

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 2)

Are We Committed to Christian Beliefs?

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We are going to begin this sermon by turning to II Corinthians 13:5, which is one of those scriptures that we know pretty well.

II Corinthians 13:5 Examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith: prove your own selves. Know you not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except you be reprobates?

This series of sermons is being given, beginning with my last sermon which was about three weeks ago, for the purpose of helping us examine ourselves prior to this coming Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread.

I want you to notice especially that the verse charges us to examine ourselves, and to put ourselves to the test as to whether we are in *the* faith. Some modern translations say, "Put yourself to the test as to whether you are *living* by faith." This is not correct, because it subtly indicates one's own particular faith, whatever it happens to be. It is very easy for one to create one's own body of beliefs, and then answer in a positive "Yes" to Paul's challenge, and yet still be misled.

This faith in question *here* is the faith with a definite article "*the*" in front of it, indicating a specific body of distinctively related inter-connected teachings. William Barclay, in his commentary, hits the nail right on the head when he translates it as "*the Christian faith*."

We are not to examine ourselves as to whether we believe Christ is our Savior, but as to whether we believe in and practice the body of doctrines that make up *the way* of Jesus Christ. It is useless to have standards that we do not apply. It is fatally easy to make acceptance of the faith as a substitution for living it. The key word there is "acceptance" of even "*the*" faith as a substitute for living it. As recorded in Luke 6:46, Jesus said to people who were listening to Him: "And why call you me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?"

Each person must do his own self examination. The best the ministry can do is point out where conduct or belief is flawed, but conviction is not reached until an individual has seen his sin and condemned himself. It is very easy to live in a fantasy of self-approval, taking shelter behind a sense of one's own virtues.

We are going to take a look at another scripture that reinforces what Paul wrote in II Corinthians 13:5. We are going to look at James 2:14-20.

James 2:14-20 What does it profit, my brethren, though a man say he has faith, and have not works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto

them, Depart in peace, be you warmed and filled; notwithstanding you give them not those things which are needful to the body; what does it profit? Even so faith, if it has not works, is dead, being alone. Yes, a man may say, You have faith, and I have works: Show me your faith without your works, and I will show ~~you~~ *my* faith *by* my works. You believe that there is one God; you do well: the demons also believe, and tremble. But will you know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

We are not being asked to examine ourselves as to whether we *agree* with the teachings of the Bible, but whether we *believe* them to the extent that they produce *works* of which God approves. There is a big difference between those two.

This paragraph in James 2 clearly states that saying that one believes, without the conduct that corresponds with what one *claims* to believe, is a dead faith. It is a faith that produces death, not life, and that sort of faith rises no higher than being an individually-held opinion. Brethren, a holy life must be lived. What Paul is saying, is charging us with in II Corinthians 13: 5, is to examine ourselves as to whether we are living a holy life.

James is not saying works save us, but when what he writes is combined with what the apostles wrote, he is saying that works will provide evidence that we are indeed justified by the blood of Jesus Christ, and that the life of God is in us, and we are undeniably growing and overcoming. That is what works do. They give evidence that we really do believe. They give evidence that we really are converted. They give evidence that we really do have the Holy Spirit in us. Works do not save us. They *confirm* what cannot be seen in the heart, and so it is external evidence that we really do believe.

I want you to see a way in which Paul confirmed this. Paul and James were in perfect agreement with one another.

I Corinthians 13:2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing.

Paul is expressing here the same fact as James 2: 14. In Paul's statement *love* is the work motivated by a living faith. Without the work of love, his faith was useless. It was dead.

In my previous sermon I laid a foundation for this message by showing that a fairly large percentage of people calling themselves Christian *do not* agree that what God says in the Bible regarding specific doctrines is all that important, let alone doing the works of Christian living. Now put plainly, they simply do not believe many of the statements the Bible makes. Put in another way, that like Adam and Eve, they are lifting themselves up to the level of God, feeling that they are free to change what has been said in order to meet their own personal criteria. Put yet another way, the Serpent said to Eve, "You shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."

As the sermon ended I was quoting from an article titled "Unbelieving Born Agains," written by Gene Edward Veith, in which he quotes results drawn from a recent George Barna poll of *born-again* Christians.

If large percentages of *born-again*s do not have faith in what God says, what pray tell are going to be the works that come from whatever faith they *do* possess, because what we believe will produce works? This is why it is critical that we believe the right thing. It takes belief in the right thing to produce the right works. The more false things that are mixed with true things, the intensity and the purity of the works are going to be commensurate. They are going to drop.

This shocking poll reveals that *born-again*s have largely embraced the teachings of tolerance and inclusion of the liberal left, the academia, the media, the environmentalists, the homosexual-feminist-Lesbian-cross-dressing and polygamist groups.

What we need to do is to examine ourselves as to whether we might be carelessly following the same principle of rejection of some portions of the Bible as these *born-again* peoples. This is very much a pit that you do not want to allow yourself to slide into. The results of this poll are staggering in their moral implications. I am going to give a short review of some of the percentages I gave you.

Twenty-six percent of *born-again*s believe that all religions are essentially the same. Quoting from the Veith article, he says, "This shows that this twenty-six percent believes that they can get to heaven regardless of what they believe, that the doctrines of the Christian religion do not matter." That is this man's conclusion. This first statistic is beginning to show that each of these *born-again*s is creating his own personal faith. Do you understand that? Each of these *born-again*s is creating his own personal faith. We might say each is creating his own personal religion.

The next statistic, taken from the Veith article, revealed that fifty percent of *born-again*s believe that a life of good works will enable a person to go to heaven. The practical theological ramifications of this are that it takes the Savior right out of the salvation equation. The Bible very clearly says "we are saved by grace through faith." This is a faith that is in the form of trust, *following* belief. We are not saved by works. But you see, that just goes out the window in terms of their belief base.

The third statistic was that thirty-five percent of *born-again* Christians do not believe that Jesus rose from the dead. That is incredible! This throws the whole chapter of I Corinthians 15 right out of the Bible. The beginning of that chapter says that 500 people saw Jesus *at one time*. At one assembly there were 500 people; not 2, not 3, but 500 people could give witness to seeing Him after His death. In addition to this, Romans 10: 6-10 flat-out tells us that if we do not believe that Jesus rose from the dead, we are not Christians. This disbelief wipes the hope of Christianity right out of the picture.

It is the practical ramifications of what we choose to believe that are so important, because we will act on what we believe. If we do not believe what God teaches, we will not act like a son of God. If we do not act like a son of God, we will not be in the Kingdom of God. The equation is that simple.

In the *born-again*'s pride, they are lifting themselves to the same level as God, as having the authority to determine what is good and what is evil. These *born-again* people supposedly represent the very cream of the followers of Christ, and yet willy-nilly, they are rejecting much of what He says. This particular doctrine is the very hope of Christian life. When we think of this in a national sense, is it any wonder that we are called in Revelation 18 "the Great Whore"? That is not a wonder at all. Maybe it is pretty mild compared to what He could say. Since belief affects morality, is it any wonder that morally Israel is going right in the pits.

Forty-five percent of people claiming to be *born-again* Christians do not believe that Satan exists. Ten percent believe in reincarnation. I am sure that these people do not even understand that in tossing this belief right out the window that they are calling Jesus Christ a liar. They do not even think of what they are doing. They claim He is their Savior, and then they do not agree with what He says. Do you know what He said? He said, "*I saw Satan fall from heaven as lightning.*" They do not agree with that. He saw it. They did not. But they do not believe that He is telling them the truth, that Satan does not merely represent evil, He *is* evil incarnate, and he is alive, and he is roaming this earth as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.

These incredible statistics really are giving clear understanding that people calling themselves Christian feel free and clear to believe virtually anything they so choose. Instead of yielding to their supposed Savior, or what He tells them to believe, they find justification to do as they please in some area of their life. We are just going to touch on this right now, but the justification is almost always to give themselves permission to sin in some area in which they want to sin.

It is no wonder though that Jesus, in His last recorded prayer in John 17, five times asks God, "Please make us one in the same way that You and I are one." He says, "even as," meaning in like manner, equal to the way the Father and the Son are one. This is a major problem getting all people to believe the same things. This is very difficult.

Now what do *born-again* people believe regarding some present-day moral issues? According to George Barna's figures, thirty-three percent of *born-again*s accept same-sex unions. Did you hear me? Thirty-three percent! One-third of *born-again*s believe that homosexual and Lesbian unions are acceptable marriages in the sight of God. Is it any wonder that the homosexual-Lesbian group is winning the cultural battle? They are unified on a goal that they believe in, and they already have many of the so-called Christians on their side. Thus the Christian group is already divided.

In addition to that, thirty-three percent of *born-again*s believe that it is acceptable in God's sight for couples to live together in fornication *before* marriage. The next statistic is perhaps very telling, that twenty-seven percent of *born-again* Christians are more likely to have experienced a divorce than even non-Christians. What does that tell you? There is something wrong. There is something very badly wrong.

Is this rampant unbelief among people who, like you, claim to have accepted Jesus Christ and then give this example of biblical illiteracy? Or does it reveal that they believe that faith is a purely subjective personal experience, rather than dutifully conforming to objective God-given biblical truth? The crux of the problem is right there.

Let me say this again. Do they believe that faith is purely a subjective personal experience rather than dutifully conforming to objective God-given biblical truth? If it is merely a subjective experience to them, then they will believe themselves free to accept only what they feel comfortable with; otherwise they will reject it.

These statistics reveal that large percentages of the supposedly deeply converted people are not conforming themselves to biblical truths.

Let us go back to Revelation 18 where we spent so much time the past year. We are going to read Revelation 18: 2 once again, and then verse 4.

Revelation 18:2 And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of demons, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.

Revelation 18:4 And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that you be not partakers of her sins, and that you receive not of her plagues.

Another aspect that is being revealed by this poll is that these people, while they are undoubtedly religious, are still conformed in belief and practice to the dominant secular culture of the Israelitish countries and are living according to the dictates of whatever faith exists in their head. They are not coming out of it.

I want you to notice the descriptive phrases in verse 2, where it says, "is become the habitation of demons, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird." Each of these is a direct reference to, or a symbol, of demonism and demons. God is telling us that Babylon—the great Whore—is dominated by demons.

Notice that it says there "*is become*." That indicates that it did not begin this way, but has degenerated from something else far purer, and has become what it is today, dominated by violent, hateful, and lying spirits that are of course able to inspire men and women in what to believe.

This is one of those little evidences that points to the fact that Babylon which is spoken of here cannot be the Babylon that many think it is, because that Babylon *never* was pure in God's eye. This Babylon that He is talking about here at one time was (we will call it) "pure" (for lack of a better word), but it has degenerated. It *became* the habitation of demons, meaning that at one time it was *not* the habitation of demons; but at the end-time it now *is* the habitation of demons.

Ancient Babylon begun by Nimrod does not fit. Right at the very beginning God lets us know that these people were *against* God. The Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar does not fit either. They were driven by demons as well, right from the very beginning.

The figurative symbolic meaning of the Babylon here points only to that woman that God was married to, but has degenerated into a habitation of demons and has become the outstanding

exemplar of the Babylon at the end. It is this influence that we have to come out of.

This ready acceptance of teachings not taken from the Bible has the Serpent's fingerprints all over it in the same manner as is shown with Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.

This next statistic that I am going to give you from Mr. Barna's poll is really telling. His poll concludes that only nine percent of those calling themselves *born-again* Christians hold a biblical world view. In other words, they do not perceive life as filtered through the words and teachings of the Bible. I am going to give you George Barna's concluding remark at the end of his poll.

"If Jesus Christ came to this planet as a model of how we ought to live, then our goal should be to act like Jesus. Sadly, few people consistently demonstrate the love, obedience and priorities of Jesus. The primary reason that people do not act like Jesus is because they do not think like Jesus. Behavior stems from what we think, our attitudes, beliefs, values, and opinions. Although most people own a Bible and know some of its contents, our research found that most Americans have little idea how to integrate core biblical principles to form a unified and meaningful response to the challenges and opportunity of life. We are often more concerned with survival amidst chaos, than with experiencing truth and significance."

This is his analysis, and I think one of a knowledgeable man thoroughly shocked at the degenerate spiritual state of supposedly the most Christian nation on the face of the earth. You should be able to see that comparing yourself against these people is a two-edged sword. Yes, we may be able to learn something valuable from them, but at the same time, because the standards reflected by these people are so low, it may prove disastrous to our vanity, puffing us up greatly—so greatly that we begin to think that we are rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing.

In order for one to have a biblical world view, one must believe that absolutes absolutely exist, especially concerning morality—that such truths are absolutely defined by the Bible.

There absolutely *is* a Creator God, and He *absolutely* is active, ruling His creation.

Jesus *absolutely* lived a sinless life.

God's calling and salvation is *absolutely* a gift from God. It cannot *absolutely* be earned in any way.

Satan is real, and the active god of this world. He *absolutely* is not merely a symbol of evil.

Jesus *absolutely* rose from the dead.

The Ten Commandments, in letter and spirit, *absolutely* define morality.

Psalm 10:4 The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God.

You can tell these *born-again*s are not really seeking after God. Their faith comes from their own subjective experience, which certainly does include some things that are biblical, but apparently they go no further than accepting the blood of Jesus Christ, and then they do not seek any longer after that, but hold fast to ideas, to concepts that they have imbibed from the culture as they were growing up. This culture is the culture that includes their parents, their friends, and the people they work with, because it is very clear that they believe the secular culture in many areas of their life.

Psalm 10:4 The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts.

We see from these statistics that God is in sixty-six percent of his thoughts, or in sixty-five percent of his thoughts, or in seventy percent of his thoughts. There is always some breakpoint at which they will not go beyond, because there is something in their life that they do not want to be required to do, and so it is better to shut one's eyes and one's mind and not get involved in that than to be faced with making the decision to make this a part of the belief system. We will see more about this in a little bit.

Here in Psalm 10:4 is clearly defined the difference between those who have a biblical world view and those who do not. Those who do not, do not have God and His word as their guide for every aspect of life. Their choices are not always screened through God's word. They do not look for God's hand in the events of their life, or in the events of their nation's life, or in the events of their church's life.

We are not finished yet with Mr. Barna's poll, so listen carefully to the following statistics gleaned from those not considered evil by this world, but rather considered among the best of the worshippers of God, and you will understand why Israel is in such terrible shape, even in America—the most religious of all Israelitish nations.

Remember I said nine percent of the people polled have a biblical world view; however, only seven percent of all Protestants maintained a biblical world view, according to Barna's poll. But hang on! It gets worse.

Of adults who attend *mainline* Protestant churches—Methodists, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, etc.—only two percent have a biblical world view. Among Catholics, of which I believe there are somewhere between 60 and 70 million in the United States (and that is a very conservative figure) only one half of one percent have a biblical world view.

The denominations that produce the highest biblical world view were *non*-denominational Protestants. Incidentally, the way the world looks at us, they would include us in that group. But even there brethren, it is only thirteen percent. This is the group that threw the balance to where it finally settled at nine percent. The Pentecostals came in at ten percent, and Baptists at eight percent.

Now what is the prism through which these people define conduct? It cannot possibly be the Bible, except for a narrow area of their life. If you do not have a biblical world view, you are not looking at life through God's eyes. There is only one possible answer, and that is, it is the world around us that is the prism they are looking through.

Barna said that one of the most striking findings of this poll was the vast difference regarding morality that exists between those who evidence a strong biblical world view and those who do not. In other words, what one believes as absolute results in far different behavior. Now listen carefully, because it clearly shows the moral effect of choosing to believe the Bible's teaching.

That narrow percentage (the thirteen percent, the seven percent, the nine percent, the two percent, and even the one/half percent who really sincerely believe that they have a strong biblical world view) are overeighty times less likely to endorse abortion; seventy-eight times less likely to accept pornography as morally acceptable; thirty-one times less likely to cohabit before marriage; eighteen times less likely to endorse drunkenness; fifteen times less likely to condone homosexual sex; twelve times less likely to accept profanity; eleven times less likely to accept adultery as morally acceptable. (I find that one really hard. That should have been ninety or one hundred, rather than just eleven); eight times less likely to buy a lottery ticket; seventeen times less likely to actually place a gambling debt.

I am going to read this from the *King James* first, and then I am going to read it from the *Amplified Bible*. We have to find where God places the blame here.

Hosea 4:6-7 My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because you have rejected knowledge, I will also reject you, that you shall be no priest to me: seeing you have forgotten the law of God, I will also forget your children. As they were increased, so they sinned against me.

That is very interesting. The richer we become, the worse we get in terms of faith, in terms of belief, in terms of works.

Hosea 4:7-8 As they were increased, so they sinned against me: therefore will I change their glory into shame. They eat up the sin of my people, and they set their heart on their iniquity.

There is a problem. This is why they do not have a biblical world view. This is why they disbelieve parts of the Bible. Their heart is set on lawlessness.

Hosea 4:8 And there shall be, like people, like priest [You cannot tell them apart.]: and I will punish them for their ways, and reward them their doings.

I am going to show you that really nothing ever changes. In Hosea, we were looking at something that was written in the 700s—sometime before 720, before Israel fell. We will say 750 BC. Now we are going to look at something that was written probably about 50, 52, 54 AD

by the Apostle Paul.

Romans 10:1-2 Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.

It sounds like Paul agrees with Hosea. I am going to go back to Hosea and read those verses out of the *Amplified Bible*.

Hosea 4:6 (Amplified Bible) My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you [the priestly nation] have rejected knowledge, I will also reject you that you shall be no priest to me; seeing you have forgotten the law of your God, I will also forget your children. The more they increased and multiplied [in prosperity and power], the more they sinned against Me; I will change their glory into shame. They feed on the sin of My people and set their heart on their iniquity. And it shall be: Like people, like priest; I will punish them for their ways and repay them for their doings.

Romans 10:1 (Amplified Bible) Brethren, [with all] my heart's desire and goodwill for [Israel], I long and pray to God that they may be saved. I bear them witness that they have a [certain] zeal and enthusiasm for God, but it is not enlightened and according to [correct and vital] knowledge.

That is really telling. They feel free to establish their own doctrinal body of beliefs.

I feel that those verses sum the cause of the evidence that is found in Barna's survey. The survey provides convincing verification that in our day American conduct is paralleling, and we are witnessing a repeat of what God charged against Israel during Hosea's day, and also in Paul's day.

This sermon has little value unless we can evaluate ourselves against what is given. Now where do we stand in regard to this issue? In Matthew 13:13, Jesus was asked, "Why do you always speak to them in parables?" This is part of the answer that He gave.

Matthew 13:13 Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not.

Think about that. He was the Word of God in the flesh. This is the Word of God in print. Do these people in the United States of America have access to this word? Sure they do. Even Barna says almost all of these people have a Bible in their house. I wonder how many times they see it, or how many times a week they see it, or how many times in a week they may pick it up and read something out of it. Now listen to what Jesus said because He was confronted by this personally.

Matthew 13:13-15 Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which says, By hearing you shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing you shall see, and shall not perceive. For this people's heart is grown gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes *they have closed*; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.

Do you begin to see something there, that God is charging Israel with a deliberate rejection? It is not that God expects these people to be converted, but certainly they have the intelligence, and they have the means and the where-with-all to be able to understand and grasp a great deal more than they are, because they are deliberately shutting it out. "Oh, the crucifixion is worth a couple of laughs." There is a deliberateness and a cynicism in that, and you can bet that this man does not really want to know, because it would ~~cost~~ cost him to know.

Matthew 13:16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.

Unless God did what He did, we would be the same way as the people out there. He has aided us in a way by His grace to overcome this natural resistance that the carnal mind has against the word of God so that we are able to accept it, believe it, understand it, and apply it.

Peter agreed with what Matthew wrote, because in II Peter 3: 3, he wrote:

II Peter 3:3-5 Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. For this *theywillingly*, ...[Modern Bibles put *willfully*] ...are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water.

There is a deliberateness in the rejection of parts of the Bible that they find is going to cost them personally, or that they just do not want to submit to. Peter just happened to pick the flood there as an example, for even in his day it was being rejected. "Aw, that never happened. It was just a little local thing. Moses got carried away when he was writing that."

What I am giving you here is that religion to these people is truly a subjective experience. That is all. Now we have to look at God's word as *objective* truth, that it is our duty, our obligation, to submit to. Certainly there are going to be things that we do not agree with, or feel incapable of accepting at times, but we cannot let this nature stop us there. We have got to overcome it,

accept it, and make it a part of our life. We do not have that kind of, shall I say, time, opportunity, or whatever to just openly reject it, because we have been called, and the pressure is on us.

This lack of knowledge that Paul talked about does not stem from a shortage of information, but from a deliberate rejection of much of the overwhelming amount of biblical evidence available. There is a neglectful willfulness caused by distractions from many sources, and these people have been persuaded that God's word is nothing but the writings of men and therefore not absolute to them. The practical effect is that they are constantly straddling the fence, creating their own religion.

This survey reveals that Israelites, palming themselves off as deeply-committed worshippers of Jesus Christ, have shallow conviction, and their efforts to submit to God are wishy-washy. Their understanding of the deadly seriousness of God's word to life and the times that we live in is abysmal, and so they blow hot and cold.

Brethren, the central core that sustains any relationship, thus allowing it to grow and produce the most and the best, is trust. These people clearly do not trust God, and the evidence is the rejection of His word. So what kind of a relationship can they have with God when they do not trust Him? God declares in Hebrews 11: "the just shall live by faith." In Ephesians 2 it says, "we are saved by grace through faith." That statement in Hebrews 11 is at one and the same time both a command and a declaration that those called "*the just*" will do.

This survey clearly reveals that these Israelites do not trust what God even clearly tells them, like keeping the Sabbath, and thus they cannot be trusted by God to be loyal. Our entrance to the Kingdom of God into the God family is going to be based on whether we trust God, and if we trust God, then He will trust us. There is nothing hard about this equation. There is a reciprocity there. We are being called upon now to trust Him without ever seeing Him, and so "the just"—those who are upright—will live by trust, trusting Him.

Brethren, this appraisal strongly and clearly confirms that we live in a culture that is confused and lukewarm to God's word and to Christianity. You know that God warns that He is going to vomit it out. That is why He warns us to come out of it so that we are not destroyed when it is destroyed. We cannot allow this world to distract us into emulating this wishy-washy uncertain unsure approach to these very serious matters. Our eternal life is on the line, and God demands of us that we know, believe, and *do* His word regardless of what others choose to do. We have been given the power to do all three. We have no excuse. We are responsible for sacrificing our life to it.

Those of you who have been part of the Church of the Great God for any length of time know that from the very beginning of the Church of the Great God I taught that I believe that it was God who drove the church apart. That is well documented in our early sermons and articles. Time has gone on, and I think I know enough of the history of God's people, as documented in the Bible, and the pattern of God's activities in behalf of His plan and purpose as is also documented in the Bible, to speculate as to what is going to happen next.

I taught earlier that God did what He did in driving the church apart because He is sovereign over His creation, and that we are the focus of His creation at this time. I taught earlier that the

break-up of the Worldwide Church of God, and the scattering that resulted, consisted of a combination of shaking us awake, and at one and the same time *punishment* to awaken us to the times that we live in, and the seriousness of the church's and our own personal spiritual condition. It was punishment, but really not much more than a good hard slap on the wrist, considering what He could have done, and compared to why I think is already beginning to be under way and building.

I think that I am right regarding the spiritual identity of the Great Whore of Revelation 17 and 18 as being exemplified in modern Israel. I also believe, when one considers the Barna poll from which I took so much information in the early parts of this sermon, that hard persecution for Christians is not far over the horizon. It has already begun in Muslim-dominated countries, and in some *non*-Muslim countries like China, India, and Sri Lanka. Hard persecution for those professing Christianity is already a fact of life. It has already taken place as close to us as Eastern Europe in Romania under the Ceausescu regime.

I want you to look with me in Leviticus 26 at a smattering of verses, beginning with verse 14.

Leviticus 26:14-16 But if you will not hearken unto me, and will not do all these commandments; And if you shall despise my statutes, or if your soul abhor my judgments so that you will not do all my commandments, but that you break my covenant: I also will do this unto you: I will even appoint over you terror.

What is the big term in the news today? Terrorism! "I will even appoint over you terror." Even if it is not happening to you and me directly, it *is* happening on a daily basis to the Jews who are part of Israel. Through all of the advertisements and the continual beating of the drums following September 11, terror is in the news everyday, and as a result of that your liberties are being taken away. The president could issue a decree and put the Patriot Act into operation, and our liberties would virtually disappear at the hand of our own government.

Leviticus 26:16 I will even appoint over you terror, consumption, And the burning ague, that shall consume the eyes and cause sorrow of heart: and you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it.

Leviticus 26:18-19 And if you will not yet for all this hearken unto me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins. And I will break the pride of your power; and I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass.

Leviticus 26:21 And if you walk contrary unto me, and will not hearken unto me; I will bring seven times more plagues upon you according to your sins.

Leviticus 26:23-24 And if you will not be reformed by me by these things, but will walk contrary unto me; Then will I also walk contrary unto you, and will punish you yet seven times for your sins.

Leviticus 26:27-28 And if you will not for all this hearken unto me, but walk contrary unto me; Then I will walk contrary unto you also in fury; and I, even I, will chastise you seven times for your sins.

Leviticus 26:36-42 And upon them that are left alive of you I will send a faintness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies: and the sound of a shaken leaf shall chase them: and they shall flee, as fleeing from a sword: and they shall fall when none pursues. And they shall fall one upon another, as it were before a sword, when none pursues: and you shall have no power to stand before your enemies. And you shall perish among the heathen, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up. And they that are left of you shall pine away in their iniquity in your enemies' lands; and also in the iniquities of their fathers shall they pine away with them. If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass which they trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary unto me: And that I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land.

The general principle revealed here is a gradual ever-increasing intensity of pressure brought to bear upon God's people in order to bring about the much desired knowledge of God, followed by repentance and reformation of life.

Knowledge, acceptance, doing, but with an ever increasing intensity of pressure God has already deemed as necessary to bring people to this point.

Amos also speaks on this, but he does it in a somewhat different approach.

Amos 4:6-12 And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places: yet have you not returned unto me, says the LORD. And also I have withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest: and I caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city: one piece was rained upon, and the piece whereupon it rained not withered. So two or three cities wandered unto one city to drink water; but they were not satisfied: yet have you not returned unto me, says the LORD. I have smitten you with blasting and mildew: when your gardens and your vineyards and your fig trees and your olive trees increased, the palmerworm devoured them: yet have you not returned unto me, says the LORD. I have sent among you the pestilence after the manner of Egypt: your young men have I slain with the sword, and have taken

away your horses: and I have made the stink of your camps to come up unto your nostrils: yet have you not returned unto me, says the LORD. I have overthrown some of you as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were as a firebrand plucked out of the burning: yet have you not returned unto me, says the LORD. Therefore thus will I do unto you, O Israel: and because I will do this unto you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel.

Here the thought in Amos is not so much the gradually increasing intensity, but the *variety*, so that everybody is hit by some disaster designed to make them think that the Great God just might be involved in what is going on. I think that God's patterns here are laid bare between the example given in Leviticus, which we read, and in Amos here that the reaction to the intensity of the pressure, and the variety as well on the Israelitish people, is showing that many passages of the Bible—the book that shows or provides the foundation for our faith—are now considered "*hate*" literature.

As these things happen, I want you to note as they go along happening, that you are witnessing the Great God being rejected openly as He brings these plagues. The idea in God's mind is to bring about knowledge of Him, repentance, and reformation of life, but what is happening is *rejection!* Now He knew that this would happen, *but we need to see the witness that is being made here* to provide for us a prod to do the right thing. When we, with our world view of God, look on these things happening, do we see God's involvement? Do we look for His hand in the events? Do we think of things He says in His word that those things are surely going to happen, and indeed we are witnessing them happening?

Remember, in the most religious of all the Israelitish nations, we see the Ten Commandments and references to the Christian God excluded from public life on the basis of the most flimsy interpretations of the Constitution's declaration that one can imagine a "so-called" intelligent judge making. Oh, he is intelligent all right! I do not deny that, but he does not have a spiritual mind.

What is it that the Bible says that it hates? It hates idolatry. It hates homosexuality. It hates adultery. It hates divorce, lying, stealing, and murder among other things, but those desiring the liberty to do these things pervert what it says into a hatred of *them*, rather than a hatred of the acts, and they react by turning their hatred of God on those professing to believe what the Bible says. A perverse twist! This is why I know that persecution is not far away. It has already begun you see in the rejection of "the Book" and portions of the Book.

This nation was not founded on the Bible, but this nation was led in the beginning by men who did believe in far larger portions of the Bible than our leaders do today. In fact, I think we can go so far as to speculate that those men who were not ministers—those men who contributed to the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence—believed in the Bible more firmly than many preachers do today, and they knew it better. They knew its truths.

We are living in a time that must very closely approximate the times recorded in Judges, when "every man did that which was right in his own eyes." But now listen to this. The book of Judges

does *not* show Israel of that time as being irreligious, but just the opposite. They were a religious people. They just had the wrong body of beliefs. It is just like today. By way of comparison, polls show that eighty percent of American people say that religion is important to them, and over sixty percent say that religion is *very* important to them. It is just that many of their beliefs are wrong, and yet these people consider *us* intolerant of their lifestyle, and we become the enemy, and even at this time they are continuously moving against us.

The principle pattern for us in Leviticus 26, and amplified by the historical record shown in many other places in the Bible, is aimed primarily at the nation. But brethren, this principle also applies to us. I hope that you will understand that these things are unfurled against Israel, and we will be caught in them. I am talking about the things that God says He is going to do.

We are Christians, are we not, and is not God able to use the same events to bring about the purification of character and the purging of iniquity in both the nation and the church at one and the same time? He can. Can He not aim specific events and circumstances to test the level of our conviction and loyalty in the midst of what He is bringing upon the nation? He will.

I want you to notice a promise that He makes, and we will end on this promise of His.

Malachi 3:1-3 Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom you seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom you delight in: behold, he shall come, says the LORD of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? [We are approaching it.] And who shall stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify [who?] the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.

Brethren, the Levites are a type of the church. Is not the church a nation, a kingdom of priests? God specifically mentions that before Christ returns, He is going to sit as a refiner's fire and He is going to specifically *purge* and purify the Levites—the spiritual Levites. That is us. That is how I know that as the persecution arises, God is going to accomplish two things at the same time. He is going to punish the people of Israel, but at the same time He does that, He is going to continue to awaken you and me to our responsibilities to Him. He is going to purify us so that we will be prepared by the very things that we have to go through in order to be like Him. And it is coming!

Our responsibility, brethren, is to not be like the religious Israelites who are rejecting the word of God. We have to accept, believe, and *do* what the word of God says in order to show, to give evidence of our faith, of our trust, of our loyalty to God in order that we might grow and be like the Son of God, and be the kingdom of priests that He is preparing for us to be. So during this period of time the dross of false or cowardly believers will be removed.

Now is a time of preparation, a time of training for what lies ahead. The purpose of training is to produce instinctive response to the way of God until right choice and right response are first

nature. If we will take advantage of the time, we will have the opportunity to stand firm in the days of training, meaning right now during this time when we are dealing with the smaller things of life so that when the truly immediate dangerous conditions arise, we will stand firm. That is what the verse asks: "Who will stand?"

We will stop right there, and God willing, we will pick up with Part 3 the next time I speak.