

Does Doctrine Really Matter? (Part 5)

Belief and Unleavened Bread

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 12-Apr-04; Tape #661B

For those of you who heard Richard's sermon this morning, you are going to see that there is in some ways a similarity between his sermon and mine. I think I will be emphasizing a little bit different things from what he did. We are going to begin in John 7: 24. This actually took place during the Feast of Tabernacles, so at least it has a holy day background to it. An argument of course erupted over something, and in verse 24 Jesus said:

John 7:24 Judge not according to the appearance: but judge righteous judgment.

We are not going to go into the controversy that erupted here over a point of law, but the subject of righteous judgment *is* important to this series of sermons that I am currently on. For one to judge righteously in the biblical sense, one must *believe* and use the Word of God as his standard.

So frequently I have quoted to you things from the Barna report. In this sermon I am not going to be reporting all that much about what he said, but I want you to reflect on the fact that the Barna report is in the foreground of this sermon as well. What it does in an overall sense is to show that religious people here are not consistently doing what I just said; that is, believing and using the word of God as their standard. But rather there is a highly individualistic and erratic picking and choosing of those doctrines that people allow themselves to believe, and it is happening right within the Church of God too. We will not go into that too much today. That will remain for another sermon.

A major part of this problem is that people allow their judgment regarding what is morally and spiritually true to be shaped in the wrong arena. In every culture on earth there is a subtle pressure working against godly belief and behavior. It is rarely noticed over the short haul of time, but there is an ever-working pattern of human behavior pulling human conduct toward the lowest common denominators of the culture.

This will be barely noticed by most because the majority's behavior is all going in the same direction. Everybody is doing it. If a person is unaware of the constant persuasion of this pull and thus fails to resist the slow but sure downward slide, that person's attitudes will nonetheless become increasingly cynical and abrasive, and his conduct will gradually become more competitive, grasping, and antagonistic.

Unless something is done to counteract the gradually changing standards in individual family environments, each child born into the culture will accept those changes as *normal*. This subtle process is the same theme that undergirds that book, *The Fourth Turning*, that I mentioned before.

There are actually two processes at work against us in what I am speaking of. The first one is the inevitable, virtually invisible and almost irresistible downward pull itself. The second is the gradual tolerance of it in one's own life, because one's personal standards tend to shift downward with the culture's.

If you are having maybe a little bit of trouble grasping this process, those of you who are a little bit older I think will be able to see this illustration. I just want you to think for just a moment about how immodest women's clothing has become, and how sloppy young men, especially teenage boys, dress these days. It did not used to be like that. Now guess whose standards these people who are wearing this clothing are judging themselves against.

I personally became aware of these downward trends in the late fifties and early sixties when we came into contact with the church. As the years have rolled by, I have gradually become increasingly aware of the force's pressures and have observed its progress in our own culture here in the United States with increasing concern.

It is impossible for me to convey to you how great the downward change in the quality of life and public morality in the United States of America has been since my boyhood in the thirties and the forties. I am not going to attempt to do that, but I hope you will take my word for it that it has changed tremendously. However, I will briefly show you that the Bible confirms these downward processes, and what our responsibilities are.

Genesis 3:6-10 And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden. And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where are you? And he said, I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

Adam and Eve were in an environment close to perfect, with no other human beings to influence them, and yet they still chose the lower of two choices. The instant result was that their perspective of purity changed, and for shame and fear to become part of their life. You know something happened to their minds. It happened quickly.

Genesis 6:5 And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Genesis 6:11 The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.

As time went on from Adam and Eve's sin, it appears that the fear of God and shame apparently disappeared, because God reports the culture was filled with violence, and that the intent of every thought was to do evil. Any shame in their conduct, any guilty conscience that might have prevented their sins and crimes was gone. They accepted thinking of doing evil as *normal*, because God reports that the intent of *every thought* was to do evil.

Any self-analysis, any judgment of their conduct against godly standards was now non-existent. They had hit rock-bottom, and their own rapacious attitudes and violent conduct was *the normal standard*. Each person's individual standard was tolerated except when *they* happened to be the victim of somebody else's.

Except for Noah, and possibly his family, each person was now doing *what was right in his own eyes*. Noah's judgment was different, because he found *grace* in God's eyes, and responded to it regardless of what anybody else did.

Now how about you? Are you a Noah that is going against the flood of public behavior? Are you responding as Noah did to God's grace that He gave you and me in calling us, and forgiving us, and giving us of His spirit?

We are going to leap forward in time once again. We are going to go to II Timothy, chapter 3 to some well-known verses about the end-time here.

II Timothy 3:1-5 This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God: Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.

They do not really believe in it. They may quote scripture, and they may go to church, but as we are seeing from this Barna report, there are many sections of God's Word that they simply do not believe. Paul says, "Avoid people like this." They are all around us. How involved are *we*?

II Timothy 3:13-14 But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived. But continue you in the things which you have learned and have been assured of, knowing of whom you have learned them.

The *King James* says, "Evil men will grow worse and worse." That translation is somewhat unwieldy. It does not mean that human nature will be worse at the end time than when it was in the days of Noah, because human nature has been just as evil all of the time. The expression of human nature has not always been as great as it is today, because there were cultural things that held it in check, but it looks as though God is warning us that when we get toward the time of the end, it is "Katy, bar the door!" He is going to let all the bars go down so that mankind has

a witness of how evil human nature can actually get. They are going to be able to see it with their own eyes, and experience it in their own lives.

The apostle Paul is here confirming that the same process that worked between Adam and Eve and the flood is going to be alive and well and working in the last days. In the last days human nature will have freer expression of the grasping, self-centered violence than at any other time in the history of mankind, with the exception that we just read of in Noah's day. Do you know why this will be? It will be because there will be little or nothing to stop it. It will be showing how evil it actually is, but there will be very much to promote it. We will experience a repetition of mankind's conduct just before Noah's flood, just as Jesus prophesied in Matthew 24. It is coming.

The period of time from Adam and Eve's sin to the violence-laden world just before the flood was somewhere in excess of one thousand six hundred years. It took that long, and probably it took that long because of things that God did. The earth was not very densely populated, so the amount of communication that could be done was quite small.

I want you to compare that to the rapidity of the downward spiral of our culture. It took a long time really to develop, and there was a reason for that. I will tell you that in the past hundred years human nature has been let loose, and we are very rapidly sliding toward rock-bottom because morality is dropping *worldwide*. It is not just in the western world. It is happening everywhere.

Do you think it is not immoral the way these Arabs rule their countries? What a screwball religion Islam is! It is a religion that promotes the killing, the violence against anybody who is not Islamic. Rather than try to attract these people, you just kill them. Do you think that is not immoral? It is moving with such force that unless one is really on his toes and aware, it is going to be easy to get caught up in it. I am not saying that we just go out and commit murder. I am not talking about that at all, but the attitude is there, and that attitude is not all that difficult to pick up on and make use of it in our own little ways.

What might it be that is hastening our descent into abject immorality? Dennis Prager, who is a syndicated Jewish columnist, frequently writes from biblical perspectives. I think he might have hit on a partial answer. His article, "*It's the heart versus the Bible*," appeared on Townhall.com website March 16, 2004. What happened that precipitated this column is that he interviewed a young Swedish woman, and he wrote, "I asked her if she believed in God or in any religion." "No, that is silly," she replied. "Then how do you know what is right and wrong?" he asked. "My heart tells me," she responded.

Now we must ask the question: What is it that is shaping her heart? What *is* it? Prager then continues: "In a nutshell [the attitude he saw in this young woman and in her answer], that is a major reason for the great divide within America and between America and Europe. The majority of the people use their heart, stirred by their eyes, to determine what is right and wrong. A minority uses their mind and/or the Bible to make that determination."

As Prager goes on, he writes that if one picks up almost any of today's cultural issues, these opposing ways (the heart and eye versus the Bible) of determining right and wrong become apparent. For example, how about same-sex marriage? That is a big issue today here in the

United States. Well, the *heart* clearly favors it.

It is a simple process. It goes like this. These people have no solid background in a true standard of morality. They see smiling people in TV and news blurbs, (apparently loving couples of the same sex) who want to commit their lives in marriage to each other. They *see* the smiling couples, *not* the Bible's teachings, and the uneducated-by-God heart is moved to redefine the God-given parameters of marriage from two adults of the opposite sex to whoever one wants to marry, as long as they *love* each other. But are they judging *righteously*? See, that is the issue. Are they judging righteously?

Let us take another issue. What about animal rights? We have the PETA organization raising cane all over the United States about the treatment of animals. The *eye* sees the cuddly animal, and that animal is truly a marvelous creation, but it is threatened with being put to death, and the heart is moved to equate the animal life and human life. But which one is created in God's image?

You see, today's TV viewer has little or no background to rightly judge. It is coming into the eye and going to the heart, but what the heart decides or judges may be completely out of line with what God says in His Word.

How about abortion? The eye sees the appealing forlorn sad-faced eighteen-year-old girl who had unprotected sex, and whose life appears to be greatly burdened, and the heart says, "What kind of hard-hearted person is going to tell her that she cannot have an abortion to remove this burden? After all, it was just a little mistake." But does the heart judge rightly that what is developing in that girl's womb is a living gift from God that is potentially God?

The unbelieving eyes and the heart form an extraordinarily powerful force, and TV and movies have become a powerful force in re-shaping people's morality. In fact a very large percentage of all of our young people have had their morality shaped almost entirely by television and movies, and now the Internet, because their parents do not provide a proper environment to counter those very effective but woefully defective teaching techniques, and they are pulling the standards down.

And then to complicate things, the kid's peers reinforce the television and movies standards because they have all been morally shaped in the same arena. This teaches us that the kind, quality, and environment of communication plays a major role in morality formation, as God clearly confirms through the Babylon example in Genesis 11. Now what did God do to radically alter the environment that was producing very great evil there in Babylon? He confused the languages of the multitudes of people there, thus making communication all but impossible. Now who is communicating standards of morality to you and to your family? This is a serious question.

The pendulum has swung from the time that God confused the languages there in Babylon, and it has come back to what was being produced in Babylon *when* He confused the tongue. This confusion, this immorality, this environment, is no longer limited to the land between the Tigris and Euphrates.

We live in a world where communication is exceedingly open on a worldwide basis through

radio, telephone, movies, television, and the Internet, and largely brethren, in *one* language—*English!* The United States and Great Britain are the fountainhead of I would guess somewhere near 60% of all that is flying out into the Internet and production of movies and television programs. Joseph is becoming a plague to the world by our very base standards.

Right here we have hit upon the crux of the problem Barna's poll shows the religious folk are having in this most-religious-of-all nation. Those interviewed in the survey appear in public to be full of confidence that they are on the right track in believing what they do, even though it can be pointed out to them that they are wrong. But as Prager writes in his perceptive article: "This elevation of the heart goes beyond self-confidence. It is self-deification."

It is self-deification because they are establishing their own standards of righteousness in opposition to God's Word. These sincere religious people are often being led by their heart rather than by God's Word.

I want you to turn to Numbers 15:39. We are going all the way back to Numbers in terms of time. Notice what God said here. This is not too long after the twelve went in to search out the land. They came back and got into a war there, and God was pronouncing His sentence. This particular verse occurred immediately following a man breaking the Sabbath. It appears within the instruction of why the Israelites were to wear tassels.

Numbers 15:39 And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them; and *that you seek not after your own heart and your own eyes*, after which you use to go a whoring.

Man's judgment has very little basis in righteousness as long as he is being led by his heart and by his eyes. We can make righteous judgments really only whenever the basis of our thinking and decision making is in God's Word, because our eyes deceive us. Our heart then makes a feeling within us that we have to follow after that which our eyes saw. Rather than say "No, that is not permissible in God's eyes. In His Word it says do not do that. Do not believe it. Do not practice it. Do not make decisions based on that unless God's Word backs it up."

Jeremiah 17:9-10 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked [Some Bibles say "*incurably* sick."] who can know it? I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

I said that Dennis Prager had hit on a part of the problem. He seems to be pretty well versed in the Old Testament, and he is well aware of that verse I am sure, based on what he has written. The heart is not a good judge of morality. It is a mind educated by God, using the Word of God, believing in the Word of God, that is a good judge of what is righteous. In the meantime mankind is unknowingly and blithely relying upon something that gives lying counsel and cannot be healed except by God's own miraculous means.

Prager concludes his article with a brief two-paragraph statement on a 25-year long experience of his own, showing how far off base and almost totally dependent young people are today upon what they see with their eye and judge by their heart.

"For 25 years I have been asking high school seniors across America if they would save their dog or a stranger first if both were drowning. The majority has nearly always voted against the person. Why? Because they say with no self-doubt, they love their dog, not the stranger. An entire generation has been raised with no reference to any moral code above their heart's feelings. They do not know, and would not care if they did know, that the Bible teaches that human beings, not animals, are created in God's image."

Recently the Methodist Church put a lesbian minister on trial because she and another woman married. The purpose of the trial was to determine whether such a practice was allowable even though the Methodist Book of Discipline unequivocally declares homosexual practice is "incompatible with Christian teaching."

The group examining her, which consisted of Methodist ministers, and maybe some laymen as well, but people high in the church, ruled in her favor after ten hours of deliberation, thus exposing the Methodist Church to a split similar to what the Episcopal Church is facing, because the conservative wing of a Methodist church reacted very strongly in disagreement with their church's conclusion.

Columnist Cal Thomas wrote on this decision, again in Townhall.com, appearing there on March 29, 2004. He wrote the following:

In his closing arguments at the church trial, Dammann's counsel, the Rev. Robert C. Ward, articulated a doctrine more befitting "the church of what's happenin' now" than the historical and once doctrinally strong Methodist Church: [Ward said] "We need to be careful about creating rules that exclude people." [Thomas' comment was:] I guess he's never heard of the separation of sheep from goats, wheat from tares, the saved from the unsaved and the afterlife separation of dwellers in heaven from residents of hell. Would Ward include in his doctrine of inclusiveness practicing adulterers (who, along with all other unrepentant sinners, are listed as people who have no hope of attaining heaven)? How about murderers, thieves and liars? They are on God's exclusionary list, too.

What are these people on this Methodist Church council thinking?

I Corinthians 6:8-10 Nay, you do wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren. Know you not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor

adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,
Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners,
shall inherit the kingdom of God.

Did you notice that the basis of Reverend Ward's judgment was not God's Word, but rather his heart's feelings that nobody could be excluded. He feels that homosexuality is not a sin as bad as others. Now where did that concept come from? It came right out of the culture, not out of God's Word. Influential people sitting in positions of power are making judgments and decisions in the public arena that are impacting upon our lives, and they are not righteous judgments at all, and they portend evil times.

How righteous a judgment was what the Attorney General's office did to the Branch Davidians? The Branch Davidians were just common ordinary people—citizens like you and me. We might consider their doctrinal position off base, but they were not murderous. David Koresh could have been arrested at any time. He went jogging in the city of Waco freely and openly very frequently while they were investigating the Branch Davidians. By "they," I mean the FBI and those governmental groups. And so they put 80-some people to death. They burned them to death. Americans killing Americans in a time of peace.

Who made that judgment? Who gave the warning afterward in which the country was warned by the president, "Let this be a lesson to those of you out there." Those are frightening words.

Another example of this kind of judgment from today's world comes from this headline from CNNmoney.com on March 29, 2004 from an article titled "Viacom plans to start a gay channel."

"Sumner Redstone, Viacom chairman and chief executive, doesn't like to admit mistakes, but he confessed to one this month. The media company shouldn't have abandoned plans that it was studying two years ago for a cable network aimed at gays, Wall Street Journal reported. Such a channel could now be worth "a billion dollars" Mr. Redstone told analysts and investors, "and would have cost only 30 million dollars to launch."

As far as I know, Mr. Redstone makes no claim at being a Christian, but I wanted you to see the similarity of the basis of judgments with Christians. The basis of Mr. Redstone's plan is not whether a gay channel would be immoral, because it does not meet God's standard, but his heart's feelings about money. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." The heart said, "I love money, and if it has to be done immorally, that is all right." Well, he did not use those words, but that was the sense of what he said.

I will give you another one. This example comes from Cutting Edge Ministry's website in which they analyze one portion of Tim LaHaye's book "*Glorious Appearings*." "*Glorious Appearings*" is the final book of the very successful *Left Behind* series concerning the time of the end from an Evangelical church point of view. In his last book, Mr. LaHaye—a highly respected and influential author in Evangelical circles—infers very strongly that taking the mark of the Beast is nothing to be all that concerned about, because one can always repent, and God will forgive. Now is he

going to lead people to take that approach? I want you to see what God says though in Revelation 14.

Revelation 14:9-11 And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation: and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascends up forever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receives the mark of his name.

It sounds pretty serious to me.

Now who is one to believe? Should we believe God, or Tim Lahaye? Brethren, this kind of thinking of judgment-making is going on all around us. The Barna report was just an insightful incisive interview into the mind of the born again Christian, and God's Word is being denigrated for the very purpose of destroying the basis of true judgment. This whole mess started when Adam and Eve denigrated God's Word and elevated what *they* thought was right to be the standard.

Do not think that the Church of God has escaped this downgrading of the Word of God for making judgments. I have here in my possession the result of a survey made at the Branson feast of the United Church of God. I do not mean to single them out regarding this, because I believe it is possible that we would get the same result from *any* of the Church of God group sites.

This survey was limited to people who had been married at least twenty years. It turned out that those surveyed had actually been married an average of twenty-seven years. They were asked to list qualities that they considered to be most important to a successful marriage. The list was arranged into two tiers, with those in the first tier deemed to be the most important. In the first tier is forgiveness, patience, and kindness. These are certainly good qualities, but conversion, brethren, did not even make the first tier! It was in the second tier along with a sense of humor, a good job, a nice car, wealth, and sex.

Now after reading this I could not help but think it is no wonder there are so many serious marital problems in the church. The people do not seem to relate the problems of life, especially in marriage, to their own lack of conversion, and so many young people look outside the church, not trusting God to supply a mate.

I Corinthians 5:8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

With that thought in mind I want you to turn to John 6:31-35. Jesus is the speaker. The first

line here is from the people, and then Jesus responds.

John 6:31 Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat.

Notice that I Corinthians 5:8 is talking about bread (food)—leavened and unleavened. Now the subject here is bread (food) again.

John 6:32-35 Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which comes down from heaven, and gives life unto the world. Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread. And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that comes to me shall never hunger; and he that believes on me shall never thirst.

John 6:47-48 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that *believes* on me has everlasting life. I am that bread of life.

The unleavened bread that we eat during the Days of Unleavened Bread represents the sinless body of Jesus Christ—the genuine, pure, truthful Word of God. This is why we are commanded to eat it everyday of this seven-day period. Seven is God's number of perfection, and during the Days of Unleavened Bread it represents the entire conversion period of the Christian, teaching us that we are to eat of God's Word—that true bread—every day of our life in order that our conversion continues, and that we have the right basis for sound judgment and decision-making. There is where spiritual health lies. We are what we eat physically and spiritually, and so God's Word is to be ingested every single day of our converted life.

II Peter 1:20-21 Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

That is very plain. We are going to go again to II Timothy, chapter 3 and reinforce this section.

II Timothy 3:16-17 All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

The Christian standard of right and wrong is the Word of God—the writing of both Testaments. For his own good, man has to humble himself and bend before the Word of God, or his ungodly conduct will destroy him. And for the Christian, it is absolutely *imperative* that one does this.

The previous sermons in this series have largely involved the state of Christian religious scene in the United States today. It is weak, and one might say almost in great disarray. We see those claiming to be born again, whom one would expect to be the strongest and most zealous members, do not judge a variety of portions of the book that is supposedly the source and foundation of their religion as worthy of their loyalty.

Large percentages of these people clearly feel free to pick and choose what they believe, and what they reject, even to the point of major doctrines like the resurrection of the dead where the concepts are not all that complicated. And like Adam and Eve, they feel free to disbelieve what the ONE they claim is their God and Savior says is valid.

Thus, instead of possessing and following the faith of Jesus Christ, they have their own individually-created faith. The end result is that they are, in reality, setting themselves up as God and establishing their own religion, and thus is fulfilled what the Serpent said to Adam and Eve: "You shall be as God, knowing good and evil." See, it was their *level*, their *standard* of good and evil which they were free to set then, but it is not God's level or standard.

This practice of sex morality (as is plainly-seen conduct) is largely determined by belief. On the surface there is no organized pattern to all this general disbelief in the Bible. In other words, there is no one organized incorporated religious group pulling people into disbelief through a direct challenging of the Bible, but rather each person appears to be acting on his own in response to a large variety of influences available in the world.

There is a lesson for us to learn, using Israel's example, by understanding that Israel responded in much the same way when they came out of Egypt. They physically left Egypt, but Egypt remained in their hearts and it dominated their attitude and conduct all the way across the wilderness.

Exodus 6:2-8 And God spoke unto Moses, and said unto him, I am the LORD: And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name YHWH [the Eternal] was I not known to them. And I have also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, wherein they were strangers. And I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; and I have remembered my covenant. Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments: And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and you shall know that I am the LORD your God which brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for an heritage: I am the LORD.

What God is doing here is establishing Himself as Israel's Savior, first of all to Moses, by

proposing all that He would do for them in order to relieve them of the burden of their slavery. He did all that He said, and He thus became Israel's Savior by breaking Egypt's power to hold them in thrall.

The important thing to remember right there is, what He said, that He did! You would think with that established before them they would be willing to follow Him, because He saved them from an awful, awful life.

Exodus 13:21-22 And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light: to go by day and night. [At this point they were following Him.] He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.

What I am developing here just ever so briefly is One establishes Himself as the people's champion, and what He wants them to do is to follow Him. So once released from their bondage, and even before the Red Sea crossing, a clear precedent was established that determined the path—the way, the direction—in which they were to march across the wilderness to the Promised Land. God gave them clear visible evidence of His presence, of His leading and guiding.

Exodus 14:19-20 And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them: And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel: and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these: so that the one [the Egyptians] came not near the other [the Israelites] all the night.

The implication of this is unavoidable. The Angel of the Lord was in the cloud. However, the cloud represents more than just guidance. As can be seen in this example, it became a defense by coming between Israel and the Egyptians. In Numbers it is also shown as being a shelter to them from the worst of the desert heat. This glowing cloud guiding them is the Shekinah that later took up residence in the Tabernacle after its construction and erection. It was a visible sign of God's presence, and thus a variety of services that He provided for them.

The glowing was provided by God's own glory, and the cloud was shielding the Israelites from its full strength, but the glowing was still bright enough for them to understand that He was right there.

Exodus 23:20 Behold, I send an Angel before you, to keep you in the way, and to bring you into the place which I have prepared.

God finished one part of what He promised to do, and the other part to bring them into the land

He is going to provide guidance so that they can follow it across the wilderness and He can get them there.

Exodus 23:21-24 Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not; for he will not pardon your transgressions: for my name is in him. But if you shall indeed obey his voice, and do all that I speak: then I will be an enemy unto your enemies, and an adversary unto your adversaries. For my Angel shall go before you, and bring you in unto the Amorites, and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites: and I will cut them off. You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do after their works: but you shall utterly overthrow them and quite break down their images.

In the context immediately following the making of the covenant, (that is where we are now here in Exodus 23), the cloud is not mentioned with any authority, but the Angel is. The Angel has already been established as being *in* the cloud, so adding the cloud was not necessary. I think if you will look in your Bible you will see that the translators have capitalized "Angel." This is because they clearly recognized that this Angel in the cloud is divine, and is in fact Jesus Christ, as we will have confirmed in the New Testament.

Now something very significant is added. Israel is told that they do not merely follow the cloud, but they are to obey the *voice*—the words of the Angel—in the cloud. They are told that if they do obey His voice, blessings will follow. Most specifically, they are commanded not to commit idolatry—that is, conduct that would specifically be a violation of the first four commandments.

In the New Testament the apostle Paul focused on the cloud in order to get across a very valuable lesson. We are going to go back to I Corinthians 10. It is interesting that I Corinthians was written just before the Days of Unleavened Bread. This is a "Days of Unleavened Breadbook."

I Corinthians 10:1-5 Moreover, brethren, I would not that you should be ignorant how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

In this opening illustration here in I Corinthians 10, Paul is setting the stage for a warning that will come just a little bit later in what he wrote. He is using this experience of the Israelites in the wilderness by spiritualizing the cloud's significance and applying it to Christian responsibility to obey the One that was in the cloud: the Word of God.

Thus the cloud symbolizes God's presence and providence to His people in guidance, in sheltering of His people, and His defense against enemies by being a wall around them and us.

We do not have the visible cloud, but we still have the privilege of God's spiritual guidance, sheltering, and defense, and therefore the responsibility to obey the voice of the same One who was in the cloud giving the guidance, sheltering, and defense from enemies.

The term "baptized" which appears there in the phrase "And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea" is being used by Paul in the sense of dedicated, consecrated or initiated. He is noting that the Israelites were devoted to God, but not necessarily devoted in the sense of staunch or faithful; but rather devoted in the sense of being under obligation to Him, and to Moses, for God's use to glorify Him and to obey His laws.

Now for this to mean anything for us, we have to begin to think of ourselves right in the heart and core of what Paul is writing, because in the manner in which he is writing, this means that all Christians who are baptized, even though they are not baptized in the cloud or to Moses, are baptized unto Christ. That sets us apart as devoted, dedicated to God and to the Voice—the Word of God—from that time forward to serve Him in bringing glory to Him with their life's conduct.

It might be helpful to remember that this was not a natural cloud. (I am thinking back now to the Israelites.) It was *supernatural*. It did not drop any rain. It moved against the wind. It went frontward, backward, sideways. It spread if it needed to, or it congealed together, as it did with the pillar of fire. It would change rapidly in color, and appear either as a white pillar (as in the daytime) or flames of fire at night. It was a miraculous symbol of God's presence and providence. This same supernatural sense is carried through what Paul is writing here, and it becomes very apparent in verse 4 when he uses the word "spiritual."

Now here, the way Paul is using it, it does not mean spiritual in terms of nature, but spiritual as to *source*. The manna and the water in the wilderness with the ancient Israelites was very much physical, and it was to be consumed by physical beings, but the *source* was supernatural. It came from the spiritual God who supernaturally provided them.

The same thing is true in every occasion that the cloud was used by God to guide, become a pillar of fire, become a pillar that went before them, that spread out over them and gave them cover. Whatever was needed, the cloud was there at all times. This is why it is important that you see the sense of "supernatural" and "spiritual."

Now Paul is exhorting you and me to thoroughly examine and compare the privileges that have come to us unbidden, even as they did to ancient Israel.

In verse 5 comes a warning. Paul euphemistically speaks in verse 5, and he was being extremely gentle in what he said. One commentary said that at the very least it should be translated "God was not pleased with most of them." The shocking truth is that God was pleased with only two of them, and all of the rest died in the wilderness. What does that say for the way the Israelites responded to that supernatural cloud that was over them, and the voice that spoke to them through Moses? Were they following the Word of God—the capitalized Angel? Most assuredly they were not!

That is the warning here in I Corinthians 10:1-5, because Paul saw that the behavior of those people in Corinth was paralleling spiritually what the Israelites did in the wilderness. They were

not following the Word of God. That cloud represented the home base of the Angel that was in it. Where was it in relation to the Israelites who were walking on the earth? It was up there in heaven, in the heavens, the first heaven, but in the word picture that Paul is drawing, it fits perfectly.

Who in the world is he talking about here in I Corinthians 10? He is talking about the same One who is dwelling in the heaven of heavens now. He is up in the third heaven, but He is our spiritual presence up there, and Paul is telling these people, "Are you responding to Him in making right decisions on the basis of His Word, or are we disbelieving like the Israelites were, and going off on all kinds of angles?"

Most specifically, the Israelites failed to follow the voice of the One who was in the cloud, and that voice was the Word of God. It was the Word of God who led them. It was the Word of God who defended them. It was the Word of God who fed them. It was the Word of God who watered them.

The lesson is that same One who was in the cloud is doing exactly the same thing for us. Are we hearing His Word, or are we like the Israelites, rejecting it?

I will just very briefly flip you back to I Corinthians 8, and verse 9.

I Corinthians 8:8-9 But meat commends us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse. But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.

If you would begin reading at the beginning of this chapter, it begins rather innocuously and seems to be about food. But actually a literal occurrence was only providing the illustration for what Paul was really getting at. Notice the word "liberty" in verse 9. "Take heed lest by any means this *liberty*?" What kind of thing is he talking about? What is this thing about liberty? This is the beginning of the subject that underlies chapter 10. It begins all the way back here. The real subject has to do with liberty—the liberty to do what? It is the liberty to make choices.

Look at verse 4 of chapter 9. You begin to see it very clearly.

I Corinthians 9:4-5 Have we not power [the liberty] to eat and to drink? Have we not power [the liberty] to lead about a sister, a wife, ?

I Corinthians 9:7 Who goes a warfare any time at his own charges [his own expense]?

He goes on to explain that he has the liberty to take money from the church. It is his right to do so, but what did Paul do? He chose not to, for their good. He is talking about making choices, and that was his right to either do it or not do it.

The subject keeps on going right on through until we get to verse 24 which has one of the strongest exhortations in the Bible. He says:

I Corinthians 9:24-27 Know you not that they which run in a race run all, but one receives the prize? So run, that you may obtain. And every man that strives for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beats the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.

Paul is talking about making choices, and how he beat his body and sacrificed to make sure that he made the right choice, even if it was going to cause him to go without or whatever.

I Corinthians 10 begins with the word "Moreover." It has a direct connection to the subject of chapters 8 and 9. And what does he talk about? He talks about the One who was in the cloud giving the orders that we are supposed to obey. We have the choice to obey, or we have the choice to disobey the way Israel did. Of course you know that Paul was urging them to listen to the voice that is in the cloud. That is Jesus Christ, as he makes very clear, and then he gives four or five examples of how Israel turned aside in the wilderness, and he comes down to verse 12, and here comes the warning to you and me.

I Corinthians 10:12 Wherefore let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

What is he saying? Very briefly, he is saying that there was in the Israelites a presumptuousness, and they presumed, falsely of course, and wrongly of course, that God would just accept any old thing, and forgive them. *"Let him who thinks he stands take heed when he makes his choices."*

I Corinthians 10:13-14 There has no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that you may be able to bear it. Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry.

We are getting right back to the central issue of this subject of people unwittingly deifying themselves by shoving the Word of God aside and believing things they choose rather than what God said. This is without a doubt a central issue in our salvation and completing the course that is before us. We are not free to pick and choose doctrines.

The Bible is the written voice of the One who was in the cloud, and so Paul has provided this series of examples of the times that they went off the path through disbelieving the voice of the Angel. His warning to you and me is, *"Flee from idolatry" and "Do not be presumptuous."*

The cloud is not visible, but it is still there. The voice of the One who was in the cloud is still up in the heavens. He is a lot higher now than when He was before, but it is the same One. That is

Paul's point. And so it remains for us to use our time to eat of God's unleavened Word of sincerity and truth so that we are fully equipped to be able to make the decisions, the choices that we are free to make, free to decide what to do so that we will be either in the kingdom, or out of it. It is up to us to choose. Make sure you choose the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth to make your choices.