

“Mad Church Disease”



The Blunders and Digressions of the Institutional Church

**Unless reformed, there in the valleys and
in the cities she will flounder**

Buff Scott, Jr.

“Mad Church Disease”

*A Defector of the Contemporary Church
Reveals the Naked Facts about
Partisan Religion*

BUFF SCOTT, JR.

[2006]

“The spirit of man can survive only in an atmosphere of freedom”—*Ketcherside.*

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Overview

Having been a child of institutional religion a big part of my life and served many of her churches as pulpit minister, pastor, partisan leader, and teacher, I feel I can speak with clarity and credibility and write with fitting credentials. As a defector, I am free to say what is upon my heart without fear of reprisal from the ecclesiastical “chief priests and elders.”

If you can tolerate me as I pour out my heart for change, I will try to tolerate you as you cling to the bosom of religious orthodoxy—should that be your walk and decision. We’ll be friends, not enemies, and we’ll lend a helping hand to each other along the way.

A fact we need to concede is that the contemporary church is in exile on the hills and in the valleys of sectarianism and apostasy. And unless her schismatic and apostate condition is reformed and repaired, there in the mountains and in the valleys she will abort.

A few years ago a new malady surfaced among cattle that was diagnosed by medical professionals as “Mad Cow Disease.” The disease subverts the brain and nervous system and throws the afflicted animal into a quivering plight, from which there is no known recovery. I have chosen “Mad Church Disease” as the title of this book because it depicts the malady that has attached itself to the body of believers—a spiritual disease that has caused untold schism and turmoil within the Christian community.

It is therefore obvious that I have no intention of promoting religion or church or placing either in a favorable light. They will not, nor cannot, land us on heaven’s shores. The Good News concerning Jesus was solving problems long before man contracted

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“mad church disease” and long before institutional religion and the contemporary church were introduced by men who envisioned their answers to life’s problems more profound than God’s. The stream flowing from the river of life was pure and tranquil before religion and church contaminated it. God has been replaced with Religion, and Jesus has been substituted with Churchianity. And all in the name of the Lord!

When the Christian community made its debut in about A. D. 30-33, there were no churches for believers to join. They identified themselves with other believers of a common cause, thus forming *congregations* or *communities*. King James’ “church” is a misnomer and a distortion of the Greek *ekklesia*. The early believers knew nothing of “church,” nor were they aligned with churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, for churches were non-existent. Yet we seem to be bent on fostering King James’ blunders, two of which were “Church” and Churchianity—plus “Easter” and numerous other mistranslated terms.

As King James considered himself a *Divine Right* monarch and Head of *The Established Church of England*, he insisted that Churchianity be incorporated in his *King James Version* of the celestial documents. Instead of today’s church trying to recapture the vocabulary of the Holy Spirit, she insists on adopting the vocabulary of King James and promoting the bungling king’s mistakes.

In the beginning there existed only one body of believers, as opposed to hundreds of churches/sects today, and it was composed of all of those who had accepted Messiah Jesus as their Savior and Redeemer. There was nothing to join. Jesus, the King of kings, added them to the new arrangement the moment they were born anew (Acts 2:47).

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As we explore the many perplexities of the institutional church, I ask you to make this journey with me. We will ascend the earthshaking problems that have engulfed her and assail her fortifications in an all-out effort to rescue her from the “fleshpots of Egypt.” But should she refuse to be rescued, we will leave her to the “Pharaohs”—the clergy—who have long enslaved her.

I stand where reformation is anchored. I cannot stand elsewhere and live with my conscience. If I’m to grow and produce in my spiritual vocation, which the Lord has placed upon my heart, I must be free to function as a reformer. Consequently, I offer no apologies for being outspoken in my efforts to influence those who are still enslaved by the institutional church and caught up in the web of sectarianism inherited from their forefathers of yesteryear. I will be confrontational without being rude or crude.

I suspect that if some of us had lived in the days of John, the Harbinger of Jesus, we would have frowned upon his tone, for he was far more outspoken than most reformers today. And if we had been in the company of Jesus when he opposed the clergy and sectarian systems of his time, we probably would have objected to His demeanor. Both Jesus and John were reformers in that they opted for change. Both men were outspoken, outgoing, and bold, but lovingly kind to those with receptive hearts.

There are many songs that have never been sung, many voices that have never been heard, and many hearts that have never been touched. If I’m chosen to sing one of those songs, I want it to resound! If I happen to be one of those voices, I want to be heard! And if I’m one of those hearts, I want to be humbled—but only to the glory of my God, and then only if His favor rests upon me.

—*The Author*

PERSONAL HISTORY

The idea of becoming a writer captivated my thoughts at an early age. It wasn't easy reaching that goal in the *Appalachian Mountains* of Eastern Kentucky, one mile from where the Hatfield-McCoy feud began. (Mom was a Hatfield before she married Dad.)

Poverty was rampant, education was not encouraged, and the stomachs of nine children had to be fed. Yet in spite of my place of birth and hillbilly culture, I pressed onward toward my future.

My formal education ended in elementary (grammar) school when my 7th grade teacher caught another student and me looking up "dirty" words in the dictionary. Earlier, I had begun to develop a strong dislike for the Appalachian culture and, at the age of 15, walked two miles to catch a bus to Williamson, West Virginia, where the nearest train station was located, and bought a ticket with the few dollars I had saved.

At the time I purchased the ticket, I didn't have the slightest idea where Norfolk, Virginia was located. I didn't care. I just wanted to get out of that hillbilly culture and plan a different life for myself. So when I walked up to the ticket window to purchase my fare, the young lady asked, "Where do you want to go?" I didn't have the answer, so I responded, "Where's the next train going?" She said, "Norfolk, Virginia." I said, "Give me a ticket."

During the night, I fell asleep in my seat and dreamt I was back home. I jumped up out of my deep slumber, startled, only to find a well-dressed gentleman sitting beside me. He looked at me intently and said, "You're leaving home, aren't you?" I answered, "Yes." He said, "You stay with me and I'll take care of you."

When the train reached Norfolk, he escorted me to the huge

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Norfolk shipyard, guided me into the shipyard's Employment Office, walked up to one of the clerks and said, "Put this young man to work immediately." No questions were asked. I was put to work at once. Later, I discovered he was the shipyard's top man! Bless his heart. I wish it were possible to meet him today. I'd give him a big bear hug—but if not here, perhaps in heaven.

I received my first paycheck two weeks later, at which time I bought a new sports coat, shirt, tie, and pants, and had a friend take a picture of me. I resolved then that I would never again be caught with hillbilly clothes on my back, and since then I have never worn another pair of *bib overalls*—and never will, unless someone sneaks a pair on me when I'm in my casket and unable to defend myself.

I sent the photo home to Dad and Mom. Up to that point, they had no idea what had happened to me—and had been looking all over for me. When I finally returned home, they had my picture hanging on the wall over their bed.

I made a lousy mistake by not contacting them earlier. They must have had sleepless nights. Having feet of clay, as we all do, I've made other mistakes and decisions I now regret. Many of my blunders were inexcusable. But history is history. It cannot be recalled and repaired. Only the future can be made brighter by the decisions we make now.

That experience away from home was the genesis of my "new world" and freedom from my hillbilly confinement. Future "tickets" to various parts of my life were more difficult to "purchase." But with the Lord's tolerance and help, and hard work, many of my goals were met, one of which was writing. This little book is the result of having reached that goal.

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But allow me to give you a little more history of my earlier life.

At 17, I changed the age on my *School Record*, a secondary “Birth Certificate,” to mirror age 18, and spent a tour in the military. I was so “wet behind the ears,” I almost drowned!

At the induction center, they measured my height at six feet. I weighed only 113 pounds—so skinny that if you looked at me from the side you’d miss seeing me. The required minimal weight was 115. In tears, I begged the sergeant in charge to let me pass. He saw how badly I wanted in, so he said, “Do you see that water fountain over there?” I nodded my head. He said, “You go over there and drink two pounds of water and if you weigh 115 pounds when you return, I’ll pass you.”

Whew! Have you ever tried drinking two pounds of water? *Don’t.* I felt as though I was floating on a lake without a lifejacket. When I returned and got back on the scale, there it was, *115 pounds*—right on the button. He stamped his approval on my papers and I was on my way.

“MISCHIEF” WAS MY MIDDLE NAME

Dad told me after I “matured” to adulthood, “Of all the children, you could find more mischief to get into than all the others put together.” And he was right.

To share an example, we had a dog whose name was “Trigger.” We named him after Roy Rogers’ horse. One day I took some bright red enamel and painted a ring around his posterior. When Dad came home and saw Trigger and his red ring, he immediately began to “chew me out”—I mean, *real good*. But during the course of the verbal discipline, he broke down and started laughing, after

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which he just walked away, never to talk to me again about the misdemeanor. Trigger carried the red ring for the remainder of his days. It served as his “tail light.”

COALMINING AND CHICKEN ALCOHOLICS

I’m a coalminer’s son. I have a special feeling for coalminers and their families, for we nine children were born and lived in coalmining country. Dad was a coalminer for 20 years. His back was almost broken when part of a mine fell in on him, and he had to wear a steel brace for months. His spine was never straight again. He lost some of his best friends in coalmine accidents, including a very special preacher-friend. I have often said that I’d steal before I’d work in a coalmine.

Have you ever heard of chicken alcoholics? Mom canned everything she could get her hands on during the harvest season, including beets. One year some of the beets soured and fermented and she fed them to our chickens, not realizing the results. The chickens ate them and became so intoxicated they all “passed out”—flat on their backs, with their legs straight up in the air.

What a “fowl” mess that turned out to be! And what a “hang-over” those chickens must have had later. I’m not sure whether their next batch of eggs was fermented or not. Wouldn’t have made any difference, for we would have eaten them, anyway.

“THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD”

A broad area of my life revolved around my vocation in the psychiatric field as drug and alcohol counselor, teacher, and Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist. Later, I would call this segment of my life “The Other Side Of The World,” for no one can

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imagine the “troubling waters” of mental illness until he has walked the corridors of psychiatric institutions and tried to understand and treat those with deranged minds.

A “CHASING AFTER THE WIND”

For a number of years, I gave hot pursuit to church ministries as pulpit minister and partisan pastor, but later discovered that my efforts to “church” others were “a chasing after the wind” and an emptiness that could not find an exit. That hollow part of my life was resolved in 1976 when, after careful evaluation of and research into institutional religion, I concluded that Churchianity was not the solution to sin, nor to the world’s problems.

It was at that point that I launched an exposé of the institutional church and opened up its numerous maladies and apostasies. This evolved into a ministry of reformation and unity within the Christian community, which is still an ongoing endeavor. My e-mail column, *Reformation Rumbblings*, goes out to hundreds of readers in different parts of the world, and many have viewed and continue to view my Website, under the same title.

—*The Author*

REFORM OR PERISH

Unless the institutional church undergoes complete reform, she will eventually reach a point of no return. Unless she's redeemed, some future historian will be led to write a history on *The Rise and Fall of Western Christianity*. For without regeneration, the apostate church may some day be ready for an isolated corner of history. If suicide be her lot, she will be her own finisher.

TESTIMONY OF OUR FOREFATHERS

The religious system called "The Church" is no longer influential or impressive. She has lost most of her ability to relate to the human predicament. It was Abraham Lincoln who said, "Christianity is not my religion. I could never give assent to the long complicated statements of Christian dogma" (www.quotedb.com/quotes/2140). Lincoln relied heavily on God but leaned away from the religious establishment.

Thomas Jefferson wrote, "The greatest enemies of Jesus are the doctrines and creeds of the church. It would be more pardonable to believe in no God at all than to blaspheme Him by the atrocious writings of the [church] theologians" (*Verdict*, POB 1311, Fallbrook, CA 92028, 1987). He further announced that he had "sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man" (*Ibid.*). Needless to say, Jefferson included the various institutions of the religious establishment when he referred to "tyranny over the mind of man."

John Adams alluded to the religious order as so much "baggage" when he wrote, "Nowhere in the Gospels do we find a

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precept for Creeds, Confessions, Oaths, Doctrines, and whole carloads of other foolish trumpery that we find Christianity encumbered with” (*Ibid.*).

James Madison spoke of the “fruits” of orthodox religions as ignorance, arrogance and servility in the laity, superstition, bigotry, and persecution (*Ibid.*). But long before our founding fathers came upon the scene, Martin Luther, the Catholic defector, insightfully concluded that the greatest threat to the cause of Jesus always arises from those who lay claim to being his children (*Ibid.*). Gandhi of India proclaimed that Christianity is the greatest enemy of Jesus Christ (*Ibid.*).

Our founding fathers looked upon the splintered estate of partisan religion with dismay. Judging from their words, they must have felt that the schismatic plight, the endless rituals, the never-ending symbols, and the clerical jargon of sectarian religion had no meaningful message for a troubled world. If Lincoln could have had his way, he no doubt would have reshaped, reformed, and even reversed “Christianity” in an effort to rid it of excess baggage—just as he freed the slaves of excess “baggage.”

HER DIVISIVE DILEMMA

The institutional church’s “cargo” of division has defeated her. Her “backpack” of jargon has resurrected the “Tower of Babel.” And when the world looks upon the mess she has created, they see a jumbled mass of rival productions. It is not surprising, then, when they conclude their world is more glamorous than the world the religious establishment promotes. If the Christian movement in A. D. 40 had been as splintered as it is today, the resurrection message—the message of salvation—would have had little impact upon the lost world. The first believers went forth as a united front,

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an army of dedicated recruits, whose message was elementary, not loaded down with ecclesiastical garbage or encumbered with divisive dispatches. They communicated “Jesus and him crucified.”

The early believers won the world without theological seminaries or missionary societies. They changed lifestyles without throwing a rock, burning a building, drawing a sword, or parading down Main Street in Jerusalem. If we intend to influence the world with the redemptive message, we must abandon our divisions and march forth as a united front. To go forth as a divisive facade is to face defeat before we “fire the first shot.”

We couldn't be more divided if the Lord had decreed it. The world will not nor cannot be won to Messiah Jesus as long as the Christian community remains fractured. Nor can the world be conquered for the Captain of our salvation by parroting our party's clichés or adding more theological waste to our partisan rostrums. The slate must be cleaned, reformed, renewed, and reshaped before receiving our marching orders. Then and only then will we be able and ready to give the battle cry!

If Apostles Peter and Paul had endeavored to spread the message of the risen Christ while working with and furthering the sects of their day, the new movement would have become stalemated and stagnated. If Martin Luther had burdened himself with the ecclesiastical anatomies of his time and had attempted to advance reform while clinging to their bosoms, the towering Protestant movement would not have gotten beyond Wittenberg's city gates. His famous words before the Imperial Diet at Worms, Germany in April 1521 are descriptive of his restless, truth-seeking spirit of reformation, “Unless I am refuted and convinced by testimony of the Scriptures or by clear arguments, my conscience

is bound in the Word of God—I cannot and will not recant anything.” Luther escaped the “Holy See’s” murderous hounds on this occasion, but the sinister Vatican hunted and bedeviled him for years.

LUTHER’S PLEA GOES UNHEEDED

It was Luther who begged his followers not to call themselves Lutherans but simply Christians, saying that he had not been crucified for them. And because his disciples did not heed his plea, the Lutheran sect has become an integral part of the divisive plight within the Christian community. But this is the history of all noble movements that become entangled in partisan, rival affairs. Their affections no longer revolve around celestial affairs but are centered on building up the party. The world drifts farther into a state of darkness while institutional religion organizes, plans, scrutinizes, and develops new ways to increase the size of her sects and enlarge her church coffers.

If we hope to achieve reformation, we must reach *beyond* the established order and ecclesiastical structures. We must bypass religious sculptures, theological systems, clerical institutions, religious symbols and rituals.

ORGANIZED OUT OF EXISTENCE

An eagle cannot fly if tied to an anchor. An athlete cannot run while carrying a hundred-pound backpack. A plane will not leave the runway if loaded down with too much cargo. And so it is with the religious establishment. She cannot fly because her yoke is too heavy with structures, organizations, and clerical arrangements. *She has truly organized herself out of practical existence.* Within her church structures are Missionary Societies, Pulpit Committees,

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Gospel Outreach endeavors, Evangelistic panels, Board meetings, Deacons' meetings, Preachers' meetings, Elders' meetings, Vacation Bible School programs, Lectureships, Forums, and a host of other scavenger organizations that drain her potentials and plunder her talents. Her yoke is too heavy, preventing her from becoming airborne with heaven's message of redemption.

These parasitical organizations extract the very life from the body of believers. In essence, she has permitted her internal "organs" to strangle her. There's no room, no time, and no money for the message of salvation. Her fancy edifices and polished organizations are symptoms of her pride and digression. Hundreds of millions of dollars are squandered on "materialistic evangelism" while millions of the world's poor go hungry—not only for food but also for the Good News about Jesus. Her priorities are abused and misplaced. She has taken the simple arrangement of communicating the Gospel to others and developed it into a complicated mess.

The activities, movements, and efforts of the first believers were unskilled, ordinary, unsophisticated, and informal—although serious and edifying. Our contemporary system is perplexing, rehearsed, organized to the brim, ritualistic, formalistic, and boring.

As most everyone is elected to some church function, there's no one left to reach out for the lost or to help the destitute. So the officers go around in circles, involving themselves in paper work, organizing meetings, filling speaking engagements, and otherwise doing nothing to convert the world. The world keeps hanging, if only by a thread, waiting for "Christians" to toss it the lifejacket of salvation. *But no!* Institutional religion is too busy keeping her churches and o r g a n i z a t i o n s afloat to bother with the Great

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Commission. Millions are waiting for someone to bring them the message of deliverance, but she sits around creating more organizations to implement the ones that have already become dormant and stale. Until the modern church becomes more interested in more people, she will remain out of the people business. Her religious parties, missionary societies, theological schools, and clergy are not winning the world. It was *individual* Christian action that brought results 2,000 years ago, and it will take individual Christian action today to achieve the same results.

When we—as *individuals*—begin where the early believers began, we will turn the religious establishment and her “Pharaohs” upside down, just as the early believers turned the first century establishment and her clergy upside down. We can accomplish this by abandoning our comfortable pews, ceasing to demand that professional ecclesiastics bottle-feed us with their warmed-over “sermons,” and “going out into the byways and highways.”

Instead of trying to get the world into our church structures, let the Good News of heaven take believers out of our church structures and into the world. The “world” is next door, down the street, over the hill, at the supermarket and office, and on the bus and plane. *The “world” is wherever people are.* As it is not necessary to be specially trained and schooled to go next door to tell a neighbor about gardening, it is not required that one be specially instructed and theologically educated to tell the same neighbor about the Man who came forth from the grave after three days.

Those common, uneducated saints who fled from Jerusalem in the face of persecution “went everywhere broadcasting the Word” (Acts 8:1-4). They had a simple but stirring story to tell, and they

told it! If Jesus' special envoys, the Apostles, had insisted that the early believers first enroll in a school of theology, or take a "Bible Training Course," or attend a "Christian Conference," the message would have stopped dead in its tracks—as it has in our modern age. The early believers were already enrolled in the school of Jesus Christ, and the resurrection was their theology.

URGENCY OF THE TIMES

Who or what can motivate the modern church? She will not be aroused until she discerns the urgency of the times and gets off her butt and out of her organizations and into the world, where Jesus said to go. Her elaborate church structures and idols stand as monuments to her failures and complacency. Her comfortable pews have weakened her, and her "Reverends" and Pastors and Priests have wrecked her. Like infants who have to be bottle-fed, she demands to be spoon-fed by clerical elitists, even though she has had ample time to acquire spiritual maturity.

Where will it all end? The whole mess will culminate in the trash-heap of bygone religions unless the entire system is reformed. And that is what this message is all about.

CHURCH ADDICTION IS NOT THE ANSWER

I will not play the fool by asserting that nothing good or heavenly exists within the institutional church. Although many pockets of good can be found in most churches, overall they're a divisive mess. A religious, churchy relationship may offer a few temporary merits, but something far greater is needed to finalize our journey to heaven. Only the man Jesus is the answer, the key, and the "lifejacket." Without Him, all is lost. About two thousand years ago, this man announced:

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Jesus either told the truth or He lied. If He lied, everything He taught is suspect. If He told the truth, we need to cease placing our allegiance in churches, cults, tube evangelists, preachers, "Reverends," and priests. For when a man places his loyalty in any of the above, we have a "church member" on our hands, not necessarily a committed follower of Jesus. Jesus desires disciples, not church addicts.

TO WHICH CHURCH IS JESUS ALIGNED?

When Jesus was on Planet Earth, to which religious party was he affiliated? There were numerous religious parties of His time—the Sect of the Pharisees, the Sect of the Sadducees, and a host of others. The reality is that Jesus was not associated with any of them. Instead of joining any of these religious parties, He opposed them and worked among them for reform. He came down hard

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on the clergy. He told the people:

“But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for show. They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments [religious garb] long” (Matthew 23:3-5).

So the question returns: *To which of today’s religions is Jesus aligned?* Is He Protestant or Roman Catholic? Is He a pew-warming church member? Is He a Jewish Rabbi or a Catholic Priest? Does He cross Himself before an idol of Mary or bow when approaching a Protestant cross? Well, none of these—*obviously*.

In His own time on Earth, Jesus recognized that His Father had children scattered among all of the Jewish sects, but he confronted and opposed the sectarian establishments and their clerical leaders. If He were on Planet Earth today in the flesh, I’m confident He would view our religious institutions as He viewed those of His time. He worked among partisan systems for reform, while not joining any of them. And so it can be with us. We can work *within* and *among* partisan groups for unity and reform, whenever possible, without subscribing to any of them.

For once we have formally “placed our membership” with a church or denomination, we get caught up in all of her projects and programs. We feel obligated, if not compelled, to support those projects, programs, and endeavors—financially and otherwise—whether we agree with them or not. Pressure in one form or another is applied, and we feel embarrassed if we fail to “contribute our share of the load.” Because the institutional church has moved from compassion to project, she has lost her anchor.

Church Addiction

I see today's church as more of a greedy corporation than a caring and humane community. Satan is at his zenith when 85 percent of church contributions are wasted on materialistic projects and programs, while only 15 percent is spent on evangelism and to alleviate the needs of the destitute. As for my house and me, we shall remain "believers at large" and support, independently and at our own discretion, any need or ministry we deem worthy.

THE REASON JESUS DIED

It should be clearly understood that Jesus did not die for religious parties, churches, sects, cults, or denominations. Instead, He died for Jews, He died for Gentiles, He died "for all the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one" (John 11:52). Jesus is not interested in uniting churches, denominations, and cults. He's interested in uniting all of God's scattered children, wherever they are, to bring them together into one body of believers, "so that they may be united as we [Jesus and His Father] are united" (John 17:11).

The early Christian community was free of Catholicism and Protestantism in that there were no Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, or Roman Catholics. All of these sects were founded by men centuries after Jesus ushered in His colony of believers. He is not their founder and author. He authored one body of believers, not a whole carload of wrangling factions.

If Jesus ascended to heaven without being a Protestant, and He did, and if the Apostle Paul was taken to paradise without being a Roman Catholic, and he was, I, too, can enter heaven without being a Baptist, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Mormon, Muslim, Jehovah's Witness, or without being tainted with any of the other partisan colors. All of these sects are counterfeit copies of

what Jesus ushered in. To place our allegiance in any of them is to place our relationship with God in jeopardy.

ADVERSE TO HEAVEN'S DESIGN

It would not be fair if I closed this chapter without telling you *why* I believe religious parties, churches, sects, and denominations are wrong and adverse to heaven's purpose.

There are two principal reasons. 1) They were authored by man, not God; and 2) They are a "work of the flesh." The great Apostle Paul placed the "party spirit" (religious parties or churches) alongside idolatry, hatred, discord, envy, drunkenness, and sexual immorality (Galatians 5:19-21).

The local believers at Corinth had formed parties within their Christian community. Some had built a religious party around Paul, others around Apollos, still others around Peter—and, yes, some of the believers had even formed a religious party around Jesus. Even the "Christ party" was wrong. It was wrong because it *excluded* other believers (1 Cor. 1:10-12). The "party spirit" is an attitude that generates separation and division. Religious parties in the form of churches are the end result.

GOD'S TEMPLE

God no longer "lives in temples built by [human] hands" (Acts 17:24). His only sanctuary today is the believer's heart (1 Cor. 3:16). But try telling this to the average pew-sitter. He views his church edifice and its "sanctuary" as holy designs and feels that he must go there in order to worship and make contact with God. However, his edifice and "sanctuary" are no holier than the building's restrooms. God dwells in the *heart*, not in tangible structures.

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How did we ever get this way? Most of the blame can be placed upon the shoulders of the professional clergy. They devise and invent and create and lead and we blindly follow. Are we no longer capable of thinking independently? Where have all the freethinkers gone? Why have we succumbed to being robots?

Men seem to learn but little from history. Moved with pride, swept with “my way or no way,” in every generation there are those who spend their time and money to erect the same idols and to perpetuate the same blunders of their sectarian forefathers. There has never been a human idol erected, whether a church edifice or an image, that did not betray God’s trust and eventually bring disaster to its erectors and their followers.

CHURCH EDIFICES AND IDOLATRY

When Moses' descent from the Mountain of God was delayed, the children of Israel built an idol in the form of a golden calf and bowed down to it, thus corrupting themselves (Exodus 32:1-8). If the implication of the above caption carries any validity, the Christian community can be charged with idolatry, for she has built for herself "golden calves" in the likes of church edifices while Jesus' descent from heaven is being delayed.

I affirm that church structures and edifices are monuments that testify of our idolatry. The issue is not whether it is right or wrong to meet somewhere. The issue is whether or not we have built church structures and edifices and set them apart—*sanctified them*—as holy articles or entities. I'm convinced we have. The evidence surrounds us. If I might be so bold, the organized church is as guilty of idolatry as were the children of Israel who erected Asherah poles as symbols of worship.

"Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved [consecrated] stone in your land to bow down before it" (Lev. 26:1).

Protestants and Catholics have done just that. Catholics have not only set up "consecrated stones" in the form of "holy" church structures, but they have made idols and images and bow down to them. We are speaking of earthen material destitute of emotions—idols and images that cannot hear, speak, or understand. Protestants, on the other hand, have set up their elaborate edifices and crosses and view them as sanctuaries and hallowed designs. There may be a few exceptions, but the rule seems to be universal.

Idolatry

There's an old maxim, "Our heart is where our money is." If we will but consider the hundreds of millions of dollars that are squandered on church structures, designs, religious inventions, edifices, statues, and compare that amount to the few dollars we spend on seeking and saving the lost and feeding the genuinely poor, we don't need a prophet to locate our hearts. If this isn't idolatry, I've lost my ability to reason. In the institutional church, money has become the "name of the game."

And speaking of "games," be on the lookout for those churchy "pledge cards." Usually, they're just another way of bleeding us blind so that the "holy edifice" idol can be even more embellished and revered. Instead, I suggest we bypass the collection plate and "pledge cards" and send our dollars to evangelize unbelievers and help feed the world's poor.

But no! We're too busy with our home-based "materialistic evangelism" to bother with the lost or to fret over empty stomachs.

When we mull over the fact that an evangelist and his family in Asia, Africa, India and several other world locations, where responsive hearts are abundant, can be supported for as little as \$50 a month, but we don't because we have an edifice to construct and a deadbeat pulpiteer to keep vocationally afloat, it is heartbreaking and depressing.

There are scores of missionaries who have been "called home" from evangelistic fields who could no longer be supported because of a materialistic program back home. This is not only despairing, it is an evil and a misplacement of priorities.

Ours is a history of a noble movement that apostatized centuries ago when Jesus' command to "get out and go" was replaced by

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the clergy to “come in and stay.” Our idols—churches—have isolated us from the world’s needs, immobilized us, nailed our pants and panties to cushioned pews, and provoked us to import professionals to do our ministries. We no longer have to speculate why the world looks upon us in disgust and laughs at our efforts to “save” them.

CLEANING OUT A COBWEB

To clean out one of the cobwebs some of you may have accumulated, let it be said that I have never argued that believers should not come together. For if we’re going to encourage and stimulate each other’s faith, and we ought, we must have a designated place to meet—whether in the living room of our home, under the shade of an old apple tree, or in some idol (church structure).

My whole point has been that our priorities are misplaced. We spend millions of dollars on our idols—venerated structures and edifices—and very little on evangelism and feeding the world’s hungry. As I see it, we are as guilty of idolatry as were the children of Israel and the pagans of their day. I entertain no doubt but that my analysis is correct.

We esteem our church structures as the “works of our mighty hands”—as though God Himself built them. We refuse to be ousted from our comfort zones. The cushions are too comfortable, and we delight in being hand-fed by hirelings who induce sleep by their stagnated “sermons.” We are stalemated with no hope of recovery unless we revamp the whole system and start over.

WHERE I'M COMING FROM

It seems the need to clarify never ends. Ideas, views, issues, and philosophies are not always communicated effectively. Consequently, the need to clarify never ends. This venture is to define my position. As most problems within the Christian commonwealth, as well as in the world at large, can be laid at the feet of poor and ineffective communication, I hope to be able to speak clearly and distinctly during this experience with words.

I'm not sure I can satisfy all of my critics. My eagerness to do so finds solace in the maxim that no man is able to appease everyone. If my approach to these matters makes for greater understanding and brotherhood, my efforts will not have been wasted.

LIBERATED FROM THE PARTISAN PIER

A few decades ago, I was set free from partisan religion. The experience was not supernatural, but certainly invigorating. As I sought to be emancipated from church slavery, heaven operated upon my heart to alter my self-righteous attitude and modify my course. It was a simple but serious procedure. The only prerequisites were that I cast aside my sectarian, partisan shackles and open my mind and heart. In essence, I was "deprogrammed."

Did I leave Jesus when I abandoned the institutional church? *Goodness, no!* He and I are closer now than ever before. As a result of my surrendering institutional religion in favor of freedom, I am now a "believer at large," a freethinker, and one of God's instruments for reform. No human being and no partisan group or

Coming From

church does my thinking for me any longer. I arrive at conclusions after careful evaluation, study, and prayer. Simply stated, I have cast aside the chains of religious orthodoxy and deserted the Establishment's *status quo*. God is blessing my ministry of reformation.

DIVERSITY

We're not all colored with the same paints or dyed in the same tub. We each have our unique personalities and ministries. We must grow and produce where the Lord has placed us. If the Lord has planted you in a different field than He has planted me, we ought to tolerate one another as we pull each other's weeds. Your ministry's techniques will not bear the same trademarks as mine. My methods will differ from yours. But if each of us has our heart set on reforming the *system*, we may be able to help each other.

NO LABELS FOR ME

I'm not formally identified with any church or religious party. I'm a free man in Messiah Jesus. With the Spirit's direction, I think independently and I arrive at my conclusions independently, regardless of what Calvin, Campbell, Wesley, Luther, Pope John, and all the others taught. There are good teachings in each man's history, but neither is my polar star. My Polar Star is Jesus—*none other*. Consequently, no one may preside over my concepts and teachings insofar as dictating my walk with the Lord.

I will gladly absorb and happily accept advice from godly men if it coincides with what I conscientiously believe is truth and understand as heaven's grace. But I will no longer bow my knees to the "powers that be" of the religious bureaucracy. I'm a free man, but I will exercise my freedom judiciously, not extravagantly.

Coming From

Believers should accept one another, just as Jesus accepted us—warts and all (Rom. 15:7). I love all of God’s children who are caught up in the web of sectarian religion, for I was once caught up in the same web. When permitted, I will happily work with them in areas that do not violate my conscience. But I will speak from my heart out, not from my teeth out, in an effort to help and clarify. I will not speak to “fit in” with the *status quo*, however.

If you can accept me on this level, we’ll embrace each other and serve the Lord together—while “pulling each other’s weeds!” We’ll walk side-by-side as we fix our eyes on the field goal of reformation and unity.

THE PROFESSIONAL CLERGY

Designed by heaven or devised by men?

Allow me to initiate this chapter by saying that I am solidly convinced a precarious cancer has invaded the Christian community and has assailed and consumed her vital organs. I have diagnosed this cancer as *The Professional Clergy*.

I take this position for a diversity of reasons, but among the foremost is that communication experts claim that pulpitering (one man speaks while pew-warmers listen without comment) is regarded as one of the *least* effective means of teaching, while small-group dialoguing is regarded as one of the *most* effective means.

Most “men of the cloth” are honest and sincere. They’re convinced their ministry has God’s blessings. They, like most of us, are victims of what we inherited from our schismatic forefathers. Jesus defied the professional clergy of his day.

“Beware of the scribes [clergy], who like to walk around in long robes [religious garb], and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts” (Luke 20:46).

In a related passage, Jesus accused them of making the fringes of their religious garb long to be seen of others (Matt. 23:5-6). In today’s scene, many of these clerics dress like mother but want to be called father! Others dress as though they’re going to or returning from a Halloween party. The story is told of a cleric who

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boarded a train wearing his clerical collar. He sat down beside a man who was “under the influence.” The inebriated fellow removed a flask from his inside coat pocket, took a swig, and offered the ecclesiastic a drink.

The cleric responded, “No, thank you, I don’t touch the stuff.” The tipsy fellow retorted, “What do you mean, you don’t touch the stuff? You’re drunk now, you’ve got your shirt on backwards!”

KING SAUL AND KING CLERGY

It was a sad day for Israel of old when they rejected God as King and begged Samuel to appoint an earthly king that they might identify with all the other nations. God gave them Saul, a man who was physically impressive but irresponsible, immature, and who later proved to be emotionally and mentally unstable. He even hid among the baggage when Samuel was ready to appoint him king.

When Saul’s condition worsened, David was called in to soothe his erratic spirit by playing upon his harp. But Saul’s paranoia increased until he felt threatened by David and, as a result, attempted to kill him. Finally, Saul succumbed to self-destruction. God told Israel they would regret their choice of king:

“When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the Lord will not answer you in that day” (I Samuel 8:18).

Israel was never the same again. The lesson is appropriate for our age. God appointed His Son to reign over new Israel, the Christian community. But like Israel of old, new Israel has side-stepped Jesus as her King and has chosen other kings to rule over her. These “kings” are labeled “Ministers,” “Pastors,” “Doctors,”

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“Pulpit Preachers,” “Theologians,” and “Reverends.” In the aggregate, they form the kingly clergy.

God’s children today are not content with elders (“judges” under the Old Covenant) to shepherd them (I Timothy 3:1-7, 5:17, & Titus 1:5-9). They want “kings” who can fight their battles, speak and make decisions for them, go to God on their behalf, do their ministries by proxy, and organize “sacrificial offerings” (conduct “church services”). Since that day when the kingly clergy were chosen, new Israel has not been the same. Since that day, her children have been in slavery. Will God send “prophets” (reformers) to free His children from “Egyptian bondage” and dethrone the “kings” who have made them “brick-makers” and spiritual robots? Surely He will! He always has.

Consequently, we need to awaken to the fact that a fatal disease called the “kingly clergy” has attached itself to the body of believers and has devoured most of her vital organs, thus rendering the body feeble and afflicting it with spiritual leukemia.

I love all of my spiritual brothers and sisters, whether they stand behind or sit in front of the pulpit, but I cannot nor will not support a system that denies the “laity” the right to verbally reciprocate and mutually communicate in the corporate assembly.

“MEN OF THE CLOTH” & SPECIAL RANK

Men of this caste are considered to be of special rank. They expect to be listened to while behind the pulpit and saluted in the vestibule. They perform the major part of teaching, preaching, exhorting, admonishing, edifying, comforting, praying, visiting, showing compassion, and exhibiting concern. They organize meetings, programs, projects, conferences, and are usually on duty

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when problems arise or the “enemy” approaches. After all, they were hired to “stand guard” for the “laity.”

These pulpiteers expect to be referred to as *the Preacher*, *the Priest*, *the Pulpit Minister*, *the Pastor*, *the “Reverend,” the Doctor*, *the “Defender of the Faith,” the “Guardian of Truth”*—or all of them lumped together. They fail to recognize that their exalted titles and “venerated” functions are foreign to the primitive order and counter to heaven’s wishes.

Most of these clerics—whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish—are *indoctrinators*, not educators. As such, their disciples are often brainwashed, not tutored.

It is commonplace that “shepherds”—who are supposed to be the true leaders of the flock—do their shepherding by *proxy*. After all, they have hired an alien—one who is not part of the sheepfold—to tend and feed the sheep. He’s responsible for the kind of food they consume, how it’s consumed, and when it’s consumed. His “sermons” (a term never once used in the Scriptures) constitute the Gospel, so if we oppose him we’re opposing the Gospel, “making waves,” and rapidly becoming a “thorn in the flesh” and an obstacle to truth. At this point, we have to walk on needles—almost literally—else we’ll find ourselves on the outside looking in, ostracized and branded until we repent.

TITLES THAT EXALT

In the institutional church where fame and prestige are too often measured by theological achievements, it is comforting to know that divine revelation prohibits our elevating one believer above another. For when we refer to fellow believers by titles that tend to exalt them to “seats of honor,” we clearly discriminate among

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ourselves. It was James, the brother of Jesus, who wrote that when we elevate one brother above other brothers we show favoritism, make distinctions between one another, and discriminate among ourselves (James 2:1-9).

We are, for example, guilty when we call a theologically educated brother “Doctor” or “Reverend,” but call an educationally deprived believer “brother.” “Brother,” of course, is at the bottom of the institutional church’s totem pole, while “Doctor” or “Reverend” or “Father” are at the top of the totem pole.

WE ALL ARE EQUAL

Christian terms and functions are not to be used to elevate one believer above other believers. We all are brothers, teachers, believers, and ministers—although some of us are *specialy* gifted in teaching and ministering. We all are priests (1 Peter 2:5). We discriminate just as much when we speak of *the* minister, as we would discriminate if we spoke of *the* believer. We *all* are ministers, priests, and teachers or none of us are. The lofty cleric, however, lays exclusive claim to being *the* minister and *the* preacher. Everything revolves around him. He’s the star, the actor, the performer, the speaker, and the nucleus or embodiment of the whole mechanism. Without him, everything would have to be reshuffled and repaired. This is how far we have drifted—almost beyond recovery.

TRUE LEADERSHIP

Older men in God’s community with the gift of leadership may be referred to as “elders” or “shepherds” or “pastors” (each term refers to the same function), but not for the purpose of elevating them above their fellows. They are elders (shepherds or pastors)

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because of age, character, experiences, form of ministry, and leadership abilities. The genuine elder is gifted to lead and instruct in a special way, but it would be contrary to divine ethics to place him on a pedestal because of the nature of his ministry. He is to be honored but not enthroned. In fact, we are to honor one another, for the Christian system is a “one another” arrangement. In today’s scene, a “one-man show” has replaced the “one another” model.

In the “one another” model, there’s no place for legislative and arrogant authority, therefore no need for special titles. Our supreme authority is celestial, not terrestrial. Special titles and special powers have no place in a family where everyone is loved and respected equally and treated mutually.

I do not object to higher education if it is compatible to the Christian walk. But higher education must not be used to make distinctions among Christian brothers. Any act, any title, or any practice that elevates one above his fellows is counterproductive to the spirit of humility. Jesus summed it up nicely in Matthew 23:5-12, when he denounced the clergy who purported to be teachers and leaders.

So, where are we now with the kingly clergy? Simply, if these “professionals” are blessed with the gift of evangelism, and many of them are, they should surrender their professional church positions and get out and evangelize, which is equivalent to preaching, proclaiming, or heralding the Good News to unbelievers. No longer should they attempt the impossible by “preaching” to those who have already been evangelized.

Since the very inception of the Christian economy, preaching has been associated with evangelism—heralding the Good News about Jesus the Messiah. As Christians cannot be evangelized,

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neither can they be preached to. Believers are edified, encouraged, strengthened, and built up. And this comes about as a result of *mutually* teaching, instructing, sharing, and loving one another.

THE “ONE ANOTHER” MODEL

“Edification” and “fellowship” are closely associated, as both involve sharing. And sharing is the key to our problems within the corporate assembly and Christian community at large. Warming pews while a professional cleric bottle-feeds us will leave us stagnated and spiritually dormant, with no hope of recovery. If we ever expect to restore our spiritual sanity, we must return to the practice of *mutually* exchanging ideas, knowledge, and experiences. This means the professional minister must go. He must give way to mature and older men (“elders”) who will shepherd and guide the body of believers.

It is interesting that the Apostle Paul did not send for the professional minister at Ephesus. And that is because the believers at Ephesus did not have on their payroll a professional pulpiteer. Instead, Paul sent “for the elders of the congregation” (Acts 20:17). Who is sent for and relied upon in today’s operation? *The hired hand*. Jesus had something to say about the “hired hand” in John 10:12-13. It will be worth your review.

It is really and truly a matter of *how* we are to be edified or strengthened in the faith. Heaven’s testimony says we are to *mutually* edify one another (Rom. 14:19). We are told to “instruct one another” and to “teach and admonish one another” (Rom. 15:14 & Col. 3:16). Additionally, we are told to “encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thess. 5:11). In all of these passages, there is no hint of the *solo* edifier or pulpit minister. Paul, in the Corinthian letter, clearly paints a picture of assembled believers

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mutually instructing one another (1 Cor. 14). The *solo* edifier or pulpit minister isn't even alluded to. His function is conspicuous because of its absence!

Any principle or practice we introduce in our assemblies that either denies or interferes with our interchanges—that is, our “one another” exercises or joint participation, as the Scriptures define it—is a grave innovation. And if a grave innovation, let's try hitting the “delete” button.

We ought to be reminded that if a congregation can import a man and pay him a big salary to do all or most of the public speaking, the same congregation can import another man and pay him a healthy salary to do all of the singing, and still another to do all of the praying—for a salary, of course. Well, you get the idea. The principle that allows one, allows the others.

To state it more explicitly, if importing specialists to feed the flock is heaven's way, all of our gifts can be performed by *proxy*. As a result, all we need do is warm a pew and wait till heaven arrives. For, after all, we're paying others to do our ministries.

The universal biblical principle, found throughout, is that in the assembly of the saints, all gifts are to be shared mutually. The “hired hand” interferes with and disrupts this principle. Do you suppose Paul had the professional minister in mind when he told the Roman believers they were “able to instruct one another” (Rom. 15:14)? Surely he was not referring to a one-man instructor! And was Paul coming off the wall with a lot of nonsense when he told the believers at Colosse they were to “teach and admonish one another” (Col. 3:16)? The one-man admonisher was nowhere to be found. Again, he was conspicuous because of his absence. Today, he is conspicuous, *period*.

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In the early assemblies there was a mutual exchange of praises, tutoring, sharing, and singing. No one person did it all. The Thessalonian believers were told to “encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (1 Thess. 5:11). The point is, when we substitute this “one another” model with a counterfeit apparatus, such as the professional spoon-feeder, we are guilty of disrupting heaven’s blueprint for spiritual growth. There’s no way to avoid this conclusion.

Take a look at our “house churches.” Where’s the pulpit minister? He’s not needed. Why? Because all attendees contribute their share, as God’s grace abounds within them, and as He confers a diversity of gifts among them. Now tell me: Why in heaven’s name are we incapable of conducting our “church services” in the same fashion? The reason is because we have gone professional. We have abandoned common ground in favor of skilled specialists.

We want the world to know how sophisticated and refined we have become. So we go all out to import the best and build the fanciest edifices. We have adopted idolatry, just as surely as we have substituted a bogus system. Where will it all end? It will consummate in the trash heap of by-gone religions unless we wise up and address our deficiencies. May God open our hearts and minds to do just that.

Is there a place, then, for the pulpit minister? Yes, when he decides to use his talents to evangelize the unsaved. Should he make evangelism his daily spiritual vocation, he will need ample financial support from his spiritual brothers. To deny him the support he needs is to deny him the love he cherishes. Occasionally, this man may decide to meet for corporate worship with those who support him. He may, of course, give a report of his work, during a mutual exchange, as the Apostle Paul did in

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Acts 20:7. That's the way it was then, and should be today.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

The greatest man who ever walked the earth lost His life at the hands of the professional clergy. *“But the chief priests and the elders [clergy] persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed”* (Matt. 27:20). It would be no different if Jesus were to return in the flesh today. Man's aversion to and hostility toward reformation has not changed. Today's religious establishment is the enemy of reformers and change. But that doesn't discourage those of us seeking reformation.

If a brighter day lies just over the horizon, it will be because reformation made its mark upon the divisive religious scene. For without reformation within the Christian community, “Christianity” will die on the vine. Death symptoms abound. But with God's help, we will survive and revive.

MY EFFORTS AT REFORM

I will continue my efforts to work with and among all believers as a reformer, when permitted, but without adopting any of their partisan labels or doctrinal platforms. I surrendered partisan labels and platforms many years ago in favor of freedom in Jesus. I've never been sorry. I've never looked back. And I'll never turn back.

The only banner I carry today bears the name Jesus. I'll never again carry a banner that bears the name Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Church of Christ, Church of God, Christian Church, Assembly of God, Roman Catholic—or any of the other factions among us. My flag conveys Jesus' blood as its only emblem. It needs no other. We either return to this way of thinking or all is

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futile and a “chasing after the wind.”

SUMMATION

1) The professional cleric obstructs spiritual growth in that he performs all of the body’s major functions. Even the physical body will die if its members are not permitted to exercise their various roles, for activity strengthens and builds.

2) Believers should no longer be slaves of the professional clergy or servants of the institutional church. Only when all believers are trained and permitted to function in their proper roles will pew-sitters awaken to their responsibilities and become shareholders instead of bondservants. All may then truly consider themselves ministers and ready to strengthen others by means of mutual participation. Those *especially* gifted will become leaders and trainers (shepherds), not masters or partisan pastors.

3) Let it be forever noted that when the early believers came together, it was not for the purpose of receiving encouragement and spiritual stimulus from a salaried functionary but to mutually stimulate and strengthen one another. When this “one another” system is substituted with a foreign arrangement that usurps the freedoms and prerogatives of the priesthood of all believers, digression and stagnation result.

In closing this chapter, it was God who spoke through Jeremiah the reformer long ago, and announced the need for change:

“Reform your ways and actions, and I will let you live in this place” (Jeremiah 7:3).

COMMUNAL MEETINGS OF THE EARLY BELIEVERS

How close are we to resembling them?

The house was filled where the early believers had met. Happiness and joy lit up each face, even those who had suffered during the week because of the faith they had adopted and the cause to which they were married. Embraces were common and holy kisses were exchanged.

One of the older men called the meeting to order by announcing that brother Jason had words of encouragement to share with the collective body and that he should be heeded. Jason was seated on the floor near the east corner of the large upper room. He stood up and told the congregation how God had used him to convince several of the townspeople that the resurrected Jesus was truly God's Son and the believer's Messiah. Everyone expressed joy.

When Jason had completed his remarks, Matthew motioned to the leaders of the assembly from within the semi-circle that he had something to say. Following his comments an exchange of messages, statements, and questions ensued. Occasionally, one of the overseers (shepherds) interrupted to maintain order or to clarify a point.

Voices of concern, love, and compassion were heard. No one was denied the freedom to share words of comfort and exhortation with the assembled group. There was no platform to mount or podium to lean on. The setting was informal and family-like. All

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things were open and mutual. “Amen” and “Praise the Lord” were heard often as everyone, without show or display, demonstrated his interest and elation.

One brother sang a psalm to the enjoyment of all. Two others offered special prayers for their imprisoned brothers and afflicted sisters. All of the pastors (shepherds) read portions of the Old Covenant scriptures and offered brief explanations and exhortations. They did not appear to be of the ecclesiastical mold, theological legislators, or professional functionaries.

NUCLEUS OF THE MEETING

The Lord’s Supper was the cardinal exercise of the meeting, and it was merged with a “love feast” or common meal. As part of the “love feast,” everyone shared a large loaf and drank fruit of the vine in memory of what their Messiah had sacrificed on their behalf. An expression of serious celebration was seen on each face. No one looked as though he was at a funeral. They were exhilarated because the man Jesus had died for them!

As there was no edifice to make a payment on and no cleric to support, there was no immediate monetary need. Consequently, no collection was taken. However, one of the shepherds (elders) announced, “We have just received word that Paul and John will be passing through within a week to ten days to collect money for Jerusalem’s destitute believers. We admonish each one of you to lay something aside at home so that no collection will have to be made when they arrive.”

If I have read the new Scriptures correctly, I believe this to be a fairly accurate description of the communal meetings of the early believers. If a comparison were to be made between their meetings

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and ours, hardly anything in common would be found. Note the following observations:

- Theirs were informal but serious. *Ours are ritualistic and formalistic.*
- Theirs were periods of celebration and joy. *Ours are somber and restrained.*
- Their activities were shared jointly. *Ours are cleric-centered, for everything revolves around him.*
- Theirs were incessant worship. *Ours consist of specific “acts of worship” and no more.*
- Words of love and compassion, spoken prior to their meetings, were worship. *The same words spoken prior to our “services” are not worship, for worship doesn’t begin until the hands on the clock are at a certain crossroads.*
- Their meetings were alive and active. *Our “services” resemble a funeral.*
- Their meetings were without the professional ecclesiastic. *Ours would “die on the vine” without him.*

It is interesting that nowhere in the New Covenant scriptures do we find an example of any man being *imported* by a congregation of believers to function as *the minister, the pastor, or the preacher*. And that is because the early believers ministered to and uplifted one another. They didn’t find it necessary to import an elite orator to minister on their behalf. They *exported* men to evangelize and

Communal Meetings

supported them financially, but no one was ever *imported* to do what all believers should be doing—ministering to one another. In our contemporary scene, we hire and pay big bucks to a specialist to function as a proxy, the exact opposite of what the early believers practiced.

Today, the “bread of life” cannot be broken without the employment of a professional ecclesiastic. Believers would suffer from spiritual malnutrition without him. As noted, he’s *the* minister, *the* priest, *the* preacher, *the* pastor, and *the* orator. Shades of hallelujah, how far we have drifted! We now demand to be bottle-fed by an elite feeder. We have not matured enough to feed one another. So we all gather at the church corral on Sunday mornings to warm pews while an imported specialist prepares our spiritual food and spoon-feeds us. Is it any wonder we haven’t matured in the faith?

THE “GOING FORWARD” SYNDROME

We'll begin this segment by asking: *What are the motives behind big TV Evangelists and mega-church Pastors when they persuade a large segment of their audiences to “come forward and accept Jesus” or to “come forward and confess your sins”? Why all the public solicitation?*

One cleric spoke of a woman who “came forward and confessed a lack of faithfulness.” Could she not have made her confession to her Heavenly Father during her daily prayers? Why did she feel it necessary to confess to the pulpit pastor? Did she feel he could forgive her?

Perhaps we all should confess our lack of faithfulness every time we pray, but the “going forward” syndrome can easily evolve into a ritualistic obsession. A sizable number of pulpit pastors who advocate this ritual enjoy the limelight and the “evangelistic results.” Those “results” are then published in their party's journals.

One tube evangelist wrote in his partisan journal of a man who had accepted Jesus, but felt he “needed to make a public confession of Christ to seal the transaction with God.” Did he not confess Jesus by accepting him? Another sectarian journal noted, “A candidate must make a public confession before he can be baptized.” He is exhibited before an audience and asked, “Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God?” He is expected to follow the ritual and say, “Yes, I believe Jesus is the Son of God.” If the candidate hesitates, the pulpiteer will repeat the question.

“Going Forward”

The story is told of a man who responded to this question by counter-asking, “Why do you think I’m reforming my life and requesting that you immerse me in water?” His “confession” turned out to be an embarrassment to the pulpit minister who had no choice but to immerse him without obtaining the stereotype confession.

The very act of accepting is confessing. It is not necessary to compel a believer to repeat a formal statement hatched by the clergy. Even if the eunuch’s “confession” in Acts 8:37 (KJV) had been included in the oldest Greek manuscripts, the confession would have been *private* and non-ritualistic.

I tender no objections if a man wishes to publicly confess before an audience his faith in Messiah Jesus. I offer no resistance to a believer who wants to go public and confess a sin or a weakness and ask for the prayers of the congregation. But I *do* object to clerics—pulpit pastors, salaried ministers, “Reverends,” ecclesiastics, and evangelists—devising a code that *must* be publicly mouthed before acceptance and forgiveness are granted.

Yes, we are told to confess our faults to one another and to pray for each other (James 5:16). But nothing in this biblical passage implies that this must be done before a group of pew-sitters. In fact, the implication is that our acknowledgement of faults may be aired to someone outside an assemblage.

If I were to go before an assembled group of believers and confess every time I succumbed to a weakness, the pulpit cleric and his bunch would find no rest, for I would be on the phone contacting them and requesting an audience almost every hour of the day—and most hours of the night. So let us say “Goodbye” to the “going forward” syndrome.

“GIVING THROUGH THE CHURCH”

The kingly clergy would like to convince us, and indeed are always trying, that the only way to glorify God in our giving is to drop our greenbacks and checks into the church’s collection plate when it makes its rounds. And why do they strive so desperately hard to indoctrinate us with that bit of ecclesiastical garbage? There are two chief reasons:

- *Without our dollars in the collection plate, they just might have to find a job and go to work.*
- *Upkeep of the edifice idol or “House of God.”*

Of special interest is that the early believers contributed of their income for two reasons, and two reasons only. **a)** To alleviate the needs of the destitute; and **b)** To support evangelists in the field who labored to spread the Good News to the unregenerate.

There were no material structures to build and maintain, and no ecclesiastical pulpiteers to support. Money was collected only when a need arose. In today’s pattern, a collection plate is passed around about every time we cross our legs.

Believers are free to support any good cause at any time, in or out of the corporate assembly. Rosita and I contribute to needy causes that are not even related to “church activities.” And the causes we support are far more relevant than the institutional church’s materialistic and ecclesiastical budget.

“NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY”

These catchwords usually mean that if we haven't accepted a church's conception of spiritual truth, we haven't accepted “New Testament Christianity.” The phraseology implies that the church and her clerics have the truth, the absolute truth, and nothing but the truth. They have already arrived and those in different partisan corrals are still stranded in the valley of ignorance.

These schismatic believers are so convinced they only have the truth, they have built a partisan wall around themselves and reject all others who do not fit comfortably into their creedal and intellectual camp. Their attitude is similar to the attitude that prompted men to construct *The Great Wall of China*, for isolation is better than contamination with outside forces.

Behind these schismatic walls are thousands of captives who need spiritual nourishment and new avenues of thought and freedom. They are spiritually incarcerated by “warlords” who stifle freedom of thought and movement with threats of excommunication, and who use the “sword of the Spirit” to kill their own kind.

The ministers, pastors, elders, and deacons of these groups are more interested in protecting the “system” than reforming their dormant and outdated creeds and dogmas. Instead of recognizing and embracing all of God's children, they have barricaded themselves behind factional fences and no one may enter who does not state a willingness to parrot the party's slogans. They will not go into the kingdom themselves, nor permit anyone else to enter. Pride and control seem to be the controlling factors.

“New Testament Christianity”

Jesus had something to say about this matter, and He said it better than any of us could:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the reign of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.” (Matt. 23:13).

If I might paraphrase: “Woe to you church clerics and elders! You reject those believers who do not carry your partisan labels, and shut out those who would enter the reign of God.”

“THE CHURCH OF OUR LORD”

“The Church of our Lord” is yet another partisan cliché employed by those who isolate themselves under “New Testament Christianity.”

Clerics and elders who use these words routinely equate their faction with what Jesus founded. We do the Lord a disservice by trying to make Him the author of our splintered groups. Jesus founded His new Israel, commonwealth, community, reign, colony, or congregation. Man founded churches, sects, denominations, factions, and religious parties. A person becomes a member of what Jesus founded by being born anew (John 3:3). He becomes a member of what man founded by joining a church and “placing his membership.”

HOUSE MEETINGS (“HOME CHURCHES”)

House Meetings vs. The Institutional Church

What follows are questions that have been asked me relative to this subject, followed by my answers.

Question

“In a recent message you spoke of the early believers meeting in private homes and similar places, and that the meetings were mutually inclusive, involving anyone who might wish to share or express himself. If believers adopted such meetings today, would there not be ‘voices of ignorance’ trying to teach one another, as well as a diversity of opinions? Would there not be more confusion than order?”

Answer

A number of people voiced the same concern. In such meetings, sundry opinions would be encouraged, as diversity yields growth. No one, however, would be coerced into conforming to someone else’s conception or interpretation of truth. Although everyone would be urged to look for pearls, a few would find lesser stones. Those few would not be rejected.

As to “voices of ignorance” trying to teach one another, we must not forget that the early believers practiced the method I am here describing, and we don’t refer to them as “voices of ignorance.” Their “family circles” and “family discussions” brought out the best in each of them. The least effective method of

House Meetings

communication is pulpit preaching and lecturing, as noted in a previous chapter. The most effective method of communication is mutual dialogue. There should be a mutual exchange of ideas by all of those who might wish to participate, both male and female. Participation would not be compulsory, but everyone would be encouraged to get involved, for “group therapy” or mutual ministry would be the crux of each meeting. Someone with the gift of leadership would lead each session.

Question

“But how do you manage order in a setting where everyone is encouraged to participate?”

Answer

A good leader will maintain order—very much like an earthly father maintains order in a family discussion. Disorder was prevalent in the meetings at Corinth (I Cor. 14). Everybody was trying to speak at the same time. Paul told them to speak “one at a time” (v. 27). He then told them that “everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (v. 40).

It is noteworthy that the “pulpit minister” or cleric is not mentioned or even alluded to in 1 Corinthians 14. Where was he? Wasn’t he supposed to be the center of attraction and the core of attention? He wasn’t there. His office was invented centuries later, thus forming the first major cancer in the body of believers.

Question

“Some time ago, you indicated that it’s wrong to meet inside church buildings. Where do you meet? Do you meet in some structure? And if you do, wouldn’t it be just as wrong as church structures?”

House Meetings

Answer

I have never indicated it is wrong to meet in some structure. I have said that our church structures are monuments that testify of our idolatry. A few readers, somehow, understood me as being opposed to meeting in *any* structure.

The issue is not whether it is right or wrong to meet somewhere. The issue is whether or not we have built church structures and edifices and set them apart—*sanctified* them—as holy articles or entities. I say we have. If I’m correct, we are as guilty of idolatry as were the children of Israel who erected Asherah poles as symbols of worship. God told Israel in no uncertain terms:

“Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved [consecrated] stone in your land to bow down before it” (Lev. 26:1).

Protestants and Catholics have done just that. Catholics have not only set up “consecrated stones” in the form of church structures, but they have made idols and images and bow down to them. Protestants, on the other hand, have set up their elaborate edifices and crosses and view them as sanctuaries and revered designs. Oh, there may be a few exceptions, but the rule seems to be universal.

Our heart is where our money is. If we will but consider the hundreds of thousands of dollars—yea, even millions—that are spent on church structures, designs, religious inventions, and edifices, and compare that amount to the few dollars we spend on seeking and saving the lost and feeding the genuinely poor, we don’t need a professor to locate our hearts. If this isn’t idolatry, I’ve lost my ability to reason. We fail to see that God no longer “lives in temples build by [human] hands” (Acts 17:24). His o n l y

House Meetings

sanctuary today is the believer's heart (1 Cor. 3:16). But try telling the average pew-sitter this. He views his church edifice and its "sanctuary" as holy places, and feels that he must go there in order to worship and make contact with his God. The truth is, his "sanctuary" is no holier than the building's toilet.

The water Catholics dip their fingers in upon leaving their "sanctuary" is no holier than toilet water—maybe cleaner, but not holier. All of this translates into idolatry, whether practiced by Protestants or Catholics. How in heaven's name did we ever get this way? Most of the blame can be placed upon the shoulders of the professional clergy. They devise and invent and create and lead and we blindly follow. Are we no longer capable of thinking independently? Why have we succumbed to being robots?

Question

"Suppose the house meeting becomes too small to accommodate everyone?"

Answer

That would be an ideal time to start another house meeting. Apparently, the early believers used the same method. Each house meeting would be set up and organized in the same manner as the first group, with leaders who encourage mutual participation. It would *not* be an ideal time to build a "holy church" structure.

The early believers did not build and own "church houses" and fancy edifices. They didn't use or need them. They met in each other's homes and in public places. Church buildings were not built until some time around the second century. Their introduction proved to be the deathbed of Christianity. They have become monuments to our failures. Jesus said to get out and go, but we have moved in to stay.

House Meetings

Question

“What ‘acts of worship’ would be emphasized in such meetings?”

Answer

Everything would be an expression of worship, for worship for the committed believer never ends. If I understand John 4:21-24 correctly, Jesus noted that worship in the new age, the Christian or grace era, would be anytime and the place where we are. The Lord’s Supper, when offered in house meetings—or in *any* Christian assembly—should be the nucleus of attention. The Supper would be a period of jubilation and pondering, not a death march.

At this junction, I’d like to quote from the late Charles Spurgeon regarding worship, temples, and houses. The quotation may be found in his message, *Additions To The Church*. I suggest you not by-pass this, as it contains wisdom worth digesting.

“New Testament believers did not think that religion was meant only for Sundays, and for what men now-a-days call ‘The House of God.’ Does God need such a house? He who made the heavens and the earth, does He dwell in temples made with hands? What crass ignorance is this!

“No house beneath the sky is more holy than the place where a Christian lives, and eats, and drinks, and sleeps, and praises the Lord in all that he does. There is no worship more heavenly than that which is presented by holy families, devoted to His fear. To sacrifice ‘home worship’ to ‘public worship’ is a most evil course of action.

“Morning and evening devotions in a cottage are infinitely

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more pleasing in the sight of God than all the cathedral pomp, which delights the carnal eye and ear. Every truly Christian household is a church, and as such it is competent for the discharge of any function of divine worship, whatever it may be.

“Are we not all priests? Why do we need to call in others to make devotion a performance? Let every man be a priest in his own house. Are you not all kings if you love the Lord? Then make your houses palaces of joy and temples of holiness. One reason why the early church had such a blessing was because her members had such homes.”

Question

“But what about the pulpit minister? Where does he come in?”

Answer

He wouldn't. He would not be needed unless the congregation opted to place him in full-time evangelistic work. Mature and older men called “elders” would shepherd and guide the body of believers, as it was 2,000 years ago. They would not be perceived as commanders; instead, they would be looked upon as gentle and loving peacemakers—insightful leaders, not “Caesars.”

Question

“I would love to be part of a house church. My husband suggests that for us to start one would take more energy than we have. We are in our 70s and are caregivers to our daughter. What would you suggest?”

Answer

Starting a house meeting is an easy matter. Tell a few friends, whether believers or unbelievers, you want to start a weekly house meeting and invite them. Or, talk to a Christian friend and suggest

House Meetings

that she/he start one in their home and that you and your husband will participate.

House meetings are not restricted to delving into the Scriptures only. Yes, they should be used as a guide and reference tool for specific spiritual and doctrinal matters, but you might wish to take a few minutes in each session to share your good fortunes and problems with one another—just as we might do as a family when gathered around the dinning room table for a delicious meal. But whatever arrangement you mutually develop and decide upon, use Jesus as your Pilot.

I can envision the early believers doing just that. And don't be concerned about getting "off of the worship track" and onto the "secular treadmill," for everything we do, *in word or in deed*, is to be done for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31 & Col. 3:17). To do something for the glory of God and in His name is worship! That covers the *entire* life of the committed believer, not just during "worship services"—whatever that is.

The healthiest factor of the house arrangement is that you won't need a "celebrity" in the likes of a pulpit minister to hand-feed you. All of you will *mutually* study together and learn together—and without any overhead expenses. This means you may take all monies pooled together, if that should be the group's decision, and help support authentic evangelism or send it to some humanitarian organization whose main function is to feed the genuinely destitute in foreign lands. You will not need a treasury.

The humanitarian undertakings Rosita and I contribute to have a minimal overhead—less than ten percent, as opposed to fifty-to sixty percent of most charitable agents. So, good luck in your new venture, and may the Lord increase your number.

House Meetings

Question

“With your emphasis on house meetings, are you also emphasizing the necessity of biblical elders or shepherds within those assemblies?”

Answer

Men with the gift of leadership will naturally rise to the top. In every kind of cause, regardless of its nature, there must be either *formal* or *informal* leadership. When men with the gift of leadership rise to the top, and they will, the house group may *formally* or *informally* recognize them as their shepherds. No rituals are needed. No “special worship service” is required. If the group wishes to *formally* recognize their leaders, a simple announcement by someone who speaks for the others will suffice.

Concluding Remarks

More and more believers, in all religious parties, seem to be getting the idea that “Church” is the problem, not the solution, and that house meetings provide far more spiritual growth. When the Institutional Church is surrendered in favor of house meetings, freedom in Jesus is discovered. There is no freedom, or at least very little, within the confines of the Institutional Church.

According to a recent survey, both Protestant and Catholic churches are complaining because many of their members (pew-sitters) are leaving and attending house meetings. So be it! May God speed the day when the Institutional Church is forced to close her doors and join the many who have “seen the handwriting on the wall.” Within the next few decades, look for some drastic changes, for they are surely coming.

[Our next chapter on *Mutual Ministry And Group Therapy* will explain these matters further.]

MUTUAL MINISTRY AND “GROUP THERAPY”

A fascinating thought is that the early Christian assemblies were similar to what is known today in the psychiatric field as “Group Therapy.” Group Therapy consists of numerous participants, plus one or two leaders. The seating arrangement is the most crucial expression of each meeting.

The group is seated is either a circle or semi-circle. Everyone is able to see each other’s face, as opposed to gawking at the back-of-heads only. Unless a previously agreed-upon topic is announced, the leader invites anyone with a problem, or simply someone who has a matter to share, to verbalize. No one person dominates the meeting by doing all or most of the talking. As participation makes for “therapy” and growth, most everyone in attendance is encouraged because his/her self-esteem has been boosted.

I envision the early believers practicing group therapy as their chief source of encouragement and support. It is assuring that not one Scripture can be found that remotely indicates their meetings were dominated by one man, not even in Acts 20:7, where Paul was the visiting Apostle and did a lot of talking in the form of reporting. Actually, the meeting at Troas was a verbal exchange, with Paul being the principal participant. The *English Standard Version* captures the Greek best by saying that “Paul talked with them.” Our oldest Greek manuscripts do not carry “preached” in Acts 20:7. This was another of King James’ blunders.

Regular meetings called for the benefit of all believers consisted of *general* participation, but there were occasions when a gifted

Mutual Ministry And Group Therapy

orator or visiting Apostle or evangelist was invited to address the assembly on some special topic, issue, or problem. Paul's visit to Troas was one of those occasions.

Consider seriously the idea of all congregations dismissing the paid functionary and substituting group therapy in his stead. Reflect on one important result:

A staggering sum of money would be available to alleviate the needs of starving humanity and promote authentic evangelism, the two commanding ministries of the early believers.

If group therapy were practiced in our assemblies, not only would a staggering amount of money be available to meet the needs of the world's destitute and promote evangelism, but the average believer's faith would be strengthened through mutual or group participation. He would no longer need to be bottle-fed and pampered by an elite servant, the professional cleric or pulpit minister. Self-confidence would increase and he would be prompted to spur others on toward love and good deeds. Heaven's testimony confirms this idea:

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:23).

Motivated and insightful leaders would truly shepherd. They would no longer need paid professionals to do their shepherding for them.

These changes are not likely to occur overnight, for they did not develop overnight. Somewhere along the way, change will come. The mood and the times are right for it. May God give us wisdom as we make preparations.

DOING MINISTRY BY “ACCIDENT”

Mechanical Ministry vs. Incidental Ministry

It might engage your attention to know that the four Gospels chronicle about 132 contacts Jesus had with ordinary people. Six were in the temple, four in the synagogues, and 122 were out with people in the mainstream of life.

Yes, the “mainstream of life.” This is where the “world” is located. This translates into doing ministry and evangelism by “accident,” not so much on purpose—and not so much by an organized effort. The former comes from the heart out, the latter from the teeth out, for it is usually done under compulsion because of it’s being a “church activity.” After all, we want to please the ecclesiastical pulpiteer and appease the “chief priests and elders.”

The “world” is not located in our church structures. The Lord wants to send us out into the world, but we refuse to leave our comfort zones and insist on serving the Lord on cushioned pews and in air-conditioned edifices. The world will never be influenced as long as believers remain pew and church addicted. The greatest mistake made along the way was when we began to construct church idols (edifices). Since then, Christianity has deteriorated.

The story goes that around A. D. 300, demons gathered in an emergency meeting to discuss how to hinder the Gospel’s spread and to impede Christ’s kingdom. Satan presided and received proposals. “Let’s persecute these Christians,” one demon suggested. “It won’t help,” another replied. “The more we oppress

Mechanical Ministry vs. Incidental Ministry

them, the more they increase.”

Other suggestions followed—discouragement, false doctrine, internal strife. Each suggestion was discarded as being ineffective. Finally an enterprising demon spoke. “Let’s make the Christian movement popular and wealthy,” he said. “Entice these Christians to abandon the catacombs, houses and marketplaces. Encourage them to build fine church buildings. When they have all gone inside, lock the doors and their progress will fade into oblivion.”

This make-believe story is reality in its truest form. Jesus told His followers to “go make disciples.” But somewhere along the way, we have neglected His words. Our message now to unbelievers is the opposite of what our Lord intended. “Come to us,” we tell the lost, “Come to the safe haven of our church edifices.” Let me put it to you purely and simply:

- *We have turned things backwards.*
- *The institutional church has obscured our goal.*
- *Church maintenance has been substituted for mission.*
- *We have lost our sense of compassion for the lost.*
- *We are now more interested in comfort than in the Great Commission.*
- *Our materialistic budgets and church calendars reveal the true story about our complacency.*
- *Most of our money and time are now spent on seeking and serving the saved.*
- *We hire elite ministers and pay them big bucks to do what we should be doing—namely, encouraging and building each other up.*
- *Laziness and indifference are our hallmarks.*
- *Worship and “service” have been restricted and confined.*

Mechanical Ministry vs. Incidental Ministry

Believers cannot have simple, normal relationships with their neighbors and co-workers, because the institutional church solicits most of their spare time for her various materialistic projects and worn-out programs.

“Evangelism” is also organized as house-to-house visitation. These people don’t know us from any other salesperson. Why should they invite us into their homes? And shouldn’t we be a little apprehensive about entering all those homes? On the other hand, the people we encounter *naturally*, in the course of ordinary daily living, will know our testimony is genuine. Those who meet us spontaneously will see that our testimony is natural and not rehearsed.

So, again, when we reflect upon how to share Jesus and the Good News with others, let us focus on the course of ordinary daily living. We can point more people in the direction of Jesus by “accident” than by pointing them to heaven by rote, ritual, or by following some institutional church’s agenda. And to God be the glory!

DISSENT

Clashing with Protestant and Catholic Ecclesiastics

If we had been Protestants and lived in England during the reign of King James I (1566-1625), we would not have had the freedom to openly and publicly disagree with his religious decrees. He believed in the “divine right of kings.” As King, he became the authoritarian ruler of England and Head of *The Established Church of England*. He even persecuted other Protestant groups. His affirmation to divinity was self-proclaimed.

If we had been Roman Catholics and lived in Rome during the reign of Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903), we would have been compelled to adhere to the following edict:

“That the unrestrained freedom of thinking and of openly making known one’s thoughts is not inherent in the rights of citizens, and is by no means to be reckoned worthy of favor and support” (Great Encyclical Letters of Leo XIII, page 126).

HAVE TIMES CHANGED?

As we can ascertain from these bits of history, both Protestant and Catholic leaders of yesteryear have denied their disciples the freedom to openly and publicly dissent. And each authoritarian ruler claimed divinity. Have times changed that much? Not really. The “Reverend Moon” of the Unification Church alleges to be divine and his devotees may not openly and publicly disagree with his “divine” proclamations.

Dissent

Jehovah's Witnesses may not take issue with the teachings of *The Watchtower Tract and Bible Society* of Brooklyn, New York. Mormons or "Latter Day Saints" dare not oppose the dictates of their "Twelve Apostles" in Utah who claim to receive "divine revelations" from God. The late Pope John Paul laid claim to "divine revelations" and sternly warned his people they were not to disagree or take issue with "church doctrine."

The Vatican's Popes have taught and continue to teach "complete submission and obedience of the will to the Church and the Roman Pontiff, as to God Himself" (Pope Leo XIII, in his "Sapientiae Christianae," 1890). The popish sect declares, "A Catholic State will not shrink from repressive measures to secure the domination of Catholic principles" (Monsignor Ronald Knox, quoted in *Proud To Be A Protestant*, by Alan Campbell, p. 14).

DISSENT IS HEALTHY

The "no dissent" clause is contrary to all logic and common sense, for man was born with both the ability and the urge to dissent in cases where injustices are prevalent. His Creator granted him an unfettered will, and no man, whether Pope or King, has the God-given right to deny him the freedom to think, to question, to take issue, to dissent.

Even the early Christian believers differed. The Apostles Paul and Peter are a case at hand. Paul took issue with the Apostle Peter, and stated, "*When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to the face, because he was clearly in the wrong*" (Galatians 2:11). The Catholic hierarchy affirms that Peter was the first pope. In this case, however, we have the *lesser* opposing the *greater*—the opposite of what the Vatican teaches. Actually, there was no pope until centuries after the Christian community was ushered in.

Dissent

Another factor worth considering while we're touching briefly upon the nucleus of Roman Catholicism is that not *once* in Peter's letters to fellow believers did he refer to himself as "Pope," "Holy Father," or "Bishop of Rome." That leaves us scratching our heads, doesn't it? But let's close this chapter on "Dissent" before we get further distracted.

FREE SPEECH vs. SLAVERY

Can we envision what the world would be like if no one were permitted to take issue with the "powers that be"? Freedom would yield to slavery. Free speech would surrender to intellectual conformity. The right to dissent would be lost to authoritarian rule.

This is counter to the very nature of man. The freedom we inherited by virtue of being born would be forfeited. Anyway we peel the orange, the "no dissent" clause is infantile and out of touch with reality. Let us never forget that our great Republic was founded upon dissent. Unity in diversity, *yes*; unity in absolute conformity, *no*. I suggest that if we treasure conformity and uniformity that we be patient until heaven opens her doors.



"With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion."—Steven Weinberg.

IS REFORMATION POSSIBLE?

Question

Considering the rampant division within the Christian community, is reformation likely to occur?

Response

Possibly, but change will not come easily. The “chief priests and teachers of the law,” or most of today’s clergy and religious leaders, will oppose reformational efforts. They will try to persuade the crowd to ask for the *status quo* and to have reformation put to death. It was the clergy who “persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed” (Mat. 27:20). They refused change and killed the world’s greatest reformer. They nailed the Prince of Peace to a Roman tree! They were more willing to “bosom-buddy” a murderer than to see their sects and religious parties undergo reform. A repeat today would not alter the scene.

Question

Who can struggle for reform?

Response

Only the free man can opt for reform. He must be free from anything that enslaves. He is not free if he is a party man. If he has yielded his will to some church or denomination or cult, he is shackled, for he is bound to uphold his party’s creeds, promote its philosophies, and fight for its growth and survival. Should he waver a little to the right or lean a little to the left, he is soon called upon the partisan carpet and told to shape up or ship out. If he refuses to shape up or line up with the party’s shibboleths, he will

Is Reformation Possible?

soon find himself on the outside looking in. But this is the best thing that could happen to him. He would meet freedom face-to-face for the first time. He could then declare with the Apostle Paul, “*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a servant to everyone, to win as many as possible*” (I Cor. 9:19).

Question

Is it possible to free oneself from all partisan entanglements?

Response

Of course! We can serve others better when we are free of all partisan fetters, and that is because we don’t have to look over our shoulders to see if our party’s chieftains are looking our way.

The free man does not nor cannot represent any church, faction, denomination, or cult upon the face of this earth. *He is God’s representative!* He answers only to his Lord, not to the “chief priests and teachers of the law.” He has no lords, popes, or masters to whom he must give an account. He will seek and accept advice from godly men, but he will not give them a license to place him under bondage.

Question

Could you further describe such a man?

Response

He is bold but not violent; firm but not rude; outspoken but not mouthy. The free man must be compassionate and loving. He will always remember that a man called Jesus transformed the world without drawing a sword or brainwashing weak and innocent minds. He changed the world by the simple act of *persuasive teaching*. There will never be another like Him! He is the conclusion of everything, our “bright and morning star.”

Is Reformation Possible?

Question

What aspects of reform do you recommend?

Response

- Churches should surrender all party labels, names, and partisan practices. The denominating of separatist Christian groups must cease. We must recognize that wherever God has a child, we have a brother or a sister. We have no half-brothers or half-sisters in the Lord. All believers are blood children of the Lamb.
- Draw no party lines. If Jesus did not erect the barrier that keeps our spiritual brothers out, dismantle it. If ever a solution is found to our divisive dilemma, the Christian community must look to Jesus—not to churches.
- Purge ritualism and formalism from our meetings and get back to the simple, informal method of sharing with and edifying one another. Our open Bible classes resemble the open meetings of the early believers, for everyone is encouraged to participate. Participation makes for spiritual growth. Pew-warming makes for spiritual retreat.
- Disregard the idea that worship must be conducted at certain places, scheduled for specific hours, and performed in selective ways. Worship for the dedicated believer is his *whole* life, as per Jesus in John 4:19-24. It is utterly ridiculous to speak of leaving our classrooms to go “into the sanctuary to worship.” Worship in the new age is never defined as moving from one location to another. If we are not worshipping in the first room, it is unlikely the situation will improve by moving to the second room. For the in-

Is Reformation Possible?

formed believer, worship cannot be turned on and off like a water faucet.

- Evangelical church leaders and Editors should cease accentuating extraneous issues such as *The Rapture*, *The Battle of Armageddon*, *The Thousand-Year Earthly Reign*, *Middle East Israel*, and other doctrinal “supplements” and start pointing the unsaved to Jesus. The innumerable magazines and books relating to these issues are causing confusion among the uncommitted and frustrating those who are reaching for a higher level of spiritual curriculum. They hunger for meat but are fed bottle milk.
- Our “pulpit ministers” must go! They prevent the various parts of the body from functioning as God intended them to function. They need to be dismissed and encouraged to find a job or transform their pulpit ministries into full-time evangelism—seeking and saving the lost.

These changes, plus numerous others, are not likely to come about overnight, for they did not develop overnight. Somewhere along our journey to heaven, change will come.

Question

Are you bitter toward those who do not share your views on reform?

Response

Goodness, no! I meet with them. I study with them. They are no less my brothers because they are not as caught up in reformation as I am. Reformation is where the good Lord has planted me. I dare not reject the brother whose ministry is in some other field or

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area of life, or whose divine assignment differs from mine. I know only that I must work for reform. And I cannot work for reform by rejecting those who do not agree with my struggles.

Question

Should a “free man” listen to, seek wisdom, and take advice from others?

Response

We are not free if we refuse to listen to and take counsel from others whose wisdom is on a higher level than ours. Listening to and accepting counsel from others is not the same as being dictated to by the “chief priests and elders.” Submission to the latter will shackle us. Listening to the former will make us wiser.

Question

How can we differentiate between those who are free and those who are enslaved?

Response

Look around you. Observe. What do you see? Pew-sitters? Preacher worshippers? Spiritual deadbeats? Lukewarm and uninformed believers? If this is what you see, you’re probably looking at a system of “incarcerated” and complacent disciples.

You need not abandon the disciples with whom you have met and loved through the years. Work for change from within, if possible. But whatever the results, do not abandon your efforts to reform the system, for there is little hope for recovery without it.

Question

Is it your position that most believers are addicted to Churchianity and her leaders?

Is Reformation Possible?

Response

It is self-evident that the vast majority of believers are addicted to and enslaved by the institutional church and her “Elite Servants.” These “Elite Servants” might properly be called “Celestial Aristocrats,” for they appear to be of sacred nobility.

Hundreds of thousands of believers are plagued with this dilemma. Most all of us were “brought up in the church,” taught “church,” indoctrinated with “church,” faced with the “right church” from childhood, and told that “Jesus established a church.” In essence, we have been brainwashed with “church.” As a result, we reject anything in our walk with the Lord that does not march under the banner of “church” and her “Celestial Aristocrats.”

We need to get away from this thing called “Church” and get back to where Jesus wants us to be. There were no churches and church edifices during the formative years of the redeemed community. Yet there were congregations of believers. As chronicled earlier, man founded churches. Jesus colonized His new community. There is not one church in existence whose author is Jesus. Yet He has children in most of them.

Our Savior set in motion His *ekklesia* (community or congregation) and reigns as its Head and King. His community is composed of all of those who have accepted Him as Lord, and they can be found in almost every sect or divisive party.

Question

What, then, is the solution to the mess we’ve gotten ourselves into?

Response

The solution, as I see it, is to cast aside our divisive parties or

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churches and be believers or Christians *only*—not the only Christians, but Christians only. Unless Jesus is the author of our labels and “inventions,” toss them to the wind. Abandon them forever and unite under the banner of Jesus. It is evident, at least to me, that Jesus is not the author of the Baptist Church, Methodist Church, Roman Catholic Church, Lutheran Church, (non-instrumental music) Church of Christ Church, Christian Church, Assembly of God Church, or any of the other schismatic creations.

We delight in thinking that our church is what Jesus founded. Interestingly, all of the other sects labor under the same mistaken idea. And they are just as right—or wrong—as we are. Let Jesus be the center of our walk, not churches or religious sects.

As noted elsewhere in these messages, our Lord did not die for a church—*any* church. Man authored churches. Furthermore, Jesus did not say in Matthew 16:18, the verse often quoted by the churchly-addicted, “I will build my church.” Churches, such as we have today, did not have their genesis until hundreds of years *after* Jesus initiated His new order or community. “I will build my church” is not in the oldest Greek manuscripts. But here is what we *do* find in the oldest Greek manuscripts, “*I will found my congregation*”—or community.

Our religious parties do *not* represent what Jesus instituted. They are part of the problem, not part of the solution. I was brought up in the (non-instrumental music) Church of Christ sect and believed it to be the “one and only” church Jesus set in motion. I preached that sectarian message for years. Like millions of others, I was brainwashed into being a partisan robot.

Jesus introduced a new people, a new Israel (spiritual or celestial, not *National*), a new household, a new kingdom or reign,

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a new congregation or community, a new assembly.

Question

The Scriptures inform us that Jesus' bride is the church. How do you get around that?

Response

Again, there were no churches until hundreds of years after the household of faith was ushered in. King James of England authored our biblical "church" by instructing his translators, "The old ecclesiastical words to be kept, as the word church not to be translated *congregation*" (*The Christian Baptist*, Vol. 2, Number 4, Nov. 1, 1824).

"Church" is not a translation of the Greek *ekklesia*. The Greek term is correctly translated congregation, assembly, called-out ones, and may also be rendered "community." Moses led a congregation of chosen ones under the old era; Jesus leads a congregation of chosen ones under the new era. But neither Moses nor Jesus led or is leading a church or religious party.

King James insisted that all ecclesiastical terms be retained. "Church," "Easter," "baptize," and "Bishop" were a few of his preferences. As the dictator was King and Head of *The Established Church of England*, to permit his translators to deliver the Greek *ekklesia* correctly would have placed him in the position of being King and Head of a *mere* congregation! Apparently, he wanted no part of that.

Allow me to disappoint some of you by confessing that I have little respect for the *King James Version* of the Scriptures, believing its dialect to be extinct and its errors numerous. Of course, there are errors in every version, but the KJV seems to con-

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tain more than most of the others—unless it would be the version used by the cult known as *Jehovah's Witnesses*.

Most believers say their church's date goes back to about A.D. 30-33, as recorded in the book of *Acts*, chapter 2. However, the *King James Version* has one under Moses in Acts 7:38, and another one under David in Hebrews 2:12. The point is, Jesus did not introduce a church—*any* church, then or later. This statement will ruffle the feathers of some of you who are churchly-addicted, but I encourage you to face up to reality.

But I need to return to our question about the bride of Christ. Jesus' bride is not a sect or faction or denomination. Jesus' bride consists of all those who have accepted Him as Lord and King and are striving, as best they can, to respond to His grace—wherever they are found. *This is the bride of Christ!* Then *where* is she? What is her location? She is spread throughout most sects and churches and denominations. She's in exile, just as old Israel was.

Question

If Jesus did not die for the church, or for what is known to be the church, for what did He die?

Response

The Apostle John tells us “Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one” (John 11:51-52).

Who are scattered among sects and parties and factions? God's children! Now we know why our reformer forefathers sought to “unite the Christians in all the sects.” Let us no longer promote the Church of Christ sect, the Baptist sect, the Catholic sect, the

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Methodist sect, the Presbyterian sect, or any of the others. Let us, instead, proclaim Jesus and Him crucified in an effort “to bring them [God’s children] together and make them one.”

This is my story and this is my song. I shall, with the Lord’s strength, continue to tell my story and sing my song. My prayer is that someone will listen to my story and sing the song of unity and reformation. I cannot tell a different story or sing a foreign song and live with my conscience. I have written what I have written. Let it be recorded.

A PAGEANT vs. AN IDOL

One of the largest denominations in Phoenix is the *First Assembly of God*. Their membership is in the thousands. They have an elaborate church structure, and the mountains in the immediate background serve as an excellent backdrop for earthen beauty.

During a recent holiday season, Rosita and I attended their *Christmas Pageant*, along with two of our Christian friends from Ohio, Brooks and Carol Wilson. The Pageant was elegant in every respect—the singers, the music, the animals, the actors and actresses—everything. The mammoth “sanctuary” and all of the balconies were filled to capacity.

This denomination is known for its generous contributions to the destitute. The cleric announced that any proceeds up and above the cost of the production would be distributed among the poor and less fortunate. And while I do not believe our Lord founded the “system” in which this church is cemented, yet I must admit that many of her programs and projects and ministries are worthwhile causes.

As we sat in the “sanctuary,” I wondered if the exquisite structure had become an idol—consciously or unconsciously—to those who frequent its doors. For if the edifice is viewed as some kind of *revered* design or looked upon as a *sacred* project by those who built it and by those who enter its doors, as is the case in most settings of this kind, it would then indeed be an idol and those who so perceive it would be bordering idolatry.

I wondered, too, at the beginning of its being blueprinted, if the

A Pageant vs. An Idol

Lord would have been more pleased had the leaders decided to take the millions of dollars it cost to construct the edifice and use it for evangelism and to alleviate the needs of the genuinely destitute. Just suppose, for a moment, that when the plans were being discussed, the leaders had announced to their followers:

“Brother and sisters, let us instead divide up and meet in various homes, or rent some public facility with little or no maintenance expenses, and take the money we would ordinarily use to build this structure and use it to reach the unregenerate and to feed and clothe the legitimately poor. We will financially and adequately support the men we choose to send ‘out among the lost.’ They will be our evangelists.

“Should we choose the house group format, each house would select its shepherds. But should we choose to rent a public facility for our meetings, the entire congregation would ‘look out among you’ and choose its leaders.

“Of all the proposals we have considered, which one of these would our Lord consider top priority? Would He want us to spend millions of dollars on a material structure and neglect the lost and destitute, or would He rather prefer that we do the latter? As you evaluate the options, please try to recall that the early believers did not construct elaborate and flashy ‘temples’ in which to meet, yet they turned the world upside down with the message of salvation.”

And so I close this segment by asking all of you who are churchly addicted: *What would our Lord recommend, and what would He do, in a situation like this?* I leave the question with you.

Author's Special Postscript

I think the best way to bring this endeavor to a close is to tell you about a special friend of mine, Moses. This final chapter may have little or nothing to do with the Institutional Church or Reformation, but it has much to do with the closing years of our sojourn on Planet Earth. Enjoy!



“THERE ON THE MOUNTAIN YOU WILL DIE”

“Go up into the Abarim Range, to Mount Nebo, across from Jericho, and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession. There on the mountain you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people” (Deut. 32:48-50).

MOSES—GOD’S MOUNTAIN CLIMBER

Go to the mountains! There’s something about mountains that seems to invite God’s presence. Abraham met God in the mountains. It was on a mountain that God told him to sacrifice his son. Moses had his encounters with God on various mountains. The *Ten Commandments* were issued from a high mountain, “the mountain of God.” It was on a mountain that God placed Moses in the cleft of a rock and allowed all His goodness to pass in front of him. Moses was permitted to see God’s backside only, however, “for my face must not be seen” (Exodus 33:12-23). *Wow*, what a taste of grace—to be able to see God’s backside!

“There On The Mountain”

Moses’ brother, Aaron, died on Mount Hor. Even Jesus was transfigured on a high mountain. His favorite places of solitude were best expressed on mountains, and that is where we frequently find Him in the four Gospels, face down or upon His knees praising and reverencing His Father. Just before He returned to heaven, His disciples met Him on a mountain, from which He ascended (Matt. 28:16-20). So, yes, there’s something about mountains our God appreciates.

Some of my closest and fondest moments with my God have been in Arizona’s mountains and canyons. I converse with Him openly, as with an intimate friend. He hears me, and my spirit is jubilant because of His presence. I feel Him! I know He’s trekking alongside me. On every trail, I see Him everywhere—in the boulders, among the rocks, in the loveliness of Spring flowers, in the exquisite melody of the birds, in the quietness of the trees, and in the whistling of the breeze.

“GATHERED TO YOUR PEOPLE”

But I’m not here to talk about my experiences in the mountains. Instead, I want to decipher what it means in Scripture to be “gathered to your people.” As I said earlier, God instructed Moses to climb Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, and view the Land of Canaan, “for there on the mountain you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people.” What does it mean to be “gathered to your people”? That statement has a fascinating ring.

By way of paraphrasing, we might construct the implication in this fashion, “*For on the mountain you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people who have gone on before you.*” I understand this to mean that Moses’ spirit, the *real* Moses, immediately following his biological demise, would be assembling

“There On The Mountain”

with all of the old saints whose earthly existence had already ended—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and all the others.

“BREATH” IS NOT MEANT

We’re not speaking of Moses’ breath being gathered to his people, as some define “spirit.” The idea is ridiculous and totally out of focus with the real sense. What in heaven’s name would a bunch of “breaths” do when gathered, share halitosis? And what would a “flock of breaths” look like, anyway? Instead, we are talking about the *actual* man, for man’s spirit is the essence of his existence. It is “the vital principal by which the body is animated, the rational spirit, the power by which the human being feels, thinks, decides,” as per *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*.

True, one of the renderings of “spirit” is “breath,” but *never* when it involves the crux of man’s existence. When Jacob’s spirit was revived after he was told his son Joseph was alive, his breathing did not improve. Rather, his *inner man* was infused with vitality (Gen. 45:23-28).

JACOB WAS “GATHERED TO HIS PEOPLE”

When Jacob was rapidly approaching death, he said, “I am about to be gathered to my people.” Then the end of a great man’s life was finalized. “*When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people*” (Gen. 49:29-33). His breathing ceased and became non-existent, but his *real* self, his spirit, was “gathered to his people” or united with “the spirits of righteous men made perfect” (Heb. 12:23). It is apparent that his spirit, when separated from his body, became an inhabitant of another world, the s p i r i t

“There On The Mountain”

or celestial world, and was “joined to the spirits of just men made perfect.” It is certain, then, that Moses’ *bones* were not “gathered to his people,” as some assert, for no one knew—or knows—where God buried him.

Even Abraham, the forerunner of Moses, an old man and full of years, breathed his last and was “gathered to his people.”

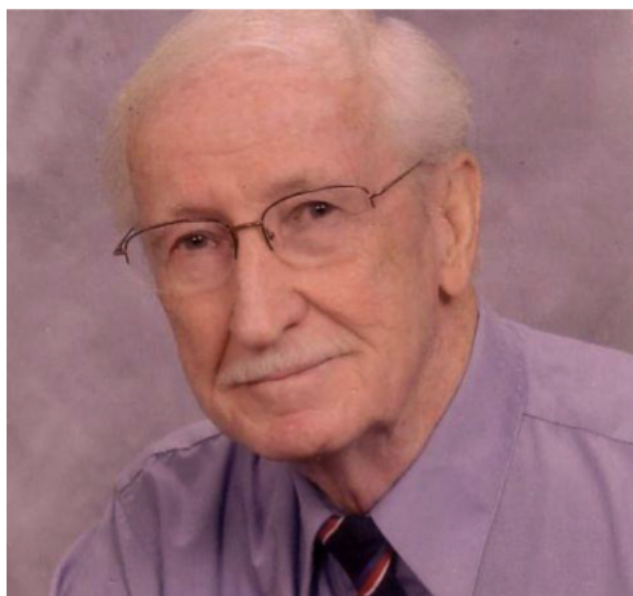
“Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years. And he was gathered to his people” (Gen. 25:7-8).

Some day, after this life’s tears and joys “have come home to roost,” you and I will be called upon to breathe our last—hopefully “at a good old age.” Will we “be gathered to our people,” as were Moses and others? May the Lord sharpen and prepare us for that glorious event, as we seek and accept His grace.

“And Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in Moab, as the Lord had said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is.

“Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone” (Joshua 34:5-8).

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