



# *Forerunner*

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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Post-Sharon Israel:  
*Where Now?*

# january 2006

volume 15, number 1

## 3

### PERSONAL *from John W. Ritenbaugh*

Communication and Leaving Babylon,  
Part Two

## 7

### PROPHECY WATCH

The Birth of Jesus, Part Two: *Nativity*  
BY RICHARD T. RITENBAUGH

## 10

### READY ANSWER

A Sin Unto Death  
BY JOHN PLUNKETT

## 13

Proselytism Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,  
Part One  
BY CHARLES WHITAKER

## 19

### WORLDWATCH

Israel After Ariel Sharon  
BY DAVID C. GRABBE

## 20

### BIBLE STUDY

The Parables of Matthew 13, Part Four:  
*The Parable of the Mustard Seed*  
BY MARTIN G. COLLINS

## cover

Ariel Sharon (right) attends a 2005 Knesset session in Jerusalem, flanked by Binyamin Netanyahu and Ehud Olmert to his right and Shimon Peres to his left. With Sharon now incapacitated, the other three politicians, led by Olmert as acting Prime Minister, will chart Israel's course over the perhaps turbulent coming months.

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# Communication and Leaving **Babylon**

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## Part Two

*Last month's article centered on God's clear command in Revelation 18:4 to come out of Babylon lest we experience the same plagues it is to receive. However, fleeing from Babylon is presently physically impossible because it is a worldwide system. Nevertheless, until God provides a place, we can come out of it spiritually by taking strong steps to blunt its influence.*

We absorb Babylon's influence through the communication of the beliefs, values, and practices of the culture into which we are born. These characteristics are instilled in us with virtually no resistance. They are, in fact, all we know until long after the foundational damage has already been done during childhood and adolescence.

A clear example illustrating how this absorption occurs is found in the language we learn to speak as children. It is native to the environment into which we are born, in this case, our home, and it becomes part of us through the verbal communication of our parents, older siblings, extended family, and community. Our native language is a quality we never question. It is simply there, and we grow up speaking it.

As youngsters, we do not critically evaluate and then decide what language we choose to speak. Thus, the family's language, which in most cases is also the language of the surrounding community and culture, becomes a fundamental part of what we are. Similarly, other characteristics of this culture—basic atti-

tudes, perspectives, and conduct—also become part of what we are.

So strong are these absorbed traits that we find, following God's calling of us, that some—perhaps even many—are contrary to God's purpose. However, we discover to our dismay that, so engrained are they in our character, they hold us in bondage, and we find it very difficult to break free from those that could be damaging to our relationship with God. Many of our efforts to grow and overcome are directed against these.

A major facet of this is that the source of the overwhelming number of the beliefs, values, and practices we absorb from our native cultures is Satan. He, the Bible confirms, has deceived the whole world (Revelation 12:9). He has had a virtually free hand, as god of this world (II Corinthians 4:4), to communicate these enslaving traits to all of mankind.

A high percentage of the influence from Satan's world comes to us through our five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. We live through all of life's experiences with these communication recep-

# personal *Communication and Leaving Babylon*

tors constantly involved and leaving impressions upon our hearts—or we might say, upon our minds and memories, and therefore upon our attitudes and character.

Additionally, both casual and formal instruction takes place in the home, schools—all the way up to and including universities—and certainly, in church or its lack. Even atheism and agnosticism are to some degree schooling and impressing upon our attitudes, character, and conduct.

We realize that some form of communication also occurs between us and living things such as plants, which thrive when the person tending them loves them, and inanimate objects such as water, whose crystals mysteriously distort in the presence of negative attitudes.

## Communication From Spirits

The Bible confirms that communication can take place between us and spirit beings, whether from God our Father and Jesus Christ, or Satan and his horde of demon spirits imprisoned beneath the canopy of air that covers earth and in which we live and breathe. We share the same environment with those demonic spirits, and since the earth was first their place of habitation before man was created (Jude 6), they regard us as invaders and therefore enemies to be destroyed before God removes them and gives us the earth exclusively, completely reversing the original state of affairs.

The dangerous quality of communication from spirit beings to us is that it can be made, performed, or transferred directly into our minds, influencing us without any participation of our senses. We see, hear, taste, smell, or feel nothing while the communication occurs.

Matthew 16:21-23 records:

From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!” But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”

Like Peter, we could be motivated to believe or disbelieve something, accept or reject something, say something or keep silent, depending on the circumstance. Additionally, we may have no reaction at all at the moment of communication, but the thought is stored and available for later use or supplementation. It is entirely possible for a person to go through his entire life as a pawn of Satan and never know it.

This situation reflects a usage of what the Bible’s

writers term “spirit.” *Spirit* is the English translation of the Hebrew *ruach* (*Strong’s* #7304), in the Old Testament and the Greek *pneuma* (*Strong’s* #5141) in the New. It can literally mean “a current of air,” “breath,” “blast,” or “breeze.” However, when used figuratively, it indicates “vital principle,” “disposition,” “the rational soul,” etc., or an invisible super-being such as God, Christ, an angel, or a demon. Whether used literally, as with “wind” or “breath,” or figuratively, as indicating God, angel, or demon, it describes something that is invisible and immaterial and at the same time powerful, even a thing of considerable power. The foremost elements of spirit, then, are invisibility, immateriality, and power.

E. W. Bullinger remarks in Appendix 9 of the *Companion Bible*: “The meaning of the word is to be deduced only from its *usage*. The one root idea running through all of the passages is *invisible force*. . . . [I]n whatever sense it is used, [it] always represents that which is *invisible* except by its manifestations.” He also shows that *ruach* is used in nine different ways in the Old Testament, while *pneuma* is used fourteen different ways in the New Testament.

In John 6:63, Jesus says, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” Here is a clear example of the figurative use of “spirit.” Words are the symbols used for communication; they are received into our minds through sight, as when reading, or sound, as when hearing. But once in the mind, nothing material is packed into our brain. Words—and thus the concepts they carry with them—are spirit because they are immaterial, invisible, and of considerable power, depending on how we use them. Thus, we can receive “spirit” in the form of words or concepts from a spirit being. In this case, it is in reality “thought transference” because no sound is heard through our ears.

Matthew 10:16-20 provides us with another example:

Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.

God is not going to announce, “This is God speaking through so and so.” Rather, it will appear to those listening, as well as the person speaking, that everything being generated is from the persecuted disciple. However,

thought transference by means of spirit will occur between God and His child.

I Kings 22:20-22 presents another incident during which a demon was used to convey a message:

And the LORD said, "Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead?" So one spoke in this manner, and another spoke in that manner. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, and said, "I will persuade him." The LORD said to him, "In what way?" So he said, "I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." And the LORD said, "You shall persuade him, and also prevail. Go out and do so."

This demon did not suddenly appear, walk up to Ahab's false prophets, and say, "I am going to tell lies through you so Ahab can be lured into battle and lose his life." No, the demon remained invisible, transferring its thoughts into the false prophets' minds. To all concerned, during the meetings held to counsel Ahab, it appeared to human eyes and ears that the lying counsel was initiated solely by Ahab's advisors. The Bible gives no indication that they deliberately conspired to dupe him. At the same time, the advisors themselves were unaware they were being used in that manner. However, God's Word reveals that they had all received unseen and unheard communication from a single, invisible demon.

Just because one is close to Christ does not eliminate the prospect that a demon will communicate with and through him. As seen in Matthew 16:22-23, Peter did the speaking, but Jesus spoke directly to Satan, naming him as the source of Peter's outburst against God's will that Jesus suffer and die. Without Peter's recognizing it, he permitted himself to be a conduit for Satan's will. The disciple's "good" intention was against God's will, and Jesus thus judged it to be evil.

## The Course of This World

The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 2:2, ". . . in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience." Previously, we defined the word "course" (*aion* in Greek). It bears reiteration because this word is of unusual importance to our understanding how Satan generally communicates with us. If we cannot understand this, our chances of coming out of Babylon are diminished significantly.

As examined above, the Bible uses *spirit* to designate an invisible, immaterial, powerful influence whose characteristics are absorbed and then exhibited in the attitudes and conduct of the general population of a given people.

*Course* is an influence of which we can be much more

aware. We can compare it to a path, riverbed, or highway, suggesting a way by which or in which something flows. It is a means to an end, a result, which may be a destination or an action. *Course*, under the heading "tendency" in *Roget's International Thesaurus*, has synonyms such as "thoughts," "disposition," "character," "nature," "makeup," "bent," "slant," "frame of mind," "attitude," "inclination," "drift," "mindset," and "perspective." It is helpful to understand "the course of this world" by rephrasing it as "the disposition of this world," "the character of this world," "the nature of this world," or "the makeup [mindset, attitude, perspective, etc.] of this world."

In the apostle Paul's usage of this word, "course" is the whole mass of elements that encompass the conduct and attitudes of the times, the *zeitgeist*. It would not be the same all over the world because its expression in people would differ depending upon many factors. However, in Paul's writings, its elements will invariably be carnal and evil because the spiritual source, Satan, is always evil.

We can begin to understand this more practically by realizing that someone from France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, or Iraq, though carnal, would not be as inclined to see, understand, and react to a given situation exactly as an American would. The specifics of what affects their minds will differ. Though all are of the world, the things that make up one nation's course will impress themselves on other nationalities somewhat differently.

Regardless of nationality, the course of this world greatly enhances the self-centered pull that we are born with, and becomes our nature. It is from this that we must be converted, the largely unrecognized foundation of our pre-conversion attitudes and conduct, and it is the same force still motivating us when we behave carnally. Despite conversion, it remains within us, compressed like a spring ready to leap into action and reveal itself in carnality once again.

A prime characteristic of this world's course—exhibited worldwide, regardless of culture—is that it is habitually self-centered rather than God-centered. This is due to the underlying spirit beings who are its heart and soul, the key elements in communicating the course of this world into humanity. Through a simple illustration, we can perceive how it became this way. Genesis 1:31 reads, "Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day." God's statement of satisfaction in all He had made at the end of the sixth day of creation includes Adam and Eve's nature, as by this time they were already created.

Thus, in the beginning, mankind's nature is designated by our Creator as, "very good." Genesis 3 records the episode that began the transformation of their basic nature to the extremes of self-centeredness we witness today. Man's nature was not created evil, but it *became*

# personal *Communication and Leaving Babylon*

evil through the influence of another spirit—besides God—that Adam and Eve *chose* to follow without any interference from their Creator.

Once they committed to that initial step, the course of this world began. By the second generation, murder had occurred (Genesis 4:8), and by the Flood, men were so evil that they were “only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). It is this same peak of evil toward which this world and its multiple courses are being driven. All of this takes place because of the communication, reception, and acceptance of evil concepts from an evil source.

II Timothy 3:13 reveals a general principle still working as we “progress” toward the return of Jesus Christ: “But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.” Improving character and conduct in any given culture are temporary, indeed very brief, when observed within a survey of all of man’s history.

The same process of moral deterioration that concluded with the Flood was quickly restarted shortly after its waters receded, and it persists to this day, as each person is born into this world and exposed to the same spirit and to the variety of courses that influenced Adam and Eve and all their progeny. Because we are made of flesh, we are born with a slight pull toward self, but not with the corruption that later develops and reveals itself in our conduct. Contrary to Catholic Church teaching, evil is not passed on through procreation, but by the spirit of the age through the course of this evil world. It is transferred to us primarily through the cultures into which we are born, all of which are carnal to the core.

It is the responsibility of converted parents to God and to their children to ensure that the right spirit prevails in their homes so their children can be properly nurtured. People grasp this to some degree when they observe that, “The apple doesn’t fall very far from the tree,” or “Like father, like son.” Unless parents make a concerted, persistent effort to change and live as God commands, they will succeed only in passing on copies of themselves.

This world’s Christians, in an effort to evade responsibility for the evil in them, have instead blamed God for creating man this way. God is responsible to a degree, in that He has not yet chosen to halt Satan’s deceptions. Nevertheless, God did *not* make us this way. Mankind, represented by Adam and Eve, *chose* to submit to Satan, and all of their descendants, including us, have also chosen to become evil under the sway of the same evil spirit that offered our first parents the choice. This creates and accounts for “the course of this world.”

## It Is Worse Than We Think

Paul warns us that “evil men . . . will grow worse and

worse.” How evil is this heart that has been so easily communicated to us? Jeremiah 17:9 proclaims, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” The Hebrew word translated “desperately” can also be translated as “incurably.” Our basic, carnal drive cannot be repaired; it cannot be changed.

Occasionally, we are asked whether it is possible that Satan might repent. The answer is absolutely not, based on the fact that our hearts are a reflection of his heart, as he has communicated it to us. Verse 9 could be paraphrased: “The always deceitful heart of man is desperately corrupt, incurably sick.” It is so bad, so evil, that fixing it cannot salvage it. It must be replaced with a new heart—a new nature—which God promises elsewhere (Ezekiel 36:26).

It is not very hard to be fooled about the truly desperate condition of our hearts. However, we do not tend to judge our hearts as thoroughly incurable as God does. What Jesus says in Luke 11:13 is interesting in this light, as it is a New Testament reflection of Jeremiah 17:9: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”

Jesus directly calls those to whom He was speaking “evil”! Apparently, they were just ordinary people listening to Him teach; they were not representatives of any of those groups that were constantly disputing with Him. Verse 1 suggests His audience was made up of His own disciples! Yet, there is no equivocation at all in His statement. *Evil* is synonymous with “diseased,” “hurtful,” “calamitous,” “derelict,” “vicious,” and “malignant.” The word derives from the Greek word for “labor,” indicating it is something that is worked at, thus producing these evil effects.

In Matthew 19:16, Jesus Himself is called “good,” but He promptly corrects the person, saying that only God is good (verse 17). He presumably said that because there were elements of human nature in Him by virtue of His human birth. Luke 11:13, then, is God’s assessment of human nature: evil. Just because a human knows how and actually does some good things—acts of kindness or generosity—does not alter the fact that his heart is still incurably evil. Human pride tends to blunt God’s assessment of the carnality within us, motivating any remaining enmity (Romans 7:14-24).

Our pride rises to defend us from the condemnation of the standard to which we are compared—God. We consider Adolph Hitler to have been utterly evil, but he is said to have cherished children and dogs, a trait we would tend to judge as good. In a similar vein, James 3:9-10 says that with our tongues “we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing.” Where do those words come from?

*(continued on page 17)*

# prophecy watch

## THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST

### PART TWO: NATIVITY

Most of us have probably had the—sometimes excruciating—experience of hearing second- or third-hand the plot of a movie or the account of an event or incident.

Obviously, the story is nowhere nearly as detailed and gripping as actually witnessing it would be, and to have it related by someone who heard it from someone else lessens its punch and reality even further. Like the old parlor game in which a sentence or two are whispered from person to person to person, the usually incoherent result is altogether different from the original.

In a way, modern retellings of the events surrounding the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, resemble this process. The accounts found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke provide enough details to weave a picturesque, even glorious, record of earth's most important birth. Yet, after so many centuries of accumulated lore, today's crèches, storybooks, videos, and even some sermons perpetuate myths and assumptions that have little basis in Scripture. Some town square displays even include Santa Claus among the infant Jesus' worshippers!

It is astounding that people feel the need to sensationalize the Gospel narratives, or even to take creative license with them. Matthew and Luke write riveting accounts, complete with a divine impregnation and birth, potential scandal, angels, visions and dreams, magi bearing regal gifts, a murderous king, and a mysterious, guiding star. What need is there for embellishment?

Part One dealt with the angel's—probably Gabriel's—separate visits to Mary and Joseph to announce the human advent of Immanuel, “God with us,” into their lives. They were told that this divine Being would be born of Mary, and that Joseph, as her betrothed husband, would take on the responsibilities of the Child's human father. They were instructed to name Him *Jesus*—more correctly, the Hebrew name, *Joshua*—which means “savior.” Perhaps

most amazing is that both Joseph and Mary accepted this overwhelming responsibility, thrust on them without warning, with humility and without complaint. Jesus would be in good hands.

#### NO VACANCY

The next we hear of the expecting couple, they are traveling:

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:4-7)

Luke's account is once again very straightforward, providing succinct details and moving the story along quickly. The events probably took place around the time of the fall harvest. The evangelist informs us that Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem to be registered for the tax that had been decreed by Caesar Augustus in 8 BC, but which was not levied on the Jews until 4 BC due to a Jewish revolt. Normally, registrations like this were done after the people were finished harvesting their fields so that they, first, would not be working and, second, would have

# prophecy watch *The Birth of Jesus Christ*

the money to pay the tax. This latter reason was very important to the Romans.

The best estimate is that Jesus was begotten, as announced in Luke 1:26-38, ironically, during the end of December, and that He was born near the end of September or in early October of the following year. This means His birth occurred around the Feast of Trumpets in 4 BC. Scripture, of course, nowhere states this explicitly, but the internal evidence points to this general time.

That these events took place around the fall holy days, and that the Romans' registration was happening at the same time, indicates why "there was no room for them in the inn." Jews would have begun to travel to Jerusalem for the holy days to be there for the Feast of Trumpets, and would have remained there until the Last Great Day. Bethlehem, being only about six miles outside of Jerusalem, would probably have received much of the capital city's overflow. There were probably no rooms available for miles around.

Joseph and Mary did not have a convenient Holiday Inn or Motel 6 to pull into, so they had to go wherever they could find a place to stay. They probably ended up in a grotto, a cave behind a home or an inn, where the owner housed his or his customers' horses, donkeys, and oxen. As the text relates, Jesus' first crib was a trough for the animals. With a good cleaning and some fresh straw, this stable was probably not a bad place to stay. They were at least out of the elements and had a roof over their heads.

Many people mistakenly believe that the swaddling cloths Luke mentions are rags. It was a custom of the time to wrap a child in strips of cloth, especially the limbs, perhaps to help them to develop straight. Today's equivalent would be a receiving blanket. Swaddling cloths are not an indication of Joseph and Mary's poverty. In all likelihood, they were neither better nor worse off than the average Jew of the day.

## **BREAKING NEWS!**

Luke continues his narrative with the announcement to some nearby shepherds of the Messiah's birth:

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night and behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and

on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:8-14)

Verse 15 then relates that, once the angels disappeared, the shepherds said (to use today's vernacular), "Wow! Let's go see this! Heavenly revelations don't happen every day!"

As mentioned earlier, Jesus' birth occurred in September or perhaps early October. This could not have taken place in December because shepherds would not have been out in the fields at night then. In Palestine, the rainy season transpires between the end of October and early April, with the most inclement weather occurring between December and February. In fact, around Jerusalem, much of the region's 24 inches of annual rain falls during this winter period. Shepherds did not want to keep the sheep in the rain and cold anymore than they wanted to be there themselves.

Most translations tone verse 9 down a bit from its intended sudden majesty. It should read, "And BOOM! an angel of the Lord stood before them." The angel's appearance was instantaneous and shocking! One second they were peacefully minding their sheep, eyelids half-shut, and the next, right in their midst, perhaps hovering just over their heads, stood an angel in all the brilliance of angelic glory!

Luke writes that "they were greatly afraid." What understatement! Today, we might say they were terrified out of their skulls! Occasionally, we hear of a person's supposed abduction by aliens suddenly in the night. Television and movies have visualized this for us—but what if an angel actually did appear abruptly before our eyes, radiating light like a huge spotlight and looking directly at us? Most people would be on their faces in an instant, probably holding their heads, wondering when a thunderbolt was going to strike!

The angel says to them, "Do not be afraid" (verse 10), trying to shush their fears a bit, although it is hard to say what success he had. At least he was able to communicate to them what he needed to say. Evidently, they were calm enough to listen to his announcement, despite their terror.

What he says is quite interesting: "I bring you good tidings of great joy." The Greek word for "I bring good tidings" is *evangelízomai*, literally, "I evangelize you," and his good news is a matter "of great joy." In a way, this is the beginning of the preaching of the gospel, as this is the sense of the Greek term. He is informing the shepherds that God had sent him as an evangelist to let them know that the way of salvation was beginning to open to *all* people. This was great news indeed for the common folk, as these shepherds were, who have rarely been considered among the worthies of society.

That God sent the first announcement of His Son's birth to shepherds among their sheep has an appealing, symbolic connotation. Recall that these shepherds were in

the field watching over sheep at night when the angel, a messenger from God, illuminated them with the good news of salvation. Shepherds are biblical symbols of spiritual leaders or ministers, and sheep are well known to represent God's elect. Jesus' parables often employ the image of a field to signify the world, and the darkness of night stands for the condition of being cut off from God. This scene is a beautiful foreshadowing of the pattern God uses to evangelize through the gospel message.

Another intriguing fact, hidden in the English translation, appears in the last phrase of verse 10: "to all people." In the Greek text, a definite article appears before "people," so it should read, "all *the* people." When the Bible reads "the people," it usually refers to the people of Israel. The birth of the Savior was to be great joy for all people, of course, but especially for Israel. If we understand this spiritually, His coming has its greatest effect on the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), the church. Certainly, the church, to which God has revealed His way most fully, has both the fullest appreciation as well as the deepest understanding of Christ's coming in the flesh.

## THE HEAVENLY HOST

Gabriel then tells the shepherds, "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11), which is similar to what he told both Mary and Joseph. He relates all the essential information to tie Jesus' birth to the prophecies of the Old Testament.

The title "Christ the Lord" would have been said as "Messiah Adonai" or "Messiah Yahweh" in the Aramaic that these shepherds spoke. This is a not-so-subtle intimation that this newborn child was not only the promised Messiah, but also the One known as "the Lord" or "the LORD" in the Old Testament! The angel is not merely announcing the birth of a special baby in Bethlehem but that God had been born as a human being!

In verses 13-14, Luke writes: "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'" Here appears another BOOM! in the evangelist's narrative. Suddenly, there was not just one angel in the glory of the Lord, but a whole host of them all around the quivering shepherds. Not only were they visible, they were singing as only angels can, praising God. Their presence heightens the importance of the announcement.

The angels are obviously overjoyed that this greatly anticipated event in God's plan had finally taken place. Another huge step in God's purpose had been accomplished. Note, too, that this was not just a small, heavenly choir but the heavenly host that appeared in full force. God's vast army came to add their voices to the announcement that their great Captain had just been born!

The hymn they sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" requires some explanation. *Glory* is the Greek word *dóxa*, which means

"praise, recognition, honor, worship"—the height of reverence and adulation that we could give or say to God. "In the highest" is a somewhat controversial phrase in that, as a superlative, it could modify either "glory" or "God." Thus, it could refer to the highest glory or the highest God (or even God in the highest heaven). There is a possibility that in the Aramaic, the words the angels sang may have been "Glory to the Most High God," since that is a common title of God in the Old Testament.

They also sing of peace on earth. One of Christ's titles is "The Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6), and He who had just been born would eventually bring peace on earth. He would do it first through His sacrifice, making peace between God and sinful man (Romans 5:1), and later He would return in glory, bringing peace to the earth with the sword (Revelation 19:11-21). He will have to impose peace at His second coming, but once He does, the earth will have real peace. Only through the birth of God's Son in Bethlehem could the process of bringing true peace to the earth begin.

The final words in the angels' song are "goodwill toward men," a long-disputed phrase. However, most modern experts in Greek agree that the whole clause should be translated, "Peace on earth among men of His good pleasure." This implies that God was bringing peace and joy especially and specifically to those to whom He had granted favor or extended grace.

During the Passover sermon Jesus gave His disciples, He says, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you" (John 14:27). His disciples, numbering a mere 120 (Acts 1:15), were the only ones who could really experience peace because they comprised the extent of those with whom God had found favor. Yet, within days, thousands more had been converted, and God's peace began to expand. Real peace, a fruit of God's Spirit (Galatians 5:22), can only be produced in those in whom God's Spirit dwells (Romans 8:14). Right now, members of God's church are the only people on earth who can really have godly peace on earth because "unto us a Child is born. Unto us a Son is given" (Isaiah 9:6).

We are the "men of His good pleasure." Jesus tells His disciples in Luke 12:32: "Do not fear little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." We are the ones who have this favor from God. The angels' song is a declaration to us that God is with us, just as He was with Mary when He overshadowed her (Luke 1:35). As spiritual Israel and spiritual Zion, we are the apple of His eye (Deuteronomy 32:9-10; Zechariah 2:7-8), and He will do all He can to bring us to salvation and into His Kingdom.

These passages mean so much more than what we usually see in a Christmas pageant, a nativity scene out on the town common, or hear in a catchy jingle. What we see in these announcements are elements of the way God works, and they should strengthen our faith in Him and what He is doing. They should solidify our hope in the resurrection because, not only did the Father bring His

*(continued on page 19)*

**“Be ready always to give an answer . . .” I Peter 3:15**

# A Sin Unto Death

**“There is sin leading to death.” —I John 5:16**

**O**ne day not long ago, a fellow church member and I were talking over tea about some mutual friends—old friends, good friends, but friends who are no longer with us—no longer in God’s church.

The family we were talking about did not leave the Worldwide Church of God in the 1990s, as many of us did, due to doctrinal issues. Nor did they leave, as many others did around that time, because it seemed more convenient to attend the local church on the corner. They left a few years prior to all that activity, and they left for offense issues. Various members of their extended family, who had been in the church for a long time, had been severely offended by a local minister. Sadly, as so often seems to have happened, the whole extended family has since slipped right back “into the world.”

Did this family do wrong by leaving God’s church and His way of life? Did they sin? There is little doubt that they did. However, in our conversation, my friend and I agreed that, because of the circumstances, it would seem wrong for us to totally give up on such people. As these friends had not been disfellowshipped, our families have maintained a kind of loose, arm’s-length relationship. We do not see each other on any regular basis, yet we would not hesitate to sit down and enjoy a coffee or a meal together. Many of us have had similar experiences with friends or family members who have, to our knowledge and understanding, left God’s truth and His way of life.

So what about it? *Should* we give up on such people? Or should we pray that God would, according to His will, heal any offenses, restore their faith to them, and bring them back to us? Or rather, back to *Him!* Is it acceptable to pray such prayers for the restoring of friends who have left us? Or is it futile—even wrong—for us to do so?

These questions introduce another “difficult scripture” and will be answered as we discuss it further.

## **Wages of Sin**

The apostle John records our difficult scripture in I John 5:16-17:

If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.

Our quotation is from the King James translation, as this is the most commonly known rendition of the verse. Here is the New King James version, which, alas, clarifies the meaning of this truly difficult scripture only a little:

If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading

to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.

There are at least two applications for these verses: the first for people who, for one reason or another, have left the church of God, His truth, and His way of life, and a second for those who are still actively in the church. The most common misinterpretation of this verse is the claim that it proves there are some sins a person can commit and not incur the penalty of eternal death. Can this be true?

In short, no! It cannot be true. We know very well that the wages of sin are death (Romans 6:23). To this, there can be no exceptions! God does not categorize sins this way. Instead, the Bible distinguishes sins differently.

### **Willful Sins**

Through the author of the book of Hebrews, God shows us that “willful” sin brings the second death—eternal death:

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. (Hebrews 10:26-27)

Please hold onto the word, “willfully.” We will come back to it presently.

Consider the frightening expression “a certain fearful expectation of judgment and fiery indignation,” a phrase that makes one wonder about the mindset of those who have left God’s church. Surely, they must remember at least some of what was preached to them during their years in the church! Do they ever stop to consider what they have left behind—what they have thrown away? Do they ever see, read, or hear a news item that may be a fulfillment of prophecy, and get a shiver down their spines when they remember what the church taught them about the ultimate penalties for failing to watch, pray, and endure to the end?

It can only be hoped that many do. Let us pray that our errant loved ones will act—sooner rather than later—upon such thoughts and feelings.

### **Unrepented Sins**

Of course, any sin can be forgiven if it is sincerely repented of, and if it is “confessed,” not to a human priest or minister, but to our merciful God: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Conversely, any sin can also lead to eternal death if it is *not* confessed and repented of, and if it is allowed to continue repeatedly in a person’s life.

What about our family members and friends who are no longer with us? Can they still repent? I personally believe that many, if not most, still could. However, it is God’s opinion—not mine—on this point that matters! Have these people sinned willfully? Further, if they have not sinned willfully, is it likely that they will repent? Even with the discernment God has given us through His Holy Spirit, we often cannot answer such questions. Only God, who knows all hearts, can answer some questions.

A “sin not unto death,” then, is one that is confessed, repented of, and does not involve a willful violation of God’s law.

### **Sins Unto Death**

On the other hand, a person has “sinned unto death” if he has willfully turned from God’s way. It is gradually becoming clear that this whole matter revolves around this word, “willfully” from Hebrews 10:26. The Greek word is *hekousios*, and it means “voluntarily” or “willingly.” The English adverb stems from the adjective, “willful” which, according to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, means:

- obstinately and often perversely self-willed;
- done deliberately;
- intentional;
- unruly.

An extensive and profitable Bible study could be conducted just on these four alternate renderings of the word, “willful.” The first three meanings generally speak for themselves, but the fourth and last one seems to show willfulness in its true shade. Those who are unruly are continuously unwilling to obey the rules—in this case, God’s rules! They unceasingly refuse to accept God’s government and His laws.

Sin unto death may not necessarily include all those who have apparently left the church, nor even all those who have been disfellowshipped, but only those who have willfully rejected God’s way to the extent that it is no longer possible for them to be brought to repentance. However, this is certainly not suggesting that it is acceptable for a person to take God’s loving mercy for granted, to think that he can leave God’s church to “enjoy a little sin” for a while, then simply jump back in at a convenient, later date. Such devices or actions carry with them some obvious and very real dangers, and bring to mind another well known but somewhat fearsome biblical passage:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. (Hebrews 6:4-6)

This should be an arresting, solemn, and even terrifying warning for any who might consider leaving God’s church. Obviously, it is often very difficult for any fellow human being to determine who has and who has not “crossed the line.” In fact, it is probably because of the extreme difficulty of discerning when this is the case that the apostle of love writes in our difficult scripture, “I do not say he shall pray for it” rather than the sterner alternative command, “He shall not pray about it.”

John’s open-ended statement allows for a Christian’s natural desire to hope the person has not gone too far—to hope that he will repent—and he does not prohibit intercessory prayer, even in such a case. We should rather err on the side of praying for our errant brethren than not praying. John implies that our prayer *may* be futile, but he does not say that it is a sin to pray even for a seemingly hopeless case, as long as we do not know for sure that it is totally hopeless.

### **Within the Church**

Finally, let us bring this subject around to include those who are still in God’s church.

If any of us sees or hears of a fellow church member who is normally striving to obey God “sin a sin which is not unto death”—often out of ignorance or weakness—we ought to ask God to help the member recognize his error and repent of it. When we do so, God will hear and answer our prayers and may, according to His will, “give him life”: “And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him” (I John 5:15).

This is the kind of concern we must have for all of our spiritual brothers and sisters, and it is one way that we can “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

Through our deeper study into a relatively complex scripture, God reveals two simple conclusions: Should we pray for a fellow member if we see or hear of him sinning? Yes, we should. And should we pray for friends and loved ones who have left God’s truth? Again, yes, we should, for “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16).

—John Plunkett

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# Proselytism Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

## *Part One*

Imagine you have gone to an automobile show. Been there, done that: Most of us have endured that materialistic orgy where a person pays money to be admitted into a huge convention center to subject himself to advertising from every car dealership in town.

There, prominently baking under a hundred spotlights is a shiny black Lexus®, surrounded by fast-talking sales people. They look like they just stepped out of *Gentlemen's Quarterly* or *Vogue*. There are glossy brochures in abundance, glitzy photographs everywhere, even a sophisticated multimedia display showing every angle of every Lexus® available. It is an advertiser's feast, a collage of colors and sounds that all say, "Buy Lexus®!" None takes exception to the king of crass.

To draw foot traffic, they sell popcorn. Not just *any* popcorn, you understand, but popcorn with a special "butter" on it, one chemically formulated to produce an appealing, almost addictive aroma. People go out of their way to buy it. You walk among the alluring displays, munching your popcorn.

Almost mesmerized by the noise, the movement, the color, the dazzle, you make your way past the "Buy Lexus®!" display, with its gaudy emphasis on ostentatious luxury, to the nearby "Buy Audi®!" display, with its obvious accent on racing—pictures everywhere of Le Mans. A little further down the aisle is the "Buy Jaguar®!" display. Be sure you stress that *u* in

Jaguar®—we must be very proper. But, if you have a big enough line of credit, the salesman will accept any pronunciation. The king of crass meets his queen.

By this time, your materialistic instincts have no need for steroids. Human nature is in the driver's seat.

Over there, in a corner near the service entrance is another display. You almost walked past it, so plain, so unobtrusive. No lights. No music. No pictures. No brochures. No multimedia. You cannot even smell the popcorn this far from the action. Only one salesman, plain-faced and plain-dressed, stands near one lack-luster automobile. He looks almost as if he does not want you to approach. Maybe he thinks you are just another lost soul looking for the restroom.

"What kind of car is that?" you ask, noting the lack of blinking neon sign announcing the make.

The salesman looks around sheepishly. "It's a Buick®," he whispers, offering no more information.

"Is it a good car?"

"I like it."

"What's it have on it that the black Lexus® over there doesn't?"

"Oh, sir," the salesman, obviously alarmed, says, "it's illegal for me to compare this car with any other car."

"Oh, okay. Well, how much does it cost?" That is a fair question.

"Sir, please, if you keep asking questions like that, we'll both get in trouble. You know, I can't possibly *sell* you a Buick®. If you are really interested in buying an automobile, you will probably have to go to one of the other displays."

Almost stunned, you back away. Are you about to be arrested? You break into a quiet jog as soon as you can collect yourself, gaining speed as you put distance between you and the evidently illicit Buick® salesman, running past the glitzy displays, sprinting past the popcorn vendor. On your way, you notice a few other darkened displays, in the corners, almost hidden from sight, staffed by forlorn bodies, lonely, empty—everything but successful.

Is that any way to run a car show? Obviously, not from the viewpoint of the Buick® salesman. Yet, that is exactly how mankind is organizing the market place of *ideas*. That market place has many venues: the newspaper, the periodical, the library, the television, the schoolroom, the Internet. The liberals—and, make no mistake about it, the traditionalists in third world nations as well—have glitzy displays indeed, of every size and description, for every taste and educational level. "Buy Evolution!" shouts one display. It comes in a number of formats. "Buy Abortion!" roars another. The displays are everywhere. "Buy Global Warming!"

What about religion? Any glitzy "Buy Christianity!"

displays around? What about "Buy Islam!" or "Buy Buddhism!"? This article explores the phenomenon of proselytism—which the dictionary defines as "the act [or] practice . . . of making converts to a religion."

Lawrence Uzzell ("Don't Call It Proselytism," *First Things*, October 2004, p. 14) asserts that current human rights specialists define *proselytism* "to mean any attempt by any religious believer to win converts from other religions or from irreligion." Proselytism, therefore, refers to the attempt to persuade others to change beliefs—to replace their former belief system with a different one. For our purposes, we will use the terms *proselytism*, *evangelicalism*, and *missionary activity* interchangeably.

What does God's Word say about proselytism? What does modern law say about it? What about the *practice* of proselytism today? How does all this affect the true church of God?

## Old Testament Proselytism

The Hebrew language lacks an exact equivalent to the Greek noun *proselyte*, which means a *newcomer* (*Strong's* number 4339). However, in the Old Testament, God's law does allow the *ger* (*Strong's* 1616), usually rendered "stranger," to become a full-fledged citizen of Israel. To do this, he needed to become circumcised. Exodus 12:48 addresses this changing of belief system in reference to the Passover:

And when a stranger sojourns with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land.

The stranger "wants to keep the Passover." There is no hint of God expecting Israel to seek converts among the heathen by actively preaching to—or, *at*—them. Here, there is no coercion, subtle or otherwise; the Gentile convert voluntarily gives himself to come under the Old Covenant. Deuteronomy 4:5-7 states the dynamics of this conversion. Moses is speaking:

Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore, be careful to observe them, for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what great nation is there that has God so near to it . . . ?"

Gentiles' observing the *results* of Israel's obedience to God's law would be drawn to reject their pagan belief system in favor of God's true religion. There is no reference to God's calling these people. Rather, conversion is treated as a fully *rational* and *voluntary* choice made when thoughtful pagans recognize the superiority of God's way over their own satanic practices.

In other words, Israel's role was to be an example. God did not command missionary activity on the part of ancient Israel. Israel's proselytism was to be non-verbal, as distinct from the overt verbal action of preaching through the written or spoken word.

Not proselytism through *words*, but through *works*, is the God-sanctioned method for ancient Israel. Israel was not so much to preach as it was to obey and to teach. Obeying God's law was an individual responsibility; teaching that law was a parental duty. Notice verse 9, which stresses both roles:

Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren. . . .

The Old Testament is replete with examples of Gentiles who were won over to Israel by witnessing the unquestioned superiority of God's way of life, and subsequently becoming convinced that His way was for them. One early example may be "Eliezer of Damascus" in Abraham's day, the chief servant in his household. Other examples, certainly, are Ruth in the period of the judges, Uriah the Hittite in David's day and Ebed-Melech in Jeremiah's time. All these quickly come to mind as Gentile converts.

## New Testament Proselytism

Later on, however, Hellenized Jews caught missionary fever and discarded the approach sanctioned by God. Active—and far-flung—evangelism became the order of the day. Indeed, the first New Testament occurrence of the word *proselyte* appears in Matthew 23:15 where Christ chastises the scribes' and Pharisees' for their hypocritical approach to spreading their corrupt religion:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

Proselytes were common in those days. Acts 2:10 records their presence, with the Jews, in Jerusalem on

Pentecost. Nicolas, "a proselyte from Antioch," is numbered in Acts 6:5 as an original deacon. Finally, Acts 13:43, mentions "devout proselytes" who followed Paul in Antioch. In context, these clearly refer to Gentile proselytes to Judaism.

Indeed, Paul's problems with the circumcision party had its roots in the widespread Jewish practice of proselytism in those days. The members of this party—almost certainly (misguided) members of God's church—followed Paul from city to city, telling Gentile converts of their need for physical circumcision. They took their cues from Exodus 12:48 and other scriptures. These Jews were men of their age, and therefore took no exception to the practice of proselytism. Also, they apparently accepted the validity of Paul's commission to carry Christ's "name before Gentiles" (Acts 9:15). Their only issue was physical circumcision. As a result of this controversy, the apostles had to redefine circumcision in its proper New Covenant terms.

In the New Testament, God clearly commissioned some to preach the gospel of God's Kingdom *actively*. Paul received such a commission, as Acts 9:15 clearly relates. Christ also commissioned His other apostles to "go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . ." (Matthew 28:19). These commissions have their parallel in the commissions received by the Old Testament prophets. Examples include the prophets Isaiah (Isaiah 6), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1) and Jonah (Jonah 1).

It is important to recognize, though, that neither the Old Testament commissions to the prophets nor the New Testament commissions to the apostles remove the responsibility on the part of the *people* to be examples. God has always used this means—the example of His people—as a fundamental method of reaching others. As one excellent New Testament example, notice I Thessalonians 1:7-9, where Paul lauds the converts in Thessalonica, pointing out the breadth of their example to other church congregations and to the world at large:

. . . so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. . . .

So strong was their witness that Paul needed not "to say anything." These people certainly did not hide their

light under a basket. Example can speak louder than preaching.

## Proselytism and Man's Law

In today's world, international law protects the reasonable practice of proselytism. Article 18 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed in December 1948, reads:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

These rights were elaborated and further delineated by a United Nations subcommittee in 1954. Following is a summary of the pertinent parts of this subcommittee's determination on religious discrimination. Notice especially point 3:

1. Everyone shall be free to adhere, or not to adhere, to a religion or belief, in accordance with the dictates of his conscience.

2. No one shall be subjected to material or moral coercion likely to impair his freedom to maintain or to change his religion or belief.

3. Everyone shall be free to teach or to disseminate his religion or belief, either in public or in private.

4. No one shall be compelled to receive religious or atheistic instruction, contrary to his convictions or, in the case of children, contrary to the wishes of their parents and, when applicable, legal guardians.

5. No group professing a religion or belief shall be prevented from training the personnel intending to devote themselves to the performance of its practices or observances, or from bringing teachers from abroad necessary for this purpose.

Furthermore, human rights specialists recognize that the right to evangelize (proselytize) entails the right to *be* evangelized. These are two sides of a single coin. This is the nexus between the right to engage in proselytism and the rights of free speech and of peaceful assembly (entailing as it does a right to disseminate and receive information). As Dr. Bert B. Beach ("Evangelism and Proselytism: Religious Liberty and Ecumenical Challenges," at [www.irla.org](http://www.irla.org)) puts it: "Any strict anti-proselytism regulations cut off the supply of new and different information, restricting both the dissemination and receiving of ideas." This aspect of proselytism is addressed in Article 19 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Clearly, international law recognizes proselytism as an integral part of an individual's right to choose whom he worships, and to change, or not to change, his habits or worship. Next month, we will see that theory and practice are two vastly different things.

—Charles Whitaker

## For Further Study

The issue of religious evangelism or proselytism is densely entangled with the rights of religious freedom, freedom of speech, and the more recently acquired "right" to privacy. Here are three specialized websites that focus on these issues.

- [www.irfw.org](http://www.irfw.org) is sponsored by International Religious Freedom Watch, of which Lawrence Uzzell is president. It has a number of interesting articles and links to other sites of interest. A good source for primary documentation.
- [www.irla.org](http://www.irla.org) is sponsored by International Religious Liberty Association. This site has a number of articles, some of which are quite technical, concerning human rights and religious freedom. An excellent site for primary documents. Extensive links.
- [www.forum18.org](http://www.forum18.org) is a Norwegian news agency devoted to tracking and reporting religious persecution, especially in the old Soviet Republics and Eastern Europe. (The number 18 refers to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.)

# personal *Communication and Leaving Babylon*

(continued from page 6)

Do they not proceed out from an evil heart (Matthew 12:34)?

People judge human nature to be a mixture of good and evil, but that is not acceptable for life in the Kingdom of God! It may as well be totally evil! Is God Himself contaminated, a blend of good and evil? According to I John 3:2, in His Kingdom “we shall be like Him.” We will be purified and uncontaminated as He is. Human nature’s evil mix will not be seen in God’s Kingdom.

We should by now realize that salvation can only be by grace. Human nature *not* only cannot be made good, but even now it resides just under the surface. Our conversion barely covers it over, as Peter’s outburst against God’s will illustrates and Paul’s experience, reported in Romans 7, amplifies.

## Heart or Will—Which?

Paul writes in Philippians 2:12-13:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

The apostle is urging us, not to work to achieve salvation, but to labor to carry out the responsibilities that the receipt of God’s grace has imposed on us (Titus 2:11-15). Christianity is not merely the passive receiving of forgiveness and the Spirit of Jesus Christ. We are to carry forward what we have freely received from God to its proper end.

We need to add to this another thought found in Deuteronomy 5:29: “Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!” Which of these—the will to carry forward what we have received or the heart—is more important to growth in conversion and leaving Babylon? Which of them is subject to the other? Is the will a self-determining agent, or does something else determine it? Is the will superior to every other faculty of the body? Is it sovereign or servant? Does it govern, or is it subject to the pleasure of other faculties?

Most who consider themselves Christian, believe that, because free moral agency exists, the will is the more significant. Human philosophies also insist that the will governs man. However, this cannot be. To the contrary, the Word of God teaches that the heart or mind is the dominating center of our being.

Consider a circumstance that each of us faces, perhaps many times on any given day. If a person has before him

two options, which will he choose? Unless some overriding reason exists, he will choose the one most agreeable to him, that is, to his heart, his innermost being.

What if the choice is between moral or immoral alternatives? If a person is what the Bible calls a “sinner,” and he must choose between godliness and sinful indulgence, which will he select? He will choose the latter because he prefers it, all arguments to the contrary notwithstanding.

Why? Because, as Jeremiah 17:9 says, his heart is desperately wicked. Jesus reinforces this in Matthew 15:19-20: “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man. . . .”

If one were to present a truly converted person with the same options, he would choose the life of piety and virtue. Why? Because God has given him a new heart:

For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. (Ezekiel 36:24-27)

Ezekiel’s prophecy is in perfect harmony with God’s promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Thus, it is not the will that makes the sinner impervious to all appeals through the gospel to forsake his way, but it is his corrupt and sinful heart.

The sinner will not come to Christ and keep the Sabbath and holy days, quit stealing from God, or do any other thing commanded by God because he does not want to. He does not want to because his heart hates Christ and loves sin. Romans 8:7 is proof that human nature is at war against God.

The human will is the faculty of choice, but it is as much subject to the mind as the hands, feet, eyes, and sexual organs. It is a servant of the mind, and in turn, various influences affect the mind throughout the course of life. Proverbs 4:20-23 confirms this:

My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your eyes; keep them in the midst of your heart; for they are life to those who find them, and health to all their flesh. Keep your heart with all diligence, for out it spring the issues of life.

The heart determines one’s preferences and inclina-

# personal *Communication and Leaving Babylon*

tions, and thus it determines one's choices, subjecting the will to it. Because of this, it is imperative to understand the evil that Satan and his demons have communicated to us either directly or through the course of this world. The world has shaped our pre-conversion heart, and thus it affects our relationship with God.

## Hatred Removed

Jesus declares in John 6:44, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." His statement limits who can be converted: Only those the Father selects and draws may be converted. Indirectly, the verse intimates that men will not come to Him unless drawn.

Paul adds in Romans 3:11-12, "There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all gone out of the way; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one." People suppose they are free to choose to seek God at will, but this verse vigorously disputes that notion. *Nobody* seeks after God!

Jesus reinforces this: "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40). In this instance, they had God in their very midst, and they would not choose to follow Him. He states this even more bluntly in John 15:18: "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you." "Hated" is a strong word!

However, some did choose to follow Him. Notice what Scripture says about them: "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). This passage clearly says that those who followed Christ did so, not by exercising their

will, but because they were prompted by God's will. Recall Paul's statement in Philippians 2:13, "It is God who works in you both to will and to do. . . ."

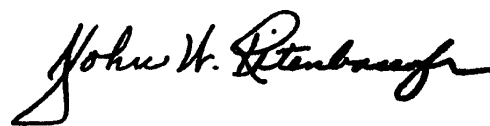
The fulfilling of God's twin promises in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:24-28 in our lives makes all the difference in the world concerning the use of the will. By them, we have a new heart as a gift from God—a heart that does not hate God. The proof that the hatred has been removed is that one who has received this benefit consistently uses his will to choose to obey God's will as expressed in His law. The new heart and submission to God's will go hand in hand.

A statement from the apostle Paul helps to put our attitude on the right trajectory: "For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (I Corinthians 4:7).

What we have received is a gift of grace, unearned in any way. We need to understand that man's free will is free only in that God never compels anybody to sin. The sinner is not free to do either good or evil because his corrupt heart, formed by Satan's dominion, always inclines him to sin. Man is enslaved by that heart, a bondage that can be broken only by God's merciful intervention.

By virtue of God's gift, only the called of God are truly free to exercise their will to choose the good. God's gift does not merely counterbalance the evil heart corrupted by Satan's world, but can thoroughly dominate human nature because God works in us to do His will. Exercising this will that is motivated by a God-given heart will enable us to flee Babylon's evil influence.

In Christian love,



# prophecy watch *The Birth of Jesus Christ*

(continued from page 9)

Son into the world just as prophesied, but He also guided Jesus through a perfect human lifetime to His sacrificial death for us all, resurrecting Him from the grave exactly three days and three nights later, as Jesus had said was the only sign of His Messiahship (John 2:18-22).

That glorious Holy One ascended to heaven and now sits at the right hand of God as our High Priest. He is the Head of the church and our soon-coming King. He promises us, "I will never leave you nor forsake you"

(Hebrews 13:5), as well as, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3). He now awaits the word from His Father to return to this earth to set up His Kingdom. What great confidence we can have that all this will happen as planned, and we will be part of it!

As the angels sang to the shepherds in the field, "Glory to the Most High God and peace on earth among those He favors!"

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

## Israel After Ariel Sharon

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's second stroke in early January 2006 interrupted his strategy of unilateral disengagement from the Palestinians, leaving his new political party—Kadima (“Forward”)—without its charismatic leader. More than this, the abrupt shift in leadership portends increased instability in Israel itself, the emerging Palestinian state, and the region.

Sharon, the son of Russian immigrants, built his military credentials in Israel's wars against Arab states, developing a reputation for courageous tactics and even borderline insubordination. He later helped form the Likud Party, which became known for its forceful, often militaristic, stance on matters concerning foreign policy and especially Palestinian terrorism.

When elected prime minister in February 2001, Sharon won under the banner of taking the fight to the terrorists. The previous summer at Camp David under President Bill Clinton, then-prime minister Ehud Barak offered generous land concessions in exchange for a cessation of Palestinian hostilities. Yasser Arafat rejected the offer, and his Palestinian Authority and associated factions waged a brutal terror campaign, killing over a thousand Israelis. (*The Washington Post's* Charles Krauthammer notes that “given Israel's tiny size, the American equivalent would be 50,000 dead.”) Sharon's response to this *intifada* was to re-occupy Palestinian communities that Arafat had turned into terrorist bases. During his first two years in office, Sharon continued to respond to Palestinian attacks by bombing Palestinian territories and beginning the construction of the West Bank barrier.

For several decades, Israeli politicians have focused on essentially two options. The left, with leaders like Shimon Peres, has favored negotiating with the Palestinians through “land for peace” deals. This was tried in the 1993 Oslo peace accords, as well as the 2000 Camp David accords, both of which turned out to be disastrous for Israel. The right, with leaders like Benjamin Netanyahu, has argued that the Palestinians do not want peace, and absent a peace partner, the only course is to remain in the occupied territories and attempt to integrate them into Israel. Detractors point out that areas such as the West Bank and Gaza Strip are predominately Palestinian in makeup (83% vs. 17% Israeli in the West Bank; 99+% Palestinian in the Gaza Strip), so defending Israelis in them indefinitely would be ultimately untenable.

Sharon devised a third way. Even with an active offensive and defensive military strategy in place, Israel could not endure the ongoing terrorism campaign. He believed that the best response to the ongoing *intifada* should have two parts: targeted killings of terrorist leaders and the formation of a territorial settlement that would—presumably—remove the Palestinian incentive for war. Since there is no authoritative voice for all Palestinians—their prime minister cannot realistically speak for all of the militant factions—normal negotiation is not feasible. Thus, Sharon's strategy was to impose a settlement on the Palestinians by unilaterally withdrawing Israelis behind defensible borders, and letting the Palestinians work out their own future apart from

Israel. This angered elements on the right and the left—the right, because it involved giving up land won in previous wars; and the left, because it was done “unilaterally” and without negotiation—but the results of this disengagement speak for themselves. Charles Krauthammer explains:

The success of this fence-plus-unilateral-withdrawal strategy is easily seen in the collapse of the *intifada*. Palestinian terror attacks are down 90 percent. Israel's economy has revived. In 2005 it grew at the fastest rate in the entire West. Tourists are back and the country has regained its confidence. The Sharon idea of a smaller but secure and demographically Jewish Israel garnered broad public support, marginalized the old parties of the left and right, and was on the verge of electoral success that would establish a new political center to carry on this strategy. (“Who Will Finish Sharon's Mission?” *Townhall.com*, January 6, 2006.)

In the midst of this momentum, though, Sharon was cut out of the political picture. Israel's political system will be in disarray for some time since it lacks a similarly recognized leader who can continue this centrist course. While Sharon's Kadima party will likely carry on, and perhaps even do well in the March elections, it will not garner the degree of popularity or backing it would have had with Sharon at its head. While Israel sorts out its politics and direction, any progress in the policy of disengagement is doubtful in the near term. As that process stretches out, it increases the likelihood of renewed Palestinian terrorism in those areas where Israel is less defensible.

As this happens in and around Israel, Iran—another of Israel's historic foes—is seizing the opportunity to further its own ends. Iran's new President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—now famous for denying the Holocaust, threatening to “wipe Israel off the map,” and appearing to be driven by a “divine mission” to prepare the way for the Mahdi (Islam's messiah)—knows that Israel's leadership is in flux. He seems to be distancing himself from Israel to regain Arab recognition, as Iran was involved in arms transactions with both Israel and the United States (the Iran-Contra affair) during the 1980s' war with Iraq, giving Iran a reputation of being a “compromiser” in Arab eyes. At the same time, Ahmadinejad may be baiting Israel and/or the U.S. into a confrontation. If he speaks brashly and is deferred to, he gains respect from his Arab neighbors. If the “Zionist entity” or its cohort, “the great Satan,” attacks him, Iran will re-emerge as the center of revolutionary Islamism—a place it held in the 1970s and desires to fill again.

Thus, in between Palestinian militant groups and a resurgent Iran, both interested in Israel's destruction, Israel finds itself with a fledgling political party and no successor the equal of Sharon—as Krauthammer puts it, “he left no Joshua.” We can expect this to be a chaotic year in the Middle East.

—David C. Grabbe

## The Parables of Matthew 13

### Part Four: The Parable of the Mustard Seed

When Jesus taught parables as prophecies of the course of the church's history until His return, He provided two views of the one subject: specifically, the outward aspect, shown to the multitude of people; and the inward aspect, as revealed to His disciples. He gave the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19) to the mixed multitude to disclose evidence of a specific characteristic of the church compared to the outside world.

The historical development of the church of God would be one of humble beginnings. However, this parable contains more than this important truth. Hidden within it is a warning about the perversion of the church's method of growth and of satanic attacks upon it. This parable is an analogy, and as with all analogies, the symbolism is not exact but similar. Therefore, the symbolism of the Kingdom of God being *likened* to a mustard seed is not identical, yet it explains a particular aspect of the process that the church goes through in preparing for God's Kingdom.



1. What does the mustard seed represent? Matthew 13:31; Mark 4:31; Luke 13:19.

**COMMENT:** The mustard seed stands for the *progress* of the church from small beginnings. Because of its minuteness, the mustard seed came to symbolize small beginnings, denoting the smallest weight or measure, a tiny particle. The parable focuses on this idea of smallness. The mustard seed is something small that does its part to expand in preparation for the Kingdom of God. The seed represents an *instrument* by which spiritual growth can be advanced, just as a plant grows and reproduces itself through a seed.

In this parable, the small seed is the church, which appeared as the firstfruits of the Word. Just as in the Parable of the Sower, the one who sows the mustard seed is the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, and the field is the world. Jesus Himself had an insignificant entrance into the world by human standards, and the church He founded is likewise a "little flock" (Luke 12:31-32), small and designed by God not to become a physically powerful organization that would make a spectacle of itself.

In Matthew 7:13-14, Christ says the way that leads to eternal life is difficult and narrow, and *few* find it. He reiterates in Matthew 20:16 that *few* are chosen. In Luke 10:2, when sending the seventy out, He says the laborers are *few*. Paul argues in I Corinthians 1:26-29 that God calls the weak and the base of the world to put to shame the mighty and the noble. Jesus is referring to those few who, upon their calling by God, voluntarily submit to God's dominion, the Kingdom of God.

2. What do the birds of the air represent? Matthew 13:32; Mark 4:32; Luke 13:19.

**COMMENT:** Birds are naturally attracted to the taste of the mustard seed. Matthew identifies the birds of the air as "the wicked one" (Matthew 13:4, 19). Mark connects them with "Satan" (Mark 4:4, 15), and Luke links them to "the devil" (Luke 8:5, 12). In Genesis 15:11, fowls swoop down on Abraham's sacrifices, and he has to drive them away (see Deuteronomy 28:26). The end-time Babylon becomes "a habitation of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird" (Revelation 18:2).

In the parable, Jesus predicts the birds of the air would lodge in the branches. These "birds," demons led by "the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2), have continually tried to infiltrate the church. Upon the unsuspecting early church, Satan moved quickly to implant his agents in it to teach false doctrine while appearing to be true Christians. Just as God permitted Satan to tempt Job intensely (Job 1:12; 2:6) and to sift Peter as wheat (Luke 22:31), He has allowed antichrists to lodge within His church (I Corinthians 11:18-19).

3. What does the "tree" represent? Same verses.

**COMMENT:** The largest of mustard plants, even under ideal conditions, can grow only to a height of about 15 feet. Luke 13:19 describes it as "a large tree," yet the natural mustard plant is not "a large tree" by any stretch of the imagination. All varieties of the mustard family, which are herbs, have thin, pulpy—not woody—stems and branches. It is nothing like a tree.

This mustard plant did something abnormal by growing beyond its design parameters; it became larger than what God designed as normal. What is this large mustard tree in which, apparently, demons are welcome? As the church grew from a tiny seed into a small mustard bush, it was as God designed it, but over time, it mutated into a large tree, something never intended by God.

This plant ceased to be God's church when it perverted its doctrines and objectives, moving beyond God's intended limits. It became a counterfeit of the true church, appropriating the name "Christian" and blending or syncretizing pagan mystery religions with Christianity. Eventually, it called itself the Roman Catholic Church, and later produced Protestant daughter churches whose doctrines are rooted in Catholicism.

What became of the true church? When the mustard plant mutated from its original form, God replanted His true church in another corner of the field, beginning the process anew. It is a consistent characteristic of God's true church to remain as a small herb, spiritually feeding the few who are chosen to become begotten children of the Kingdom of God.