

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 10, Number 10

December 2001

DOES
KEEPING
CHRISTMAS
MATTER?

Christmas, Syncretism and Presumption

In 1980, the host of a Columbia, South Carolina, radio talk show invited the pastor of a large Baptist church onto his show to discuss Christmas and some of its customs. The clergyman admitted to the pagan origin of Christmas, but said that it really did not matter.

On the same radio station, in the weeks before Christmas, a syndicated commentary, “The Customs of Christmas,” aired daily. During one of these, the narrator said, “There is almost nothing about Christmas in the Bible except the actual story from the book of Luke.”

These are significant admissions about the origins of the biggest holiday of the year. However, we should expect such admissions because Christmas presents an excellent illustration of the perversity of human nature. Americans claim, generally, to have sprung from Judeo-Christian roots, and both Jews and Christians profess to get their ideas, customs, practices, and teachings from the same book, the Bible. Yet we find most Christians—and even some Jews!—celebrating Christmas, a festival that is nowhere mentioned in the Bible.

Years ago, the editors of *Newsweek* produced a montage of pictures showing how people in various parts of the world celebrate Christmas. One of the most striking featured holiday decorations in Japan. The normal trappings, banners, and lights were taken to the extreme limits of gaudiness. Thousands, probably millions, of lights had been strung up over some of the city streets or on the sides of buildings. Santa Claus and his reindeer flew among the lights and banners. It was a visual cacophony of light and color. We might expect this in France, Spain, or Germany, because these nations claim to be Christian, but not in Japan, an Oriental nation whose major religion is Shintoism! They too have been caught up in the “spirit of the holidays.”

Christmas is a worldwide phenomenon. It is not restricted to the Israelitish countries, or to the “Christian” nations of the world. We see vestiges of its presence in every corner of the world, no matter how far removed from Christian influence. When we take an honest look at its global appeal, we find that the real

interest in it is commercial rather than religious. The latter factor is often dismissed or ignored.

Like the Baptist preacher, can we afford to dismiss it so glibly? Is Christmas really all that innocent? Can we pass it off by saying, “Oh, it really doesn’t matter all that much”? Should we be so careless?

Some excuse it with trite statements like, “It’s what you have in your heart, the ideals, the teaching, that counts, not the actual practice of it.” Now this may sound reasonable because, after all, we want to glorify God in every aspect of our lives. Does not Christmas glorify the newborn Christ? Although God does not mention it in His Word, is it not something that perhaps we ought to do? On the other hand, does God give us better reasons not to add it to our worship of Him?

ZEAL WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE

The apostle Paul describes a general Israelitish characteristic—one still in evidence—in Romans 10:1-3:

Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

Are modern Israelites who celebrate Christmas really deceived? Is the deception so strong that they cannot see it? Interestingly, a commentator writes that “they being ignorant of” (verse 3) could be translated into “for they ignoring,” which puts a different sense on Paul’s thought. When one is ignorant, he just does not know. Perhaps knowledge was withheld from him. On the other hand, when one ignores knowledge, it is readily available, but he turns his back on it.

A self-deceived person is ignoring truth rather than ignorant of it, and if that indeed is Paul’s



ing God's existence, power, and nature are clearly seen, but mankind suppresses the truth. What God wants man to know, man willingly ignores and suppresses through the addition of beliefs, customs and traditions that cloak the truth. The truth is still there, hidden behind a screen of falsehoods that most never attempt to remove.

Theologians call this process *syncretism*. According to *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, syncretism is "the combination of different forms of belief or practice." Syncretism could possibly describe other fields, like philosophy, but scholars use it almost exclusively in religious contexts. *Syncretize*, the verb form of the word, is very revealing. It means "to attempt to unite and harmonize especially without critical examination or logical unity." In other words, those who syncretize will frequently attach one belief or practice to their religion without trying to ascertain whether it is proper to do so.

Using Christmas as an excuse, men have added foreign beliefs and practices to the worship of God the Father and Jesus Christ. They have combined pagan ideas, beliefs and practices with Christianity without examining whether God approves.

This implies presumption by the syncretizer. *Presumption* is "an attitude or belief dictated by probability." Facts play little part in presumption, just probability and likelihood. Its first synonym is "assumption," followed by "arrogance," "boldness," "impertinence" and "imprudence." *Presume*, its verb form, means "to undertake without leave or clear justification; to expect or assume especially with confidence; to suppose to be true without proof; to take for granted."

As we begin to combine the concepts of syncretism, presump-

emphasis, it makes this Christmas question much more serious. It means that people are accountable for what they are doing, and therefore, they will pay more for it than if they acted in ignorance.

Most Americans are aware that many of the Christmas traditions have no connection with Christianity. Almost every year, articles on the origins of various Christmas customs appear in the newspapers, especially in the larger cities. The authors of these articles cannot trace any of the "modern" traditions back to the Bible because most of the customs came from pre-Christian traditions in Germany, Norway, Russia, Holland, and other nations. Thus, people cannot claim that such knowledge was withheld from them.

In Romans 1:18-20, Paul asserts that things involv-



tion, and the Israelitish characteristic of misguided zeal for knowledge, we will see why a holiday like Christmas could become and remain a practice in modern Israel. The Israelitish people—especially the sons of Joseph—seem to be imbued with a spirit of zeal that is both a blessing and a curse. It is almost paradoxical that Israel's zeal for God is often its greatest hindrance, as it retards true righteousness that comes by faith and submission to God. Virtually all of Israel's religious zeal is wasted because it stampedes in the wrong direction.

JOSEPH'S DRIVE TO EXPAND

Before he died, Jacob made a prophecy regarding the traits of his descendants, the tribes of Israel, "in the last days" (Genesis 49:1). Notice what he says about Joseph: "Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well; his branches run over the wall" (verse 22). The people of Joseph are a productive lot. To produce goods and services requires a vast amount of energy—call it zeal, enthusiasm, or drive. They live in a well-watered land that enhances agriculture and industry. The people are so driven that they extend their influence and zeal beyond the boundaries of their countries.

Historically, the people of Joseph have moved into other countries, taken the raw materials to make their products, built manufacturing plants, and influenced the native culture. When the British or Americans colonized, they brought their way of life and imposed it on the natives. Americans continue to introduce movies, television, rock music, household appliances, big cars, etc., to impoverished nations around the globe.

These things just typify the inherent drive of the people of Joseph, a proclivity to expand beyond the frontiers in every endeavor. They are an aggressive and innovative people in science, industry, education, government, and religion. This is generally beneficial and

at the benefits it would bring!" Thus, they throw away the holy days and the Sabbath, but accept pagan holidays, the trinity, and heaven and hell. Through the centuries, the truth is forgotten, and the false ideas that sprang from human reason become a major part of the religion.

MODERNIZING CHRISTIANITY

Things have not changed; the proclivity is still in mankind. Notice this quotation from a modern book, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology*, by William Hordern. The title of the chapter from which this comes is "The Remaking of Orthodoxy."

The method of liberalism includes the attempt to modernize Christian theology. The world, liberals argue, has changed radically since the early creeds of Christendom were formulated; this makes the creeds sound archaic and unreal to modern man. We have to rethink Christianity in thought forms which the modern world can comprehend. Fosdick [a liberal Christian theologian] argued that we must express the essence of Christianity, its "abiding experiences," but that we must not identify these with the "changing categories" in which they have been expressed in the past. For example, says Fosdick, an abiding experience of Christianity has been its conviction that God will triumph over evil. This has been traditionally pictured in the category of Christ's second coming on the clouds to destroy evil and to set up the good. We can no longer retain this outworn category, but we can still believe the truth which this ancient thought form was trying to express. We can continue to work in the faith that, through His devoted followers, God is now building His Kingdom and that there will be a renewing

productive, but in one area, religion, it has profound repercussions. Satan has taken advantage of this characteristic, producing a religion that allows Israelites to think that they are Christian and yet still be free to explore the frontiers of religious thought.

This proclivity is not confined to the people of Joseph, as we can see by tracing God's revelation to man. God first gave His religion to Israel through Moses, and later, through Jesus Christ by means of the Holy Spirit, He gave to His church an improved, spiritual religion based upon the original. The early apostles preached and taught this revelation, writing books that provide for us the foundation for Christianity.

But what has happened through the centuries? People have felt free to expand their religious horizons into areas of thinking far removed from the orthodox teachings of the Bible. They say, "Isn't this idea interesting? Wouldn't it be good if Christianity absorbed this? Look

of life, individual and social, to bring it into conformity with the will of God. The essence of the faith is thus retained, argues Fosdick, while the thought form in which it was once clothed has been abandoned. (p. 74)

Thus, in a few words, he says that Christ will not come because that is an outworn idea—that is just how ancient people thought. Today, he claims, we know the Kingdom is already here, and it will gradually grow as God adds to it. Again, we see unrestrained zeal for knowledge.

Hordern continues, "Man's mind is capable of thinking God's thoughts after Him. Man's intuitions and reason are the best clues that we have to the nature of God." What blasphemy! God's nature is like human nature? The Bible explicitly says, "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 mind must be kept open to all truth regardless of from whence it comes,” Hordern adds. Now he rationalizes that if “truth” comes from paganism, we can include it in Christianity. Christ was born. That is true. Giving gifts is good, right? So it must be all right to pretend that a fat man in a red suit brings gifts to children to commemorate Christ’s birth.

He concludes, “This means that the liberal must have an open mind; no questions are closed.” Nothing is absolute with this kind of thinking. We can *never* know what is true! This leads to such tolerance that every evil and perversion is permitted because nothing is wrong. Anything goes!

Can we be so blind to think that this “openmindedness” is not evident in the U.S., Canada, Britain, Australia, and other Israelite countries? It starts with such things as allowing Christmas to be a part of the worship of God. This syncretistic inclusion begins to dilute the purity of our God-given religion, and before long, other barriers begin to fall. Soon all absolutes are passé, and perversions are commonplace.

DOES IT MATTER?

Is it any wonder when the clergy—supposedly the guardians of religious purity—thinks so liberally, that the laity acts the way it does? The clergy shrugs off the paganism in Christmas, claiming that it is harmless. Is it? Does it really make any difference whether we celebrate Christmas?

One of our ministers visited a prospective member, a policeman, a person accustomed to dealing with law. A policeman is at least experienced with the biblical principles regarding the importance of law. During the visit, the minister and the policeman began discussing Christmas, and the minister asked where in the Bible God commanded its observance. The minister said he

could show him many verses that plainly said that God did not want us to learn the way of the heathen, nor add their ways to our worship. Since he could not quote Scripture, the policeman’s only argument was that the Bible related the story of Jesus’ birth.

The policeman asked, “Does it make any difference if I keep Christmas?” The minister said, “No, it doesn’t make any difference whether you celebrate Christmas or not, *unless there is a God.*” Then he showed him Deuteronomy 12:29-31:

When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, “How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do

likewise.” You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.

It certainly matters to God, the Lawgiver! It was because of these heathen practices that God was driving out the inhabitants of the land. He did not—and does not—want His people to get caught in the process of judgment and punishment that results from broken law!

Notice that God says “that you are not ensnared.” In the Bible, a snare is a figurative expression of destruction through deception. The snare itself does not destroy, but it leads to destruction. The Israelites heard these words in the last months before going into the Promised Land. God had set the land aside for them, but the people who inhabited it were still there. It was a ready-made nation for their use. The towns, fortifications, houses, farms, businesses—everything was ready for them to take over.

We too were born into an ready-made society. The world was already here when we came into it, and because we had no alternative, we accepted it without resistance. We absorbed the culture because our parents taught it to us. However, with our calling God now has us moving in the other direction, away from this world. We must reject the false practices of those who have inhabited the land before us.

NOT GOD’S WORLD

I John 2:15-17 warns us that there is a profound gulf between the Father and the world, and that a Christian is faced with making a choice between them. Spirituality, morally, and ethically, Christianity does not allow for neutrality. God is bringing us into a position where

we recognize truth, admit it is true, and make it a part of our lives.

We are learning a new way of life, so He does not want us to be ensnared by the attractiveness of many things that are in the world. We cannot presume that because something appears to be harmless, it would be fine to do “just this one time.” Therefore, we have to learn to resist the urge to think and conduct our lives as the world does.

“World” in I John 2 is the Greek *cosmos*, and its basic meaning is “an ordered system.” Because of the disparity between God and this world, it cannot possibly be the world for which God gave His only begotten Son. The world He created He called “very good.” Nor is He referring to mankind, also part of His creation. He loves people and desires to save them.

Nevertheless, He does not like man’s way of life. This ordered, human-centered system is anti-God and

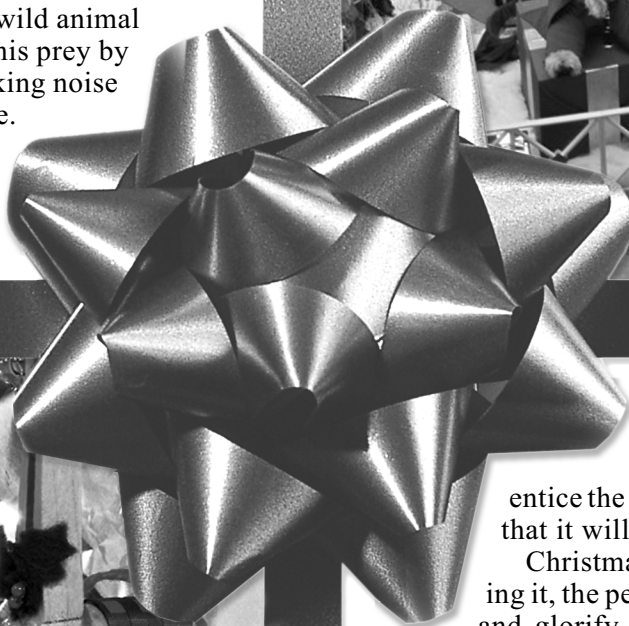
anti-Christ, and Satan sits at its head. This system occupies His creation and consists of people that God loves so much that He sent His Son to die for them, but He does not love the system! It produces people that need to be rescued, and it tends to make them worse and worse.

When God speaks of “the world,” He is identifying all of man’s purposes, pursuits, pleasures, practices, and places where God is not wanted. Much of this world is religious, cultured, refined, intellectual, but it is still anti-God and anti-Christ.

Through His calling, God puts us into a position where He forces us to choose between disparate ways of life, and both of them are realities. We must choose either the eternal and worthwhile or the temporal and vain. God is not saying that this world is unpleasant, unattractive, or unappealing, but we have to choose between that reality and His. The sum of I John 2:15-17 is that this ordered system—anti-God yet appealing and attractive—has the power to seduce the believer, to ensnare him and turn him from God. We have to be vigilantly on guard against it.

Christmas is a vivid illustration of the world’s power of attraction. It plays upon all of a person’s senses with pleasant music, lights, colors, foods, clothes, gifts, and parties. Though it is a very attractive trap, it nonetheless ensnares the person into destruction. By itself, it does not destroy the person—it is the snare, the trap!

Anyone who has ever hunted a wild animal like a deer knows one cannot bag his prey by blundering through the woods making noise and leaving his scent everywhere. Instead, a hunter makes himself as invisible as possible so that the deer wanders under his stand where he can shoot it. The same

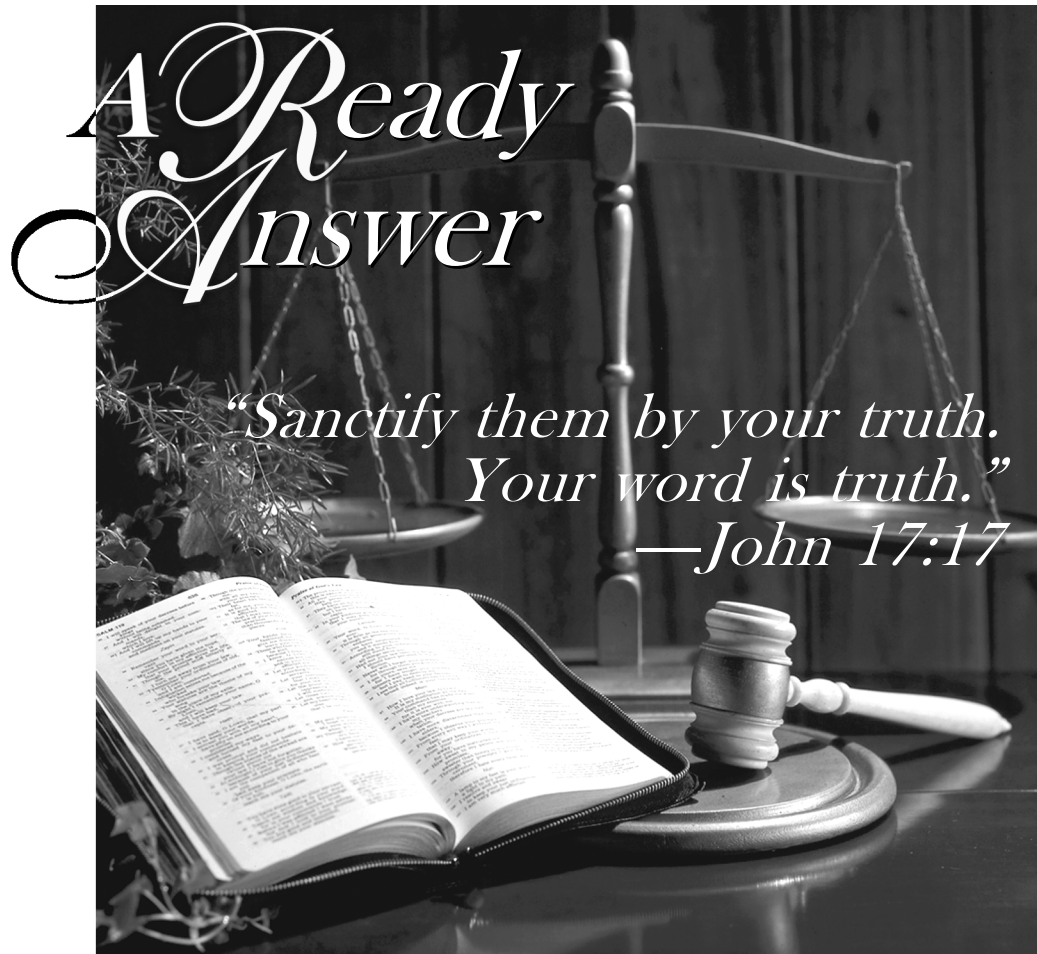


holds true with trapping smaller animals. A successful trapper makes a trap that will entice the animal in without letting it know that it will be caught.

Christmas is a well-laid trap. In celebrating it, the people of the land honor, worship, and glorify a god, but not the God of the Bible. It is appealing and attractive with all the ornamentation and catchy music. There is also an appealing baby, born to be the King of kings, and his lovely mother radiant in her motherhood. In addition, what could be better than giving gifts? Certainly giving is Christian. And what about decorating ever-green trees, hanging mistletoe and holly boughs, caroling, stuffing stockings, and burning Yule logs?

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The Whole Truth

Some years past, on a trip to Portland, Oregon, I sat next to a lady attorney on the airplane. She had left the legal profession and entered the restaurant business, and as I sold to restaurants, we had common ground to carry on a conversation.

I brought up the phrase, “The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” Though I cannot recall all that we spoke about, I do remember that she felt that many times the entire truth never comes out.

One of the reasons is that we want to appear good, so we make a truthful

statement that does not reveal the *whole* truth. We picked up this trait from our ultimate grandparents. Adam said to God: “This woman You gave me made me eat the forbidden fruit” (Genesis 3:12). However, the truth was, “I knew better, but went ahead and did it anyway to please my wife.” For her part, Eve told God: “It wasn’t my fault. That tricky serpent deceived me into eating it” (verse 13). Again, the truth was, “I really wanted to be made wise and have my mind opened. I wanted it, and I took it.”

The world we live in suffers greatly because it lacks the truth. Perhaps it

would be more complete to say that the world suffers because, even though the truth is available, most will not accept it.

In American culture, movies, television, books, and magazines tell us that premarital or extramarital sex is exciting and feels good. That is **the truth**—but not **the whole truth**. It leaves out the guilt that one feels for having broken God’s seventh commandment, as well as the stress and harm that frequently follow in unwanted pregnancy or sexual disease that result from this sin.

Nothing but the truth spells out that penalties will follow the committing of sin. Moreover, the penalties may not end with “just” stress and harm. Certainly, suffering and death can come from sexual disease. An unwanted pregnancy could end in abortion. A person could even become addicted to illicit sex, ruining any chance for a proper marriage, family, home, and a happy future.

It is easy to see that avoiding the whole truth can have far-reaching consequences!

Paying Later

Buy now and pay later” is a common sales approach in our society, and Americans have bought it wholesale. As of September 2001, according to the Federal Reserve Bank, consumer-credit debt in this nation is somewhere in the neighborhood of \$1.6 trillion, roughly \$5,600 per man, woman, and child.

We can see how this works to our detriment if we apply “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” to this sales ploy:

The truth: A person can have his heart’s desire and enjoy it immediately.

The whole truth: He will pay for it at high interest rates over a long period.

Nothing but the truth: By making this expensive purchase, he will pay far more for it than it is worth. He will also reduce the money available to his family for more

important things. In addition, he could develop a habit of spending more than he has, leading to possible future financial difficulties.

“Take out a second mortgage and pay off all the bills” is another common scheme to talk someone into borrowing money. “Why not?” most people think. “I will never pay off my mortgage anyway.”

The truth: One can pay off all his credit card bills.

The whole truth: People rarely learn their lessons in financial matters. Because of now being debt-free, they feel they can go out and spend, landing themselves in debt once again. Sadly, even our senior citizens make this mistake, as 37% of retirees spend their entire retirement in two years.

Nothing but the truth: By loading their homes with additional debt, not only do people feel a false security to spend freely, but they also jeopardize their future solvency. It is important that a person’s residence be paid off completely before old age saps one’s earning power.

God wants us to do our best to understand the “nothing but the truth” side of every matter. It is wisdom to see the whole picture before making a decision. Unfortunately, the world we live in reels from bad decisions based, not on truth, but on greed, superstition, fear, and the desire for power and control. The called must work from truth in making evaluations and in living their lives—despite past bad habits and an ungodly environment.

What Is Truth?

It is important to establish a proper definition of truth, and John 17:17 gives the most basic biblical definition of it: “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.” *Sanctify* means “to render or set apart as pure,” and when we obey God’s Word, we are set apart and purified. Jesus confirms here that everything that God

originally authorized to appear in the Bible is truth.

This means that every law, statute, illustration, example, and principle is good for us, helping us to have a better life now by building godly character in us.

Jesus reiterates an Old Testament principle from Deuteronomy 8:3 in Matthew 4:4: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” To live by the truth—the Word of God—demands that we first study the Bible to find out what His truth is. Once we understand what God expects of us, we have to meditate on its every aspect and begin to put it into practice. God desires that we consider more than just the law or principle by itself: He wants us to learn to apply it.

What is the truth of fearing God, anger, godly love, forgiveness, patience, temperance, service, and so forth? What are God’s teachings intended to produce in our lives? God’s very nature!

He wants us to consider the results of our actions, both good and bad. We must ask ourselves, “What are the consequences of what I’m thinking of doing? What are the consequences of how I’m currently living my life, and what of God’s truth can I apply to improve?”

When we work to understand the depth of the truth, it causes us to change for the good. We see what God is after and can learn to apply it in our conduct. We will also begin to understand how obedience to God’s truth produces great benefits.

Notice Peter’s contribution to the subject:

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever. (I Peter 1:22-23)

Peter echoes Jesus’ words in John 17:17. When we yield our wills to the

truth of God, we are purified. What happens is that, when we allow God’s Word to have its effect on our mind, we change, and this change produces sanctification. We become different, and are thus set apart from those in the world.

Submitting to Truth

However, this purification or sanctification does not come without great cost. God’s Holy Spirit does not make us *do* anything. It guides us, or reminds us of the truth, but taking the stand to apply it in our lives is up to us. God may place us in similar situations repeatedly until we finally grasp the fact that we need to change, but eventually *we* have to submit to the truth.

Often, what God thinks is necessary is not what we want to do, and a struggle is born. We may not care about going into debt for something we really lust for, and then we read Proverbs 22:7: “The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.”

Consider also the principle in Proverbs 17:18: “A man void of understanding shakes hands in a pledge, and becomes surety for his friend.” *The Living Bible* renders it: “It is poor judgment to countersign another’s note, to become responsible for his debts.”

With this information, we can consider how best to apply the principle by asking ourselves the following questions: Can I save my money and pay cash for my desired item? Can I do without it? Do I really need to have it for my family or business? Is it proper to purchase it at this time?

In other words, God’s truth in these two proverbs should cause us to consider if we are conducting ourselves frivolously or appropriately. We can then make the most prudent decision possible.

We should apply this principle of measuring what we want to do next to God’s instruction on the subject in all we do, whether it is in dating, marriage, other relationships, child-rearing, finances, work, government,

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GLOBALISM

Part Six: Tide and

If globalism is a force resulting in bigger, consolidated units, the “new tribalism” yields smaller units, decoupled from the mainstream. Globalism manifests itself in integration and *interdependence*; tribalism in localism and *independence*. An analogy from normal life may help in understanding this: Globalists seek to house people in a single apartment building under one homeowners’ association; tribalists prefer to house people in a large number of small, free-standing bungalows.

For our purposes, we will treat tribalism as a *fragmentation* process, wherein large, integrated structures break into smaller sets and subsets. To understand fragmentation, just drop a mirror. The mirror fractures, fragments scattering everywhere. The fragments are not all the same size. Pick up one of the larger pieces. Drop it. That piece fractures, fragments scattering everywhere. One can repeat the process several times, each time breaking larger pieces into smaller ones.

This is fragmentation in its most literal sense. The verb *fragment* comes from the Latin verb *frangere*, “to break.” English gets the noun *fracture* and the adjective *fragile* from that same word. To *fragment* is “to break or separate.”² Synonyms include *fracture*, *rupture*, *split*, *burst*, *blow up*, *explode*, *break in pieces*, *smash*, *shatter*, *splinter*, *disintegrate*, *decompose*, and *dismantle*.³

Fragmentation is a process that can be fast—but more often takes years to run its course. More importantly,

fragmentation is a destructive process. It should not surprise us, then, that God treats it as rebellion. As the mirror example illustrates, fragmentation can be iterative, repeating over and again to form new, ever smaller, units. An empire, like the Soviet Union, breaks up into nations. A nation breaks up into groups arranged by ethnicity (as in the old Republic of Yugoslavia) or by religion (as in the India/Pakistan cleavage).

In the last century, Africa experienced fragmentation time and again, as larger nations, like the huge Belgium Congo, broke up into small units, often around basically tribal lines. There are many more, and smaller, nations in Africa today than there were in 1900.

Examples of fragmentation exist elsewhere. Scotland wants to separate from Great Britain, as does a piece of Ireland. There is also a Welsh separatist movement. French Canadians want to separate from Canada. A somewhat viable movement exists in Hawaii for some sort of secession from the United States. We see secessionist movements in Indonesia and militarized nationalist initiatives in the former territory of Yugoslavia. *It is almost a paradox: The movement to fragment is global!*

Tribalism can take place at other levels too, where the fragmentation—whether we term it deconstruction or decomposition or decoupling—is just as obvious. School districts fracture into small units. Religious groups split in reaction to doctrinal or governmental differences. Even something as historically monolithic as the Catholic

Church is not today nearly so universal as its name implies. Quite the contrary, it is now fragmenting increasingly, like a mirror repeatedly broken. Finally, we know that families fragment. The extended family is almost an anachronism in the Occident, and the nuclear one seems terribly endangered as well.

We would be blind indeed if we missed the fragmentation occurring within God’s church today. We in the church exploit the modern tools of communication; we have web pages galore. We have everything that, from a carnal standpoint, should permit us to get together and stay together, yet we only fragment the more. The worldwide church is history for now. This countertide of fragmentation is a powerful force; even with God’s Spirit, we have so far not been able to hold it in check.

In its largest context, fragmentation is a definitive characteristic of the postindustrial society, of which the United States is the leading example today. In such a society, one witnesses

the breakdown of virtually all of the sources of moral authority that prevailed in the middle of the twentieth century: organized religion, large social institutions like corporations or labor unions, neighborhoods, families, and the nation itself. . . . While economic freedom produces prosperity and technological innovation, moral freedom undermines community and detaches individuals from one another. . . . So, the story

The Aga Khan, the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims and a direct descendant of Islam's founder, Muhammad, perceives "a deep and vigorous countertide ... a 'new tribalism'" shaping our world.¹ The next two articles in this series will discuss the nature of this countertide, review its worldwide extent, and assess its dangers.



Countertide

about the shift to postindustrial society is . . . the story of social disorder, disrupted neighborhoods, growing poverty, loneliness and broken families.⁴

God's Word and Tribalism

God uses at least three powerful metaphors to refer to fragmentation:

Vomiting, or Spewing from the Mouth

The idea behind this metaphor is total rejection, with a sense of violence and even anger. The rejected material is separated from the body, quite permanently.

For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants. . . . [L]est the land vomit you out also when you defile it, as it vomited out the nations that were before you. (Leviticus 18:25, 28; *cf.*, 20:22)

The King James Version uses the verbs *vomit* and *spew*, but they are the same verb, *qow'*, in the Hebrew.⁵

In the New Testament, the image appears in Christ's letter to the Laodicean Church: "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth" (Revelation 3:16).⁶

The apostle Peter provides an-

other good example. Quoting Proverbs 26:11, Peter describes false teachers as those who return to their own vomit. Apostasy is so perverse that it will lead people to return to what they had, earlier, totally rejected as utterly foul.

Scattering of Sheep

This is certainly the most prevalent metaphor for fragmentation in God's Word. Christ Himself quotes what is probably its most famous example: "I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered" (Matthew 26:31 quoted from Zechariah 13:7).

The metaphor derives from the common biblical image of Israel as sheep in God's pasture, God being, of course, their Shepherd. Psalm 23, "The LORD is My shepherd," is a classic example, as is Psalm 80, which commences with the words, "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock."

Sheep, in the absence of a responsible shepherd or in the presence of a predator are sure to scatter. The prophet Jeremiah applies this fact to Israel in metaphor:

My people have been lost sheep.
Their shepherds have led them
astray;
They have turned them away on
the mountains.
They have gone from mountain to
hill; . . .
All who found them have devoured
them. . . .

Israel is like scattered sheep;
The lions have driven him away.
(Jeremiah 50:6-7, 17)

The prophet Ezekiel provides another example. In this case, greedy shepherds scatter the sheep. God, the good shepherd, finds them.

For thus says the Lord GOD: "Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. (Ezekiel 34:11-12; *cf.*, verses 13-31)

In Leviticus 26:33-38, God makes it clear that He "will scatter you among the nations and draw out a sword after you" (*cf.* Ezekiel 5:2, 12). The context makes it clear that this scattering is the result of sin. Jeremiah 18:15-17 clearly tells us *who* does the scattering and *why*: "Because My people have forgotten Me, . . . I will scatter them as with an east wind before the enemy."

God scattered Israel because of their sins.

For the LORD will strike Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water. He will uproot Israel from this good land which He gave to their fathers, and will scatter them beyond the [Euphrates] River, because they have made their

wooden images, provoking the LORD to anger. (I Kings 14:15)

Ezekiel records yet another example of God's scattering.

Also I lifted My hand in an oath to those in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the Gentiles and disperse them throughout the countries, because they had not executed My judgments, but had despised My statutes, profaned My Sabbaths, and their eyes were fixed on their fathers' idols. (Ezekiel 20:23-24)

The metaphor works beautifully in reverse, where God, as a good shepherd, *re-gathers* His scattered sheep: "Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock'" (Jeremiah 31:10).

As a final example, notice the prophet Micah's comments: "I will surely assemble all of you, O Jacob, I will surely gather the remnant of Israel; I will put them together like sheep of the fold, like a flock in the midst of their pasture . . ." (Micah 2:12).⁷

Sifting of Grain

This metaphor most famously appears in reference to Israel in the book of Amos:

"Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are on the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth; yet I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob," says the LORD. "For surely I will command, and will sift the house of Israel among all nations, as grain is sifted in a sieve; yet not the smallest grain shall fall to the ground." (Amos 9:8-9)

The metaphor appears also in Isaiah 30:28 in reference to the Gentile nations, especially Assyria. In the New Testament, Christ tells Peter, "Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat" (Luke

22:31). Additionally, the Old and New Testament references to scattering by the winnowing fan may be a subset of the sifting metaphor.⁸

Sifting is a scattering process, but with some important nuances. To *sift* is

1. To put (flour, for example) through a sieve or other straining device in order to separate the fine from the coarse particles;
2. To distinguish as if separating with a sieve: *sifted the candidates for the job*;
3. To apply by scattering with or as if with a sieve: *sift sugar on a dessert*;
4. To examine and sort carefully: *sift the evidence*.⁹

Metaphorically, sifting carries the ideas of

1. a *trial* (that is, an examination) to distinguish between different levels or grades of qualities;
2. a *separation* of these different grades with the intent to produce something more refined and more usable;
3. a *spreading* of the sifted particles thinly and evenly about a larger entity.

So, God says He will try the peoples of Israel, spreading them "among all nations." He encourages us, though, by making it clear that He will not lose track of even one individual.

All three of these metaphors are powerful, having advantages over the modern terms *fragment* and *tribalism*. *Tribalism* as a word is too academic for many people. *Fragment* has a real weakness as well: It is generally used as an intransitive verb, as in "The civilization fragmented more and more each day." The implication is an unguided, even automatic, decay process—something that just happens. For example, the sentence "The nation fragmented" does not tell us who or what *caused* the peoples of the nation to separate.

The verbs *scatter*, *sift*, *vomit* and *spew* do not suffer from this weakness at all. All four commonly appear as

transitive verbs: *God* scatters Israel; *God* sifts Israel; *God* spews from His mouth; the *land* vomits out the people. There is no question here about agency; God uses these verbs to indicate *who* causes or performs the scattering, sifting, vomiting or spewing, and *why*. This direct statement of agency makes these metaphors far more vivid than modern-day terms like *fragmentation* and *tribalism*.

The Disintegration Process

It is important to understand that fragmentation is only one part of the larger, usually more extended, process of *disintegration*. In the case of a broken-mirror, fragmentation and disintegration take place virtually at the same time. However, in social life, the disintegration of an organization is a process that can take years and even decades to run its course. While there may be individual variations, the four-step process of disintegration generally follows this sequence:

1. Disengagement. *Disengagement refers to the intellectual, emotional and psychological separation of a person from an organization.* It can be subtle, even imperceptible, at first. People begin to miss meetings, be slow in paying their dues, and the like.

In the church context, disengagement manifests itself in an argumentative attitude, in ceasing to contribute monetarily, or in the slow but sure forsaking of the assembling of God's people on the Sabbath (Hebrews 10:25). No *geographical* scattering occurs at this phase.

2. Fragmentation. *At this stage, the individual physically breaks off from the group.* He may not separate himself from the organization geographically, but he no longer identifies with its values or goals, and therefore breaks away.

In a church context, the cause of fragmentation may *appear* to be a single issue of disagreement over doctrine or government, but in all likelihood, the difference is far

broader. It is important to note as well that a group can be fragmented and *not* be scattered. This is the case with the church today. It is *fragmented*, but not geographically *scattered* any more than in the days of the Worldwide Church of God. Broadly speaking, members still reside in the same geographic locales, yet they no longer attend their former congregation.

3. Scattering. *Geographic scattering is the next step in the disintegration process.* Sometimes a person moves away for the explicit reason of separating himself from the organization with which he no longer identifies. This is a *geographical* event.

For us in the church, it is vitally important to recognize two facts about scattering:

First, a people fragmented in spirit, broken apart by disparate ideas of doctrine, governance, and the like, *will eventually become a people scattered geographically.* As we saw in the scriptures quoted above, this is the story of ancient Israel (1 Kings 14:15). Historically speaking, it may take decades for the process of disintegration to go that far, but *the physical scattering will happen.* In this fact lies the long-term danger of fragmentation for any peoples, and God's own people are no exception.

Second, and more positively, the mere fact that the members of an organization become geographically separated for a while does *not* mean that the organization itself is in the process of disintegration. This means that geographical scattering can take place when *no* process of disintegration exists at all. The members of a group may be united in spirit, but become physically separated due to factors beyond their control. In this case,

the organization may actually become stronger by virtue of the separation of its members.

This appears to be the case in the early church. As a result of Saul's persecution immediately after Stephen's death, there was a general scattering of the Jerusalem church (Acts 8:4). Luke gives not so much as a hint, however, that the church was in any way disunited. In fact, only a chapter later he writes, "walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, [the churches] were multiplied" (Acts 9:31). Note the plural of *churches*; there were several, perhaps many, congregations. Though separated in body, they were united in spirit. They were *not* part of a disintegration process, but were in fact growing!

Together, these two examples from history—the scattering of ancient Israel due to sin and the dispersion of the early church—point out an important distinction between scattering as the result of sin and scattering as the result of God's purposes to strengthen.

The generalization remains valid, through, that when scattering is part of the process of disintegration, its cause is *spiritual*—a matter of the mind coming to doubt, devalue and ultimately reject a group's values and goals. Physical scattering is, properly, the *effect* of reprobate thinking.

4. Dissolution. In this final stage of the disintegration process, *the organization disbands, becoming no longer viable.* Examples may be the Vandals, Heruli and Ostrogoths, which Herbert Armstrong understood to be "three of the first horns [which] were plucked out by the roots" (Daniel 7:8; cf. Revelation 13:1-10). These Germanic peoples

successfully invaded Italy, but then simply seem to *disappear* from history, losing all national identity. The descendents of these people, of course, still exist to this day, for the Vandals, Heruli and Ostrogoths did not just vanish into thin air. Rather, they suffered severe battle losses, were decimated by disease, lost political power, and intermixed with others around them. As a result of all or some combination of these circumstances, they vanished as distinct groups, becoming indistinguishable from their neighbors.

Very often, a core of people—a remnant, as it were—has the foresight to see the coming dissolution of their organization and takes steps to arrest the process. They generate membership drives or adjust the group's goals and aims to attract more people. In the case of Israel, both national and spiritual, God Himself will intervene to stop the disintegration process before it goes all the way to total dissolution. He "will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob" (Amos 9:8; cf. Matthew 24:22). This intervention, of course, is the thrust of Romans 11, where God promises to graft Israel again into the good olive tree: "And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. . . . And so all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:23, 26).

Next month, we will focus on fragmentation in the context of today's globalism and notice the gigantic sweep of the "new tribalism." In addition, we will see that the story of ancient Israel is in part the story of God's building a single nation. What does He think of people who desire to retain their narrow tribal identifications at the *expense* of a unified nation?

—Charles Whitaker

Endnotes

¹ The Aga Khan, quoted by Yahya Sadowski, "Ethnic Conflict," *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1998, p. 12. Mr. Sadowski is associate professor at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University.

² *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition*, 1992, "fragment."

³ *The Original Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases (Americanized Version)*,

1994, "fragment."

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, "Getting It Right," *The National Interest*, Winter 1999/2000, p. 130. Mr. Fukuyama's comments appear in his review of the latest edition of Daniel Bell's classic book *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*. Bell's works are essential reading for anyone trying to make sense of the current American zeitgeist.

⁵ Other occurrences appear in Job 20:15; Proverbs 23:8; 25:16; Isaiah 19:14; 28:8; Jeremiah

48:26; and Jonah 2:10.

⁶ See Mark 10:34, where Christ refers to people spitting on Him. This is clearly an example where spitting represents anger and rejection.

⁷ Other scriptures referring to the gathering of a scattered people include Deuteronomy 30:3; Isaiah 11:12; 54:5-7; Jeremiah 3:18; 16:14-15; 23:7-8; 31:8; Ezekiel 36:24.

⁸ See Isaiah 30:24; 41:16; Jeremiah 4:11; 15:7; 51:2, Matthew 3:12; and Luke 3:17.

⁹ *The American Heritage® Dictionary*, "sift."

On December 1, 2000, the hotel in which I work shut down for a \$50 million renovation, causing about 250 employees to lose their jobs. Only a few managers and a skeleton engineering crew remained.

Months beforehand, the hotel's Human Resources Director and the General Manager devised a plan to provide jobs for all those who were good employees and wanted to continue to work. Working diligently over several months and trying to keep the employee's best interests at heart, they were able to place most of our staff with our other eleven Chicago hotels. To the rest, even those who were not very good employees, they gave handsome severance packages, as well as help to find other employment. These two men labored diligently to insure that everybody who wanted to work received jobs.

A fellow who works for me expressed a bit of a bad attitude a couple of weeks before the closing, and it worsened to the point that I finally had to call him into the office and talk to him about it. For my department, I had to develop a plan, budget, and justification for a skeleton crew to be maintained during the renovation, and this fellow was not one of those who could be kept. His particular job was unnecessary to the operation of the hotel during the shutdown. However, he is an excellent member of the department, and I had already told him that, when we reopened, he would be offered a job in a different classification making a substantially increased wage.

Because of his particular job description and pay, it was difficult to place him with one of the other hotel properties, but I had been able to work out some options for him and a few others who would be let go. One was to move him and two others to another property for less money initially but more chance for advancement, if they chose to go that route.

The other option was to take \$5,800 in severance pay plus his accrued six weeks vacation pay and sit out the three months until we could rehire him. Under this plan, he could even collect unemployment compensation! In addition, upon his return to work, we would reinstate his seniority and full benefits, including his five weeks of vacation.

I had given him a number of very fine options, especially under the circumstances. However, here he was in a snit because, as he said, he felt like an orphan that nobody wanted. He believed that I had made sure to get some of the people in my department jobs during the renovation but not him.

I had to remind him how much negotiating I had to do with the corporate office to justify the small staff that was staying. I also repeated that he was getting one of the best severance packages of anyone and that he would be coming back in a much better-paying job with all his seniority and vacation benefits completely reinstated. It

took quite a bit of time to show him that I was not rejecting him out of hand, but that many people had worked very hard to help him through an ordeal that could have been much worse.

By the end of the conversation, he still thought he was getting the short end of the stick, but his attitude had improved. He saw what the hotel faced in shutting down and renovating a property that would make no money for the company for six months to a year.

Nevertheless, this fellow was being given enough money to cover his salary for the three months he would be off plus unemployment. He would not be paying for transportation to and from work. Because he is very handy, he could pick up extra money doing side jobs during that time, and he would come back to a career-advancing, higher-paying job—but all he could see was what he was not getting and others were!

— I DESERVE BETTER! —

Is this not how we look at things in this life, more often than not? We see how much we lack, as opposed to how much we have. Our glass is always half-empty rather than half-full. We see ourselves as a “have-not” rather than a “have.”

When I looked at this man during our conversation, I saw one of my best employees, a good worker, one for whom I had tried very hard to do what was right—and he turned my best intentions around, saying it was not enough! He deserved better! Looking at him, I was disappointed and disgusted because I knew I was looking in the mirror!

How many of us really thank God for what we have and what He is doing to create us in His image (Genesis 1:26)? How many of us thank Him for every breath we take and for every action He takes for our benefit? How many of us gratefully sing His praises and glorify His holy name when He answers our prayers—or for that matter, even when He “seemingly” does not?

For instance, we are often encouraged to pray for the ill among us. God not only hears our prayers, but He also frequently acts upon them, giving the afflicted strength and healing. Do we sound His praises and thank Him with the same fervor in which we requested His aid? Could this be a reason why more of our brethren are not healed completely? Could we possibly be demonstrating ingratitude in our hearts toward God?

We all think that we esteem God highly and are grateful to Him for everything, but how true is that? Ingratitude will separate us from God and what we were to become. We see this in Jesus' first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). Being poor in spirit is an attitude of poverty in all respects, one that is so poor that every little favor warrants joyous thanksgiving!

INGRATITUDE

Do we believe that God owes us nothing except death? Do we believe that everything we have and are is a gift worthy of praise to the Eternal God?

Or do we think that, because we prayed hard for it, God owes it to us? Because we work hard, God owes us blessings? Because He called us into His church, He owes us? Because we have endured the persecution of this world for His sake, He owes us?

Maybe we do not think we are this way, but, then again, maybe our actions betray us. Maybe God sees our heart because the mouth does not speak the words of thankful praise, “for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34).

KORAH AND SATAN

Two biblical examples will illustrate this attitude of ingratitude. The first appears in Numbers 16:1-2: “Now Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took *men*; and they rose up before Moses. . . .” Notice that *men* is written in italics. The translators, not knowing what to do with the verb *took* at the end of the clause, supplied it to finish the thought. *Men* is plural, but *took* is in the singular, so it cannot apply to all these men. *Took* expresses the action of the singular subject of the sentence, *Korah*. *Young’s Literal Translation* says, “Korah . . . takes both Dathan and Abiram. . . .” Interestingly, the New American Standard version renders it, “Korah . . . took action.” The sense, however, is the same: Korah took these men against Moses.

They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, “You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?” . . . Then Moses said to Korah, “Hear now, you sons of Levi: Is it a small thing to you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the work of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to serve them; and that He has brought you near to Himself, you and all your brethren, the sons of Levi, with you? And are you seeking the priesthood also? Therefore you and all your company are gathered together against the LORD.” (Numbers 16:3, 8-11)

This is an example of a person who is dissatisfied with what he has and stirs up others because of his ingratitude for what God had given him already.

The consequences of Korah’s “taking action” are clear: God destroyed all these who rose up against Moses and Aaron—against Him. Does this pattern look familiar? It should. It is the age-old and oft-repeated sin of pride manifesting itself in ingratitude. Satan did the same thing (Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:14-17). It was not enough for him to be a covering cherub at God’s throne. It was not

enough to have the lordship over the earth and one-third of the angels (Revelation 12:3). No, he wanted to resemble or compare to the Most High (Isaiah 14:14)! His pride led him to go to war against God, a battle he soundly lost (Luke 10:18). Revelation 12:7-10 prophesies that his pride will drive him to attempt another coup d’état before Christ’s return.

This is where ingratitude can ultimately lead a person: into total rebellion against God. It lends to an individual feeling a false sense of worth, that he deserves more. If not checked, it becomes a plague of discontent that soon infects others, as Satan’s ingratitude spread to other angels.

If this kind of attitude lands us in trouble, just what should our attitude be? A truly humble and grateful person will never rebel against God because he knows that even the very breath he breathes is a gift and calls for praiseful thanksgiving to the Father. Sharing this thanksgiving with others in the church works like soothing oil that helps to heal the body.

PAUL IN PHILIPPI

Acts 16 contains a clear example of what God expects from us. As the chapter opens, Paul and his companions are traveling through the cities of Asia Minor, delivering the Word of God, and the people heartily receive them (verse 4). They establish new churches in the faith, and the number of converts increases daily (verse 5). God’s Holy Spirit directly leads them in the work (verses 6-7), keeping them from certain areas that were Peter’s responsibility (see I Peter 1:1).

In Acts 16:9-10, Paul has a vision in which a Macedonian pleads with him for help, and Paul and his companions conclude that God wants them to preach the gospel there. Macedonia, a Roman province, lay north of Greece. Paul began preaching first to those there who kept the Sabbath, and Lydia became his first convert (verses 13-15). He seemed to be making good but labored progress.

However, a woman possessed by a demon begins to follow Paul and his party, calling them “servants of the Most High God” (verses 16-17). Though this is true, it greatly distresses Paul because the Jews might conclude that he consorted with soothsayers, unlawful according to Leviticus 19:31; 20:6; and Deuteronomy 18:9-14. From their point of view, the Gentiles might consider the religion Paul preached to be as pagan as all the other religions of the time. Thus, Paul commands the demon to leave the woman in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 16:18).

Her employers, who made quite a profit by her fortune telling, are not pleased because her supernatural abilities disappeared with the demon. So they haul Paul and Silas before the city courts (verse 18), saying:

“These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe.” Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded

them to be beaten with rods. And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. (verses 20-24)

Unlike the Jews, the Romans were not limited to 39 stripes, so the beating Paul and Silas took was severe. The stocks they had to endure afterward were two large pieces of wood pierced with holes at different distances, designed to restrain the feet and produce pain.

Confined to the pitch-dark bowels of the prison, Paul and Silas now lie on a filthy floor on their bloody, shredded backs, their legs painfully distended. One might think they would have every right to complain about how unfairly the Philippians had treated them—or at least to spend all their time beseeching God to relieve them of their pain. Notice verse 25, however: “But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them”!

Not only were they singing praises of thanksgiving to God, but they were also doing it loud enough for the other prisoners to hear them! Just as James says in James 5:13: “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.” They were praying for their affliction, but they were also singing songs of praise to God from hearts filled with thanksgiving!

—GRATITUDE IS A GIFT—

Are we willing to do this, or will we just thank God when we think He deserves it? We need to make it a sincere habit to thank God fervently every day for all His benefits, glorifying His holy will and purpose for us. He is *never* undeserving of our praise and thanks—indeed, we cannot thank Him enough.

It hurt me when my employee griped and grumbled about my best efforts to give him something good. Even after I sat down and explained to him what he could have and why things had been done the way they were, he only expressed a qualified thanks to me. I had done the best I possibly could, but it rated only a qualified “thank you” from him.

How does our heavenly Father feel when we only express a qualified “thank you” occasionally or not at all? How does He feel, knowing that He has done what is absolutely, perfectly the best for us for now and all eternity?

Ingratitude, whether passive or active, is a tool that Satan uses to recruit us to join him against God’s Family. By this means, we can allow him to plant us as a tare within Christ’s field and spread our ingratitude to others (Matthew 13:24-25, *cf.* verse 33). On the other hand, a constant attitude of praiseful thanksgiving, no matter what the circumstances, is a gift of God to us. Gratitude spreads a healing balm among those with whom we fellowship, and it will speed us on the path to God’s Kingdom!

—Mark Schindler

Continued from page 7

CHRISTMAS, SYNCRETISM AND PRESUMPTION

Everything just seems to go so well together. Nevertheless, it is a trap *because it is not true*.

ADDING AND TAKING AWAY

In all sincerity, men and women have gone to great lengths to try to please God. Without seeking His permission, they presume to add things to the worship of God because they are attractive and have a vague attachment to the One whom they look upon as their Savior. They think their sincerity in worship is more important than the truth.

But God thinks differently: “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Deuteronomy 12:32). Christmas is a festival that has been added. It is syncretism, blending a practice from paganism into the stream of Christianity. Only the revelation of God shows how He will be worshipped, and He will not be served in imitation of other gods. God’s way *cannot* to be “improved” by human sincerity.

Deuteronomy 13 defines the law regarding apostasy. Those who led others to worship other gods or adopt the practices of the nations around them were to be stoned! Cities that fell under the sway of corrupt individuals were to be attacked, burned to the ground, and left as rubble! God considers tampering with His truth to be evil that must be eradicated!

Apostasy begins with the perverse drive in man to push beyond the bounds of what has been revealed by God as the basis for His way of life. When God gives instruction, He frequently does so in broad generalities. Within the perimeters of those broad generalities, He expects us to explore and to apply them in their spirit and intent. Unfortunately, history reveals that that has not been mankind’s approach. Man has consistently tried to “improve” upon God’s revelation using his limited reason and logic.

Proverbs 30:1-6 describes the approach of a godly man:

The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, his utterance. This man declared to Ithiel—to Ithiel and Ucal: Surely I am more stupid than any man, and

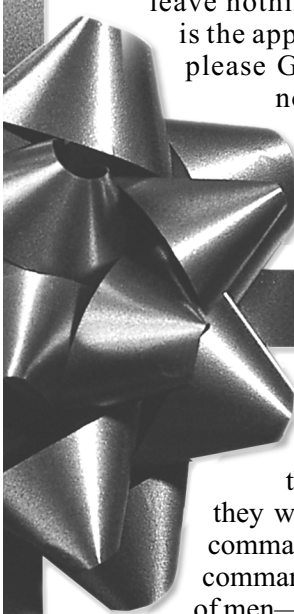


do not have the understanding of a man. I neither learned wisdom nor have knowledge of the Holy One. Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name, and what is His Son's name, if you know? Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, lest he reprove you, and you be found a liar.

Agur claims no great intelligence or superior understanding. He feels his education is lacking in the more important areas of life, like the proper way to live and the knowledge of God. He is only a common man with no special abilities, powers or privileges—in fact, he would like to know the person who could do some of these things.

In verses 5 and 6 he states his conclusion: To get the most and the best from life, we should believe God, not presuming that we can comprehend the effects of our actions without advice from God in His Word. God's Word cannot be improved upon; every word of God is pure, as gold is pure. The value of God's Word cannot be increased by adding to or taking from it, anymore than gold can be increased in value by alloying it with something else. He advises that we strive to do nothing that God forbids, and leave nothing undone that God commands. This is the approach of a man whose sole aim was to please God, and who does not want to do or not do anything that might strain the relationship.

In the religious Jews of His time, Jesus faced man's proclivity to add to and take from God's Word:



Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do. . . . All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. (Mark 7:6-9)

The Jews added thousands of regulations in a sincere effort to make their obedience to God as complete as they possibly could. Their traditions were different from ours, but the principle is the same. Their religious life did not depend on listening to God but upon clever arguments and interpretations of the experts, the rabbis.

They substituted human ingenuity for God's law. Jesus called their ingenuity vain and hypocritical, and their additions resulted in nothing good in terms of the Kingdom of God.

FRUITS OF CHRISTMAS

We have to apply the same kind of judgment to modern Christianity and its use of Christmas. God nowhere speaks of making Christmas a part of Christianity, nor does He say to celebrate His Son's birth. He does tell us, though, not to add to His worship anything that is a tradition of the heathen. Such additions hinder rather than enhance our journey to God's Kingdom.

What are the fruits of keeping Christmas? Has Christmas helped to glorify God? Has it clarified and aided man's spiritual life? We have a record of the fruits of the Jews' additions. Their intent may have been better than those who accepted Christmas into Christianity, since they at least attempted to obey the law of God. Still, when Jesus walked among them, they did not recognize their own Messiah! Adding to and subtracting from God's Word changes the focus God intends.

Christmas is no better. When the so-called Christians added Christmas to Christianity, it had nothing to do with true Christianity at all. It was a ploy to win converts from paganism. It was a deliberate grab for power. From the beginning, Christmas, rather than promoting the true God and His way of life, has only led people away from the truth.

Peter writes that we are redeemed from these very traditions (I Peter 1:18). These traditions, inherited from our fathers, are a part of our culture. Jesus used His ministry to repudiate every addition, subtraction, and distortion that had attained any kind of specious, "divine"

authority, and He did this by clarifying and magnifying the truth. Christmas seems to have "divine" authority because "Christians" are doing it, but it is part of a world that is anti-God, anti-Christ. It is not a part of what God has shown is true.

The theme of not adding to or subtracting from God's Word continues to the very end of the Bible. Jesus emphatically says:

"And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last." 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 city. But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie. "I, Jesus, have sent

My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star.” And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” And let him who thirsts come. And whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely. For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:12-19)

In calling Himself “the Alpha and the Omega,” Christ indicates that He is the beginning, source, or author of truth, and He is also the end or judge of it. He determines the truth, and He is the One to whom we must give account of our use of that truth. Thus, it behooves us to listen carefully to what He says.

What He says is that anyone who “practices a lie” will be outside the gates of the Holy City. They will not be in His Kingdom. Is Christmas the truth? Not according to God’s Word. Is keeping Christmas practicing a lie? Definitely!

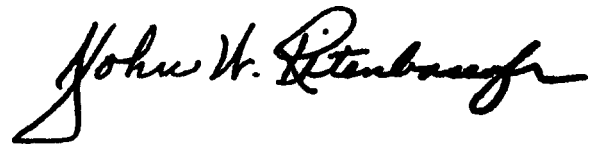
In the law, God says do not add to it and do not take away

from it. Do only what God has commanded. In the last few verses in the Bible, He says virtually the same thing. We can safely conclude that God does not want us to presume that we can add to or take things away from His Word. Adding what is not part of His revelation is syncretism, an attempt to merge foreign practices with the truth without determining if God would permit it.

Because Christmas came into Christianity hundreds of years ago, we may not be responsible for it, but we are responsible—once we know the truth—to step away from it. We cannot allow our minds to deceive us into thinking that it will be okay to continue because in our hearts we just want to worship God. Scripture clearly shows Christmas is a snare (Deuteronomy 12:30), vanity (Mark 7:6-9), and spiritual death (Revelation 22:15). We should not let the human proclivity to add to the worship of God lead us away from God and the wonderful future He has prepared for us!

We can conclude, then, honestly and rightly, that it makes a great deal of difference whether or not we keep Christmas.

In Christian love,



A Ready Answer

The Whole Truth

Continued from page 9

and so forth. However, nowhere is truth more important than in truly understanding how to worship God.

The world has its gods and its way of worshipping them. Some state that all one has to do is to be a good person, forgetting that God Himself defines what is good. The churches of the world worship their god by means of ritual and customs, some of which have their basis in the Bible, but others do not.

The Bible reveals God’s feasts, the holy days (Leviticus 23), and because of them, we understand the plan of God. We keep the Sabbath and the other Ten Commandments, but worship of God is much more than that. Proper worship of God is changing our lives to live as He lives in every facet of life. Beyond that, working to reflect His character in all

we do brings Him great honor, so our study to learn and apply His truth means a great deal to Him.

Proverbs 3:3-8:

Let not mercy and truth forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart, and so find favor and high esteem in the sight of God and man. Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and depart from evil. It will be health to your flesh, and strength to your bones.

Practically, truth is shutting out all deliberate falsehood and all hypocrisy, conscious or unconscious. Not only are we to shun all falseness that is presented to us, but we are also to reflect truth in all our dealings with others. Truth builds and encourages; falsehood tears down faith and trust.

Verse 6 admonishes us to acknowledge God in all our ways, that is, in all

our endeavors. God and His truth are needed, not just in times of crisis or want, but in everyday living, and if we study and learn to do things God’s way, it will not be long before God’s way *is* our way. In so doing, we will be worshipping God in Spirit and truth (John 4:24).

Solomon shows in Proverbs 3:7 that the great hindrance to all wisdom is the thought that we have already attained it. If we have the proper fear of God—if we understand our place before Him and act accordingly—we will gain a heart of true wisdom (Psalm 90:12). As we do this, healing and strengthening begin to take place in our lives (Proverbs 3:8).

Jesus Christ tells us in John 8:31-32, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” We will be free from superstitions, from wrong ways of living, and from the ungodly way this world does things, and in the process, we will be made fit for the Kingdom of God. This should be ample motivation for us to seek and apply truth in our lives.

—John Reid

BIBLE STUDY: FIRST TITHE

The tithing principle in God's Word transcends merely giving of a tenth of one's increase. The entire question revolves around whether a person is of a willing and obedient spirit and truly desires to obey God or behaves like a pharisaical moaner and must, like a stubborn goat, be forced or dragged into doing what is required. God commands us to tithe, but to do it perfunctorily and out of necessity is far short of the type of giving God expects.



1. What does tithing demonstrate to God? Genesis 4:4; 14:18-20; 28:20-22; Hebrews 11:4, 6.

COMMENT: When we give God His tithe, it is a sign that we trust and believe in Him. Abel brought the best of his flock as an offering. Abraham, the father of the faithful, gave Melchizedek a tenth of all his goods. Jacob acknowledged God in His life by promising to give Him a tenth of all. Tithing demonstrates that a person worships God. It is an act of faith, a spiritual act like prayer, and without faith, it is impossible to please God.

2. To whom did God provide first tithe and for what purpose during the time of Abraham? Genesis 14:18-20. During the time of Moses? Leviticus 27:30; Numbers 18:20-24; Deuteronomy 14:27; Hebrews 7:1-10.

COMMENT: God has always used giving as a means to carry out whatever commission He gives to His people. The Bible first mentions tithing when Abraham gives tithes to Melchizedek, a priesthood that predates even the patriarchs. By the time of the Exodus, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had grown from a small patriarchal family to a great multitude of upwards of two million people. The size of the population dictated the need for a written code of law, yet the principles of giving remained the same. Numbers 18 records that God turned His tithe over to the Levitical priesthood for their use in the administration and conduct of His work. By the time God formally instituted Israel's civil code, tithing had long been an ongoing financial law.

3. Why did Jesus Christ not specifically deal with the tithing law? Matthew 5:17-20; 23:23; Luke 11:42; 16:17.

COMMENT: Jesus magnified God's law while on earth. In His Sermon on the Mount, He paraphrased six Old Testament laws or principles, giving their intended meanings. Tithing, however, was not generally questioned at the time; it was not a theological issue like circumcision and the eating of meats sacrificed in an idol's temple. The New Testament expounds Old Testament principles and laws, and Jesus specifically says He did not come to invalidate them. No New Testament passage rescinds the tithing law. Quite the opposite, Jesus upholds the principle in His denunciation of the self-righteous Pharisees in Matthew 23:23.

4. By what authority does the church apply the tithing law

It is a matter of conversion and attitude! The decision to tithe revolves around our willingness and eagerness to do all our heavenly Father commands. If we always approach the study of His Word with the attitude of "What is the minimum I need to do to satisfy God?" or "I don't want to do any more than I have to do," we will likely not tithe. God uses the handling of money as an obvious test to see where our loyalties and priorities lie. This study will cover the tithe for the work of God, the first tithe.

today? Hebrews 7:1-12; Mark 13:34; I Corinthians 9:18; II Corinthians 10:8; II Thessalonians 3:7-9.

COMMENT: Though the New Testament seems vague in its authorization to the church to receive tithes, the principle is certainly there. We find the greatest evidence for it in Hebrews 7, where the apostle Paul uses tithing as an illustration to show that the Melchizedek priesthood supplanted the Levitical priesthood upon the resurrection and ascension of our High Priest, Jesus Christ. All Levitical authorities and responsibilities—which would include receiving tithes—have transferred to Him, who is also the Head of the church. Jesus gives authority in the church to His ministers to conduct His work on earth in His stead. The apostle Paul shows in his letters to Corinth and Thessalonica that he had the authority to receive tithes, though he chose not to in some circumstances.

5. How should God's church use first tithe today? Leviticus 27:30; Matthew 10:8-10; Hebrews 8:6-10; Galatians 3:26-28; I Corinthians 9:11-14; II Corinthians 9:8.

COMMENT: The first tithe is holy to God and must be used to support the commission God has given His ministry in a way similar to that of the Levitical priesthood. Jesus confirmed that tithing continues, but now God through Christ has made a better covenant with His people, who are no longer limited to the physical nation of Israel. He is now working through His church, the spiritual "Israel of God." Through tithing, God provides abundance for every good work.

Jesus Christ emphasizes the approach God's church should have today: "Freely you have received, freely give." But faith is the key. As God's minister, Paul often asserted his right of financial support by the church. He preached free of charge (II Corinthians 11:7), but this would not have been possible without the church's support because Paul had expenses, including food, lodging, and travel. There is no biblical indication that Paul ever charged the *public* for his work in teaching God's truth because the churches gave their tithes to him (verse 8).

Tithing is a matter of conversion and attitude, demonstrating that a person worships God and recognizes that He is and rewards those who diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). Tithing is a test and act of faith, a good work that pleases God.