal doubts and fears, while they are undesirable and should be rooted out, are not really what James has in mind. He is warning against double-mindedness. Double-mindedness requires knowing God's law and making a premeditated effort to subvert it and then justify the behavior.

Double-mindedness did not apparently apply to Uzzah, who broke God's law in ignorance or foolishness (II Samuel 6:6-7). However, it does apply to Saul, whom God ordered to destroy the Amalekites totally, but only accomplished 80% of his objec-

tives (I Samuel 15). When confronted with his compromise, Saul makes a whole series of excuses. Excuses and alibis are the defense mechanisms used by double-minded people. If we put sin out of our lives as soon as we find it, or as soon as it is pointed out to us, we do not have to worry about making and remembering excuses or alibis.

Double-mindedness occurs when we harbor a sin and still appear to live God's way. Tares, during their formative (immature) period, look just like wheat, yet mature wheat and tares do not look the same (Matthew 13:30). Over time, the tare is exposed because it does not mature like the wheat. So a double-minded "Christian" will become obvious by his lack of fruit and worldly, hypocritical attitude and behavior. Interestingly, God leaves the tares among the wheat ultimately to benefit the wheat.

A double-minded person cannot have God's Holy Spirit within him (Romans 8:5, 8-9; Galatians 5:16-17). Jesus says we cannot serve two mas-

ters because our allegiance will really be to one or the other (Matthew 6:24). One cannot be a double agent with the world and a member of God's church (II Corinthians 6:17-18; I John 2:15-17).

God demands that we choose one way or the other—but not straddle the fence. We cannot have it both ways. Unless in the battle between the spirit and the flesh we throw down the gauntlet in favor of our spiritual selves, we run the risk of being torn to pieces psychologically and emotionally.

Recall Psalm 119:113: "I hate the double-minded, but I love Your law." Notice that the antidote to double-mindedness is yielding to God's law. Wholeness and singleness of purpose are the result of keeping God's law through the power of Christ working in us. As our Lord reminds us in His Sermon on the Mount, "The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good [*single*, KJV; focused, directed], your whole body will be full of light" (Matthew 6:22).

—David F. Maas

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The Wavesheaf Offering

On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. . . . Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'"

The Bible nowhere indicates that the priests understood the ritual they were performing on Saturday evening when Jesus Christ, the archetypical Wavesheaf, was "harvested" from the material world by

being resurrected from the dead. On Sunday morning, as the firstborn of many brethren, He was lifted into and through the heavens to God's throne to be accepted by Him as the sacrifice for our sins and as our High Priest.


What an exuberant and joyous reunion must have taken place then! What thunderous "Hallelujahs" and applause for a job well done! Revelation 5:11-12 pictures "ten thousand times ten thousand [angels], and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!'"

God's plan had just taken a momentous step toward its completion. The Redeemer of mankind had triumphed and been glorified. "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Romans 5:10). Now the payment for our sins had been se-

cured and a sinless and dynamic High Priest installed as our Mediator before the Father. Our salvation had now been assured and death conquered, preparing the way for many, many more to follow.

On the surface, the wavesheaf offering may seem an insignificant event lost in the more visible activities of Passover and Unleavened Bread. Though it may be lost on this world's "Christianity," it memorializes the most significant spiritual event that has yet taken place on earth: the resurrection and ascension of our Savior Jesus Christ! Thank God that He has given us understanding of it! We can be even more thankful when we understand that it signifies the real beginning of the spiritual work of harvesting human souls, culminating with us being resurrected and changed to spirit as Jesus' brothers and sisters at His return!

In Christian love,



A conservative radio talk show out of Atlanta caught my ear one day as a discussion developed about the moral and ethical standards of youth today. Callers, young and old, gave their wisdom or the lack thereof. At one particular time, the subject matter had narrowed down to how young adults and teenagers evaluate what makes a person good or bad.

The next caller was Natalie, a 17-year-old girl who lives in an upper-middle-class neighborhood and achieves a B+ average in school. As her comments continued, it became clear that Natalie judged her own life by what others around her were doing and saying. Her moral and ethical standards did not come from the Bible or from standards taught to her by her parents. Her standards were based solely upon what was acceptable to her peers—those “wise” counselors who encourage individualism but all dress, act, and speak the same.

As Natalie vainly described her lifestyle, it was amazing to realize her total removal from reality and moral responsibility. She said she did not sleep around—she only has sex with her boyfriend (whoever that is that particular week). She does not drink alcohol—except at parties (which she attends several times a week). She defensively sighed, “I’m not bad, not like the others.”

She claims she only smokes pot about two times during the school week and occasionally before school in the morning—but not as much as most kids. When she goes to school stoned, the teachers know it, but no one mentions it. According to Natalie, most kids in her high school smoke pot mixed with LSD “because they go together so well.” She has tried it, but does not smoke it regularly (only a few times a month). Natalie admits, “Pot definitely affects my memory, definitely. There’s a lot I can’t remember. But everybody does it! I don’t do it like the others. Not as often.”

Natalie justified herself by saying, “I’m not bad, not like the others. I think I’m a pretty good person, I haven’t killed anybody. I know it’s wrong to do drugs, but it’s the only thing I do wrong. I’m a pretty good person. I haven’t killed anybody yet!”

The announcer was stunned, “Are you telling me, because you haven’t killed anyone—yet—that makes you a good person?”

In a matter-of-fact way Natalie replied, “Well, yes!”

What a sad indictment of the society in which we live that children have descended to the level of moral bankruptcy. Natalie is a typical product of this society. She is the fruit of a nation that has rejected the way of the righteous God. As the children of Israel did throughout most of their history, Natalie does whatever seems right in her own eyes (Judges 17:6; 21:25).

A Variable Standard

Wise Solomon writes in Proverbs 14:12, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” We can see the truth of his statement in our society, which engages in situation ethics rather than morality. Our news—local, state and national—is full of examples. When asked why she still supported President Clinton after his immorality hit television, radio and newsstands, a middle-aged woman replied, “Because he stands for social and political diversification.” She was willing to “forgive” his dalliance in the Oval Office with an intern half his age because he supported a political agenda she also espoused!

Diversification means “engaging in assorted operations or producing variety.” Synonyms are “variation,” “multiplicity” and “mixture.” As a basis for ethics, diversification implies variation from a fixed standard. Clinton’s own actions—now regarded as acceptable by much of the public—illustrate that his ethical “standard” varies with his mood, desires and aims. His ethic can plainly be stated as “the end justifies the means.”

Moreover, many of the politicians who criticized him for his infidelity, impropriety and deceit are guilty of the same sins. President Clinton’s sins became public knowledge when the media reported every graphic detail. Many of those who reported these things hide similar skeletons in their closets, but until

Comparing Among

their indiscretions see the light of day, they will continue to make a public mockery of him.

The apostle Paul comments in Romans 2:1 on the hypocrisy that often occurs when judging others: “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.” This is a clear explanation of Jesus’ illustration of a man with a plank in his eye critically pointing out the speck in someone else’s (Matthew 7:3-5)!

In the original Greek, “inexcusable” in Romans 2:1 is literally “defenseless.” In the spiritual court of law, there is no defense for the actions of a person who commits the same sin of which he accuses another. An interesting aspect of this appears when we understand a more thorough meaning of the word “practice” (*prassoo*) that occurs later in the verse. It means to perform repeatedly or habitually, to do exactly. We can infer from this that Paul means these accusers have not only committed the particular sin before but are also *continuing* to commit it!

We cannot properly assess what a righteous standard is if we use others or ourselves—fallible human beings—as the standard. True judgment is according to the truth of God. Paul makes this very point in the next verse: “But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things” (Romans 2:2).

God’s righteous judgment is based on truth. This means that His decisions are reached based on reality, on the facts of the case, not on appearances or intentions. It also means He judges without partiality to rank, wealth, station, or position. Finally, it means that He judges against an authoritative and unchanging standard: His own character as revealed in His Word.

Judging our lives according to how others live is a sure way to neglect and ignore serious problems in our own lives. Continuing in verse 3, Paul writes, “And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?” God pronounces judgment on those who make a practice of indulging in sin. The apostle makes it quite certain that all sin will be judged. No one will “get away with it.”

Commending Ourselves

Some, indulging in self-praise, write their own testimonials to promote themselves because they are full of impatient pride, unable to wait for the acknowledgment and praise of others for their accomplishments. In their own foolishness, these people try to establish their own conduct as the norm and then find great satisfaction in always measuring up to the standard that they have set.

Paul describes intruders in the church the same way in II Corinthians 10:12: “For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.” Apparently, the Corinthians to whom Paul was writing commonly compared themselves with each other. They not only made false ministers the standard to follow, but they also made themselves and their peers standards of righteousness.

Many of the Corinthians were graphic examples of pride and complacency. Occasionally, we also suffer the pride that causes us to compare ourselves among ourselves because it is so deeply ingrained in our human nature to evaluate ourselves by human standards.

A professing Christian who, in his own eyes, sets himself up as the standard of righteousness, will compare himself to others who appear to him to be less spiritual than himself. His views are the standard of righteousness, and his ways of worship are the models of proper devotion. His habits and customs are—in his own estimation—perfect. He looks on himself as the true measure of spirituality, humility and zeal, and he condemns others for failing to rise to his level. He judges everything by his own benchmark: himself.

Each of us lives under a unique set of circumstances. We are working on different problems, growing at various rates on diverse character traits. We experience dissimilar trials and have been influenced by our environment in distinctive ways. A true and accurate comparison is impossible by another human being. It misses the mark of perfection according to the truth of God. Only

Commending Ourselves

God can truly judge a person, for only He can judge the heart and observe the entire picture.

We know that it is our responsibility to examine ourselves intensely before Passover, and the Days of Unleavened Bread teach that we must rid our lives of the leaven of sin. However, comparing ourselves among ourselves does not accomplish the goal God has in mind for us, that is, the total renewing of our minds. Individual comparisons deter us from overcoming our problems because it causes us to aim too low and in the wrong direction. It deceitfully provides us with self-justification for the way we are. The result is no change and no growth. This is judgment according to our own standards and the standards of the created rather than the Creator.

In athletics, it is commonly understood that, if a person competes only with athletes of equal or lesser ability and skill, he cannot improve his ability and skill above theirs because he will not strive to improve. This is the principle of Proverbs 27:17: “iron sharpens iron.” Whether it is an individual sport like tennis or a team sport like volleyball or basketball, skills are sharpened by pushing oneself to exceed the skill of the other person or team. This principle works just as effectively in spiritual matters. Only if we set our sights higher than mere humanity (Colossians 3:1-2) will we ever attain godly character.

Even Secret Sins

We often cannot see our own sins and lack of righteous character unless God reveals them to us. King David records in Psalm 19:12-13 how he wrestled with the problem of his own concealed faults: “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; blameless, and I shall be innocent of great transgression.”

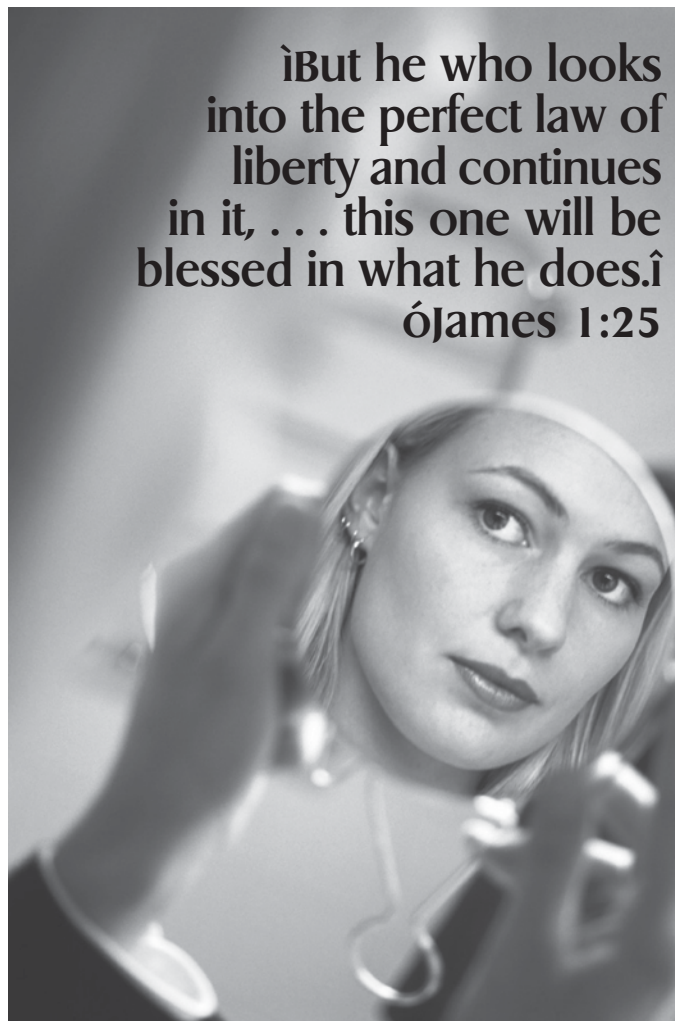
Secret faults are sins that we commit that we do not see or recognize as sins. We commit them not knowing we have committed sin. Nevertheless, we are still held accountable for our actions, and we will eventually pay the penalty. Ignorance of the law is no excuse. *Presumptuous sins* are willful sins, ones we do knowing that they are sin before we commit them. Such willful sins, depending on one’s attitude, can be spiritually very dangerous.

The godly man is not only concerned about avoiding committing sins willfully, but also with extracting those hidden sins that are committed unknowingly. Because we so often allow our carnal natures to dominate us, we remain blind to many of our sins and character flaws until God reveals them to us through the Holy Spirit. Paul writes in Romans 8:5-9:

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 mind

But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, . . . this one will be blessed in what he does.

James 1:25



is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. . . .

God delivers us from the power of the flesh by the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. One of our chief tasks as Christians is to “live according to the Spirit” more consistently and fully, making no room for the destructive efforts of our natural, carnal nature.

Paul adds in I Corinthians 2:11: “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.” Notice the contrast in verse 14, “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.” The “natural man”—as opposed to the spiritual man—is one who is governed and influenced by natural instincts and drives. His senses and lusts motivate his behavior and choices in opposition to godly reason, conscience and obedience to God’s law.

Natalie, the girl from the radio talk show, has no clue as to the magnitude of the decadence of her life. God has

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NICOLAITANISM TODAY

The Christmas season has passed—thankfully—for another year. The colorful, twinkling lights have come down, dying evergreens grace the curbs awaiting trash collection, lines at stores have dwindled to manageable size, and the cheerful, too-sweet tunes of the season no longer clog the airwaves. People have quit the annoying “Merry Christmas!” sendoff, the Salvation Army’s bell ringers have gone on to quieter things, and Rudolph, the elves and jolly Saint Nick have disappeared from sight.

Is it not ironic that “Christians” celebrate Christmas? Christians are by name followers of Christ, and He says nothing in His Word about memorializing His birth year after year. The Bible is quite clear that the day of one’s death is more important (Ecclesiastes 7:1), and certainly, Christ’s death is particularly more important for our salvation and the fulfillment of God’s plan than His birth (Romans 5:6-21). So how did Christians come to believe that God approves of them celebrating Christmas?

The answer is not as simple as one might think. It involves a minor controversy within today’s scattered church of God: Who are the Nicolaitans? Believe it or not, the

Nicolaitans are in part responsible for “Christianity’s” acceptance of Christmas, Easter, Halloween and other unbiblical practices. More importantly, Nicolaitanism, representative of a much broader philosophy, can be blamed for the organized and systematic removal of God’s law as a central pillar of the Christian way of life. These things happened because of an attitude, an approach to the truth, found in the Nicolaitan heresy.

Interestingly, Jesus mentions Nicolaitanism in a few of His letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2. This fact brings in a prophetic angle—that is, it makes Nicolaitanism not only a historical movement but also a current and future trend within the church of God. Knowing what Nicolaitanism is and how it works may be important to our spiritual survival!

THE CONTROVERSY

Although prior studies on this phenomenon had been done, the church’s interest in Nicolaitanism coincided with the breakup and scattering of the church in the early 1990s. Papers

on the subject, often linked with ideas about the heresy of Balaam, circulated from hand to hand and across the Internet. One can even argue that these papers’ definitions of Nicolaitanism spurred and intensified the scattering of the brethren.

In the main, these papers defined Nicolaitanism as the belief and practice of hierarchical government, the scapegoat for all the church’s problems, with an emphasis on tithing and using a paid ministry. This definition derives from the meaning of the word *Nicolaos* in Greek: “conqueror of the people” (*Balaam* in Hebrew has a similar meaning). The authors of these papers on Nicolaitanism assumed that, since God names things what they are, the title “Nicolaitan” must therefore refer to a practice of abusive and dictatorial government and administration, which they assumed to be hierarchy. This assumption is based entirely on the authors’ emotional reactions to their circumstances at the time—not upon biblical or even logical reasoning.

First, *Nicolaos* may have nothing to do with Nicolaitan doctrine. Not every name in the Bible is significant spiritually. For instance, *Luke* means “white,” and any spiri-

tual connotation it has to him or his work is pure conjecture. Many biblical names are simple common names within the culture and time in which the person lived.

Second, the meaning of *Nicolaos* is not necessarily negative. Although its natural connotation is “one who conquers the people,” it can have a positive, possessive sense: “the people’s conqueror,” that is, a champion of the people, one who fights for the people’s best interests. It may refer to a tyrant or despot, but it can just as easily speak of a popular hero.

Third, the name has a military association, not a governmental one. It primarily suggests conquering by might and strategy on the field of battle. Granted, such conquerors usually also governed as kings or emperors, but ruling is a separate activity from conquering, occurring as its consequence.

Fourth, this means that *Nicolaos* nowhere suggests any form of government.

Those who believe the word to refer to hierarchy assume that a conqueror would rule as a tyrant or dictator, whether he is called king, emperor, president, chancellor or first citizen. While this may be the rule, a few historical exceptions (for example, American military-heroes-turned-rulers George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses Grant, Dwight Eisenhower, etc.) prove this assumption faulty.

Finally, people can be conquered in ways other than “abusive and dictatorial” hierarchy. Socialist democracy in America and Europe has by mostly “benevolent” means cowed millions into a complacent and controllable herd. Populaces have been overcome by trickery, disease, famine, natural disaster and their own sheer stupidity. Limiting Nicolaitanism to hierarchical government is arbitrary and subjective.

The Bible itself does not define

Nicolaitanism. Revelation 2:6 declares, “But this you [the Ephesian church] have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” Jesus later says to the Pergamos church, “Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine

Christ wrote letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, and He mentions Nicolaitan or Gnostic practices in three of them: Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira.



of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate” (verse 15). While these verses provide no definition, they tell us three things:

1. Nicolaitanism is a belief system, like a religion or a philosophy.
2. Nicolaitanism results in ungodly behavior.
3. Christ hates it vehemently.

NICOLAS

The only other clue to Nicolaitanism available within the New Testament is the lone occurrence of the name “Nicolas” in Acts 6:5. It appears in the section describing the dispute between the Hebrews and the Hellenists over the neglect of the latter’s widows. To solve this problem, the church chooses seven deacons to oversee

the physical work of distributing food to the needy brethren, and one of these is “Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.”

Again, this description provides the most meager of hints about the man but enough to propose some conclusions. Nicolas is a Hellenist, meaning primarily that he spoke Greek, but probably also suggesting that he possessed a Greek education. As such, “they [the ‘Hellenists’] maintained a more liberal outlook than the ‘Hebrews,’ including the apostles” (F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, p. 219), especially regarding keeping the law. This “liberal outlook” toward the law later formed the heart of the debate at the Council of Jerusalem in AD 49 (Acts 15).

That Luke calls him a proselyte tells us that he is a Gentile who converted to Judaism before his calling to Christianity. Becoming a proselyte required a Gentile to keep Jewish law in its entirety, undergo circumcision, be baptized and make a special sacrifice at the Temple. This rigorous process indicates that Nicolas must also have been quite devout and dedicated in his beliefs. The church’s choice of him as one of the first deacons reveals he likely possessed standout natural abilities and leadership qualities, as well as fulfilling the apostles’ qualifications of being “of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3).

The last tidbit of information is that he is from Antioch, the largest city and capital of the Roman province of Syria. The city’s residents—Greeks, Macedonians, Syrians, Jews, Romans and others—brought to it their own languages, cultures, philosophies and religions. F.F. Bruce writes, “Its cosmopolitan population and material wealth provided an apt setting for cultural exchange and religious syncretism” (*ibid.*, p. 264). This urban, multicultural, reli-

gious mélange formed Nicolas' background.

Unfortunately, it is in the context of syncretism that Nicolas is last mentioned in the post-biblical, historical record. Both Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1.26.3; 3.10.6) and Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies*, 3.4.25f) consider Nicolas of Antioch to be the founder of the Gnostic sect known as the Nicolaitans. Another early writer, Hippolytus, adds that Nicolas "departed from sound doctrine, and was in the habit of inculcating indifference of both life and food" (*Refutation of All Heresies*, 7.24), meaning he taught the Gnostic belief of the irrelevance of physical things. This reinforces Clement's claim that Nicolas became an ascetic and that his followers later perverted his teachings to encompass idolatry and immorality (2.20.12), becoming what we know as Nicolaitans.

From this information, we can hypothesize the evolution of Nicolaitanism. Roman church historian Eusebius writes that Nicolas himself was a moral man (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.29). Though sincere and devout, he came to believe that the only way to grow spiritually was to consider his body and its desires as unimportant. In this way, he could ignore them in favor of spiritual pursuits. His fundamental doctrine appears to have been "the flesh must be treated with contempt."

Over the years, however, this teaching took on a more Gnostic spin: Since the flesh is unimportant, even contemptible, what one does in the flesh is of no consequence. Spiritual life, growth and ultimately salvation occur in the soul, and since God is spirit, He has no regard for the flesh. Therefore, Nicolaitans reasoned, what does it matter if one satisfies the flesh's desires? At some point in its early

history, then, Nicolaitanism evolved from an ascetic philosophy to a licentious one—one that Christ says He hates.

IDOLATRY AND SEX

What was the doctrine and practice of Nicolaitanism that Christ hates so much? The context of Revelation 2:12-16, the letter to the church in Pergamos, confirms the claims of these early church writers that the Nicolaitans were antinomian (literally, "against law"). Notice the flow of verses 14-15:

But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to

Balaam, the sins of eating things sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality, and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. Christ implies that all three are the same basic heresy under different guises. This antinomian teaching affected the church in Thyatira as well (verses 20-21).

Moses records Balaam's story in Numbers 22-25, 31. Balak, king of Moab, hires Balaam to curse the Israelites, but every time he tries, Balaam instead blesses them. He then counsels Balak to send Moabite and Midianite women into the camp of Israel to seduce the men and invite them to the sacrifices of their god (Numbers 25:1-2; 31:16). Clearly, Balaam's instruction included getting the Israelites to commit idolatry and sexual immorality.

Interestingly, these two practices arise in the Jerusalem Council in AD 49. Paul and Barnabas, with

Peter's help, convince the assembled elders that Gentile converts to Christianity should not be required to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, Judaism's rigorous "yoke" of picayune laws (Acts 15:10). However, the Council enjoins the Gentiles on four points of typical Gentile religious practice:

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. (verses 28-29)

Obviously, the Council's decree does not exempt Gentiles from keeping the Ten Commandments, for it is clear from many New Testament passages that Jesus and the apostles taught them to both Jews

The early church chose seven deacons to care for the needs of the Hellenists' widows. Among them was Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.



eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

The structure of this paragraph ties together the doctrine of

and Gentiles (e.g., Matthew 19:17-19; Romans 13:9; etc.). These two issues—idolatry and sexual immorality—became a flashpoint in the conflict between true Christianity and Hellenistic Gnosticism, and a person's stance on them exposed which side he favored. Thus, Nicolaitanism and Balaamism are biblical symbols or representatives of the larger Gnostic, antinomian influence on Christianity.

DIRE WARNINGS

Is Nicolaitanism passé? Evidently not, for Jesus' admonitions in Revelation 2 indicate that this antinomian influence will remain until His return. Notice His warnings to Pergamos and Thyatira:

Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. . . . But to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, and who have not known the depths of Satan [another allusion to antinomianism], as they call them, I will put on you no

other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come. (verses 16, 24-25)

This does not mean that the particular sins of eating meat sacrificed to idols and sexual license will pervade the church until the end, although idolatry and sexual sins will certainly exist in it. He is more concerned about the antinomian spirit, the attitude of lawlessness, that allows these sins to infest the church. When members of the church teach and practice that they are not obliged to keep the laws of God, sin will inevitably break out vigorously. When this occurs, Christians are no longer under grace but under the penalty of the law and the wrath of the Judge (Romans 6:11-23; Hebrews 10:26-31; 12:25).

Jesus, Paul, Peter, Jude and John warn against the encroachment of antinomianism or lawlessness. In His Olivet Prophecy, Jesus says: "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matthew 24:11-12). What will happen to such lawless people? Jesus Himself answers:

Many will say to Me in that

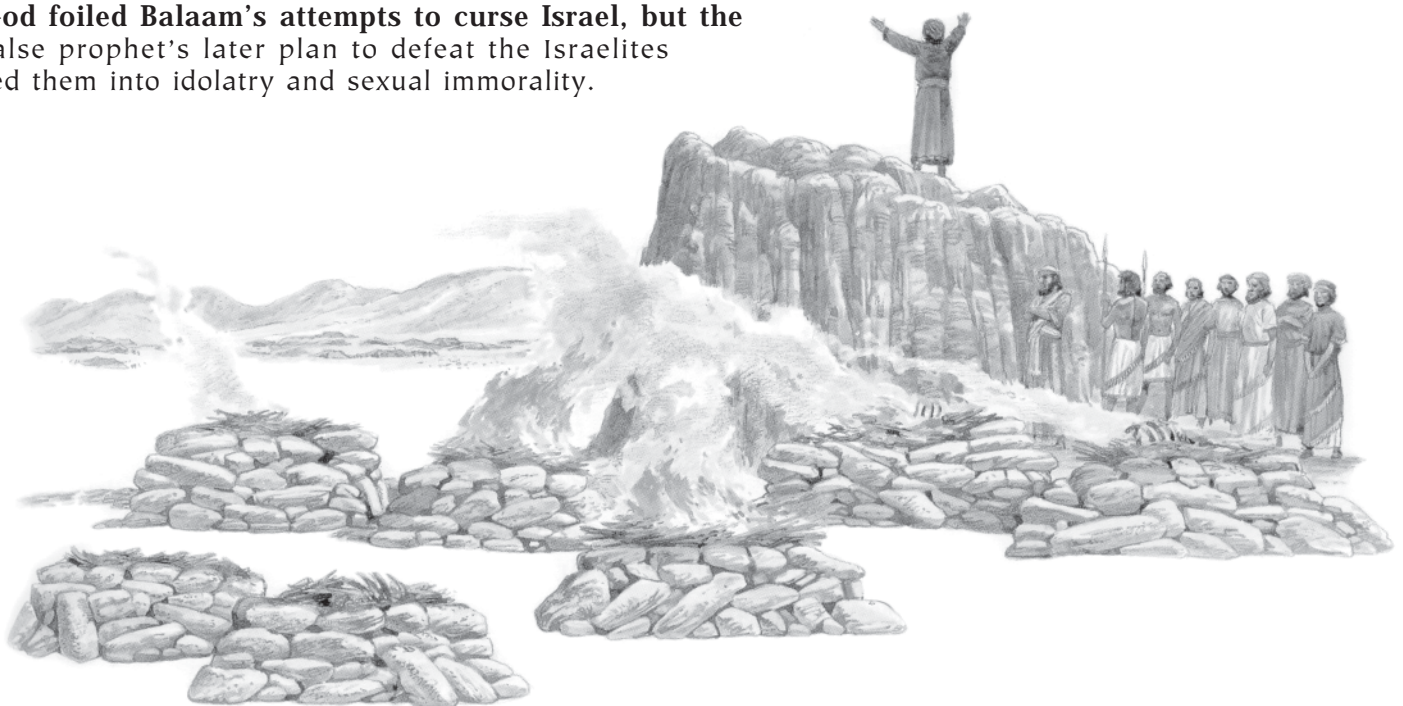
day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" (Matthew 7:22-23)

Among Paul's end-time prophecies is his prediction of a great apostasy that results from the unrestrained assault of "the mystery of lawlessness" (II Thessalonians 2:1-7). This comes

with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. 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. . . . Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught. . . . (verses 10-12, 15)

Peter and Jude use similar language in their books to counter the antinomian teaching extant in their

God foiled Balaam's attempts to curse Israel, but the false prophet's later plan to defeat the Israelites led them into idolatry and sexual immorality.



congregations. Peter writes:

[T]he Lord knows how to . . . reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority. . . .

But these, like natural brute beasts made to be caught and destroyed, speak evil of things they do not understand [such as God's law], and will utterly perish in their own corruption, and will receive the wages of unrighteousness. . . . They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness. . . .

For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through licentiousness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. . . .

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. (II Peter 2:9-10, 12-13, 15, 18-19; 3:17-18)

Jude adds:

[C]ontend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God

and our Lord Jesus Christ. (verses 3-4)

John's epistles are full of warnings against antinomian heresies. For instance, notice these passages:

◆ Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (I John 2:3-4)

◆ Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. (I John 3:4)

◆ 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. (I John 3:10)

◆ By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. (I John 5:2-3)

◆ This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. . . . Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. . . . If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. (II John 6, 9-11)

◆ Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God. (III John 11)

In addition, the gospel of John uses Jesus' own words during His ministry to attack antinomian heresies in the church. This much scrip-

tural attention along with its prophetic implications warrants our taking careful notice.

STILL WITH US

Of all people, we who have left the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) in the past decade should be most aware of the antinomian spirit working in the church of God. The doctrinal changes that began to be instituted mere months after the death of Herbert W. Armstrong had as their goal the removal of God's law, particularly the Sabbath, from the church's beliefs. WCG's subsequent heavy emphasis on "grace" and "love," along with its renunciation of "legalism" exposed its antinomian position. Because of these changes, it has joined evangelical Protestant "Christianity" to the point that it now worships on Sunday, encourages celebration of Christmas and Easter, and permits the use of crucifixes and images of "Jesus" by its ministry and membership and in its publications.

The "Christian" churches of this world are predominantly antinomian to some extent. Both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism belong to what can be termed Hellenistic Christianity, that is, a form of Christianity heavily influenced by Greek philosophies, particularly Gnosticism. Catholicism is the more moderate of the two, having retained obedience to the Church and its traditions as well as requiring certain works for salvation. However, its belief of the afterlife, with its levels of heaven, limbo, purgatory and beatific vision—not to mention its belief in an immortal soul—brand it as Gnostic.

Protestantism is more antinomian, having rejected Catholicism's works during the Reformation. Martin Luther's doctrine of salvation by grace "through faith alone" removes God's law from the equation altogether. Pure Protestant theology is so antinomian that it

claims that lawkeeping in any form—which it terms “legalism”—is detrimental to the soul’s growth in spirituality. This form of Christianity also champions the doctrine of eternal security, the idea that, once one accepts Jesus, he can never lose his salvation, no matter what sins he commits (“once saved, always saved”). This doctrine knocks out law and judgment for sin in one blow.

Of course, the world itself is antinomian because it is under the sway of Satan the Devil, who despises God’s law (Ephesians 2:2; I John 5:19). He even tried his antinomian tricks on Jesus, who coun-

tered with quotations from the law (Matthew 4:1-10)! Certainly, our adversary will tempt us similarly, trying to get us to put God’s law aside so we can fulfill our desires.

Jesus, however, in his prayer in John 17, asks God to help us in this, and He also gives us the antidote to antinomianism:

I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep [guard, protect] them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. (verses 15-17)

Knowing God’s truth and practicing it to become holy will protect us from the rampant antinomianism of this world, this age that is soon to end. Still to come are the Beast and his False Prophet, who will exemplify this anti-God, anti-Christ, anti-law spirit. To endure to the end, to survive the mystery of lawlessness that will mark the end time, we must hold fast to God’s Word and seek His righteousness. “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the [New Jerusalem]” (Revelation 22:14).

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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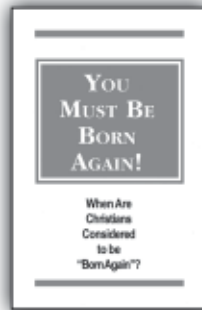
Comparing Ourselves Among Ourselves

not revealed her sin to her. She continues to compare herself with others, never improving but sadly degenerating into the darkness of sin that leads to death. In this life, without the truth of God and the revelation of what life should be like, she has no hope of living a truly abundant life.

As we ask God to keep us from committing presumptuous sins and to reveal our hidden sins to us with the help of the Holy Spirit, we have to evaluate ourselves according to God’s standard of truth, not how we fare with others—as Paul so memorably says, not comparing ourselves among ourselves. Because comparing ourselves to others is rooted in pride, it takes diligent prayer and a humble attitude to acknowledge that we sin and to desire to search out and overcome our sins, whether known or hidden.

In Psalm 139:23-24, David writes, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Until we come to have a similar attitude to David’s, our self-evaluation will be flawed, but once we compare ourselves to a pure and righteous standard, overcoming and growth can begin in earnest!

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BIBLE STUDY: SELF-SURRENDER

Everyone struggles between the negative impulses of self-seeking and self-defense on the one hand and the positive, unselfish impulses toward self-denial and self-surrender on the other. All religions maintain some concept of surrender of self to deity, ranging from heathen fanaticism to self-sacrifice for the holiest aims and achievements. But what distinguishes righteous from unrighteous surrender? Is it not knowing the truth that sets us free to worship and

surrender in faith to the one true God?

A Christian's life can be described as a life of both self-surrender and self-development. To some, this may seem contradictory, but only when we surrender self-will can we realize our human potential. We must give up what our carnal nature holds dear to take hold of something greater, spiritual and eternal. In this Bible study, we will survey this noblest of human virtues—self-surrender.



1. Has man from earliest times been required to surrender himself? Genesis 2:24; 3:16; 12:1; 22:1-8; Hebrews 11:23-27.

COMMENT: The Old Testament teaches self-surrender in the account of Adam and Eve. Each is given to the other and both are to surrender to God in perfect obedience. Throughout the Bible, self-surrender characterizes the faithful. Abraham abandons friends and native country to go to a land unknown to him, because God called him to do so. At the voice of God, he gives up all his cherished hopes in his only son, Isaac. Moses, at the call of God, surrenders self, and in faith undertakes the deliverance of his fellow Israelites. He is willing to be blotted out of God's Book of Life, if only God would spare the people (Exodus 32:32).

2. How was Israel to express its surrender to God? Exodus 13:2, 13; 19:5-6; 22:29; Leviticus 20:7; Deuteronomy 7:6-11.

COMMENT: Israel itself is set apart to God as a holy people—a surrendered nation. Moreover, the entire Levitical system of sacrifice is a doctrine of self-surrender. The whole burnt offering implies the complete surrender of the worshipper to God (Leviticus 1). The law regarding the firstborn of both men and beasts emphasizes the same fundamental doctrine, as does the ritual for the consecration of priests (Leviticus 8).

3. Does self-surrender involve giving oneself? Isaiah 53:7; Nehemiah 2:5; Esther 4:16; Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-37; 20:22-24.

COMMENT: During their return from exile, the faithful remnant of Judah endures great hardships for the nation's future and to accomplish God's purposes. We can also see this spirit in Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah. Nehemiah surrenders his position in Shushan to help reestablish the returned exiles in Jerusalem. Esther is prepared to surrender her life to ensure her people's safety. The early disciples, counting none of their possessions as their own, give for the good of all. Stephen and others give of themselves to the point of martyrdom.

Paul surrenders himself joyfully for God's use, carrying out his commission not knowing what dangers might lie ahead.

4. Ultimately, what does self-surrender require? Galatians 2:20; Colossians 2:20; Romans 6:6, 7; 12:1; I Corinthians 6:19-20; I Peter 2:13-17; 5:5, 6.

COMMENT: Our self-surrender is to die with Christ, crucifying the old man that a new man may live. In so doing, the man no longer lives for himself, but Christ lives in him. We are no longer our own but Christ's, and by making this living sacrifice, we die daily. Consequently, we must also surrender ourselves for our neighbors' welfare and subject ourselves to those in authority and to civil ordinances for God's sake.

5. Does Christ's teaching and example emphasize that self-surrender is necessary to become His disciple? Matthew 16:24-28; Luke 9:59-62; 14:26-33; Philippians 2:5-18.

COMMENT: When certain disciples are called, they leave all and follow Christ. This dedication requires so complete a surrender of self that father, mother, and one's own life must be loved less than God. This surrender of self is never a loss of one's personality. On the contrary, it opens the way to true human potential.

Jesus not only teaches self-surrender but also practices it for our edification. As a child, He subjects Himself to His parents, and later, self-surrender distinguishes His baptism and temptation. Throughout a life of physical privation, He does the Father's will and not His own, refusing to use His power and standing with God even for His own deliverance. With His dying breath, He surrenders His spirit to the Father. While He is no ascetic and does not demand asceticism of His followers, He empties Himself and becomes obedient even to death. His working in us both to will and to do enables us to respond to His exhortation and work out our own salvation. Our reward for self-surrender is well worth the cost: eternal life and joy in God's Kingdom!