

Family Gathering

Rhys N Thomas

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Introduction

Premise

Christian congregations around the world meet for different purposes and employ different methods. I have not been tasked by God to institute unanimity or uniformity.¹ God is the only one who separates the acceptable from the unacceptable. Not only is it not my job, I am glad it is not my job. At the other extreme, neither is it my job to declare that every group's practices are equally valid or demanding of your endorsement. All I can do is make suggestions from my point of view and hope that others find value in some of my opinions. My premise is 1 Thessalonians 5:21, "Test everything; hold on to the good."

The purpose of creation is to be an incubator for faith leading to God's terminal objective of developing a big family that will last.² In our time on earth, we develop our own faith and that of others with significant help from the Spirit who dwells in the faithful. Part of that development occurs when the faithful gather.

Because we tend to drag with us our culture and our pasts into church meetings, over the centuries we have developed both healthy and unhealthy practices. I have my observations; you have yours. I am certain that our lists of supposedly healthy practices will differ. My objective is to present ideas to improve the collective experience and allow some unhealthy practices to die natural deaths. My purpose is not to hunt down unprofitable traditions and kill them off; rather, I hope to remove artificial life support for that which has no life of its own.

As a simple example, the vast majority of congregations meet in facilities designated specifically for their purposes. In most cultures, a church is not a real church without a building. Yet, church buildings are not mentioned in the New Testament. But we would all feel very strange if we did not have one. If we can manage to view the building as nothing more than a convenience, perhaps we can retain what makes us comfortable without inflicting severe damage to the purpose for meeting.

Further, we are accustomed to theater-style meeting rooms. Other configurations feel odd. Yet, I have observed that activities connected to the idea of "one another" are difficult to accomplish with the back of someone's head. Again, I am not advocating the radical overthrow of tradition; I suspect such a thing would be counter-productive. Rather, I hope to raise some questions and suggest some answers to allow us to put tradition in the background so that we can focus on the real purposes for meeting – if we know what they are.

Christianity has tried radical change to overcome newly recognized unhealthy practices. The result has been division. We have tried to transplant the traditions of one culture into others, mostly with disastrous results. As a small example, Western missionaries started taking the gospel to West Africa nearly six centuries ago. Yet, the vast majority of congregations could not exist without continuous cash infusions from the West. We have unwittingly blended our culture with the gospel to the detriment of those who hear that mixed message.

Since the time when Christianity became fashionable under Constantine, speakers with eloquence and charisma have become more important than becoming a big family that will last. Peter did not rent the Coliseum so he could preach to 50,000 or 75,000 people at a time. Yet, Christianity did just fine. We probably would feel unfulfilled if we did not experience a stirring and well-crafted sermon each week, but we need to remember that such speeches are a product

¹ For a thorough explanation, see Volume 4, *Weeds in the Wheat Field*.

² See Volume 1, *Think as a Spirit*, Chapter 3: Ethics.

of culture, not gospel. Learning from a lecture is normal for us (although only about 10% effective, educationally speaking), but lectures do not forge bonds with the back of the head before me. We can keep the comforting sermon, but we need to recognize that our preferred style of communication is only a tiny part of what should happen when the faithful get together.

Target Audience

In most churches, an authority figure or group of authority figures determine what happens when the faithful meet. I find that unfortunate.³ Further, my target audience, those who decide what will happen at church meetings, would seem to be small as a percentage of all faithful people.

More modern churches (classifying churches as modern or traditional) employ “worship leaders” who guide the collective experience. I find that practice strange, but my children and grandchildren do not. Again, my target audience is small – hardly worth the cost of a print run.

My real target audience is the group I call “free thinkers” who are attached to one denomination or another. My experience has been that such people appreciate the need for the faithful to gather, but have been disappointed with the results. My hope is to give hope that something better not only exists, but is obtainable without armed conflict.

The Spirit that dwells in the faithful enables and promotes outrageously faithful behavior through transformation into the character of Jesus.⁴ A gracious nature, an unquenchable desire to fix what ails others, and peace in a broken world become obvious. Other people want a piece of the action. So, my target audience is the free thinker who, through faith, becomes the go-to person when lives are falling apart. The free thinker then has the opportunity to bring people together as a functional body, promoting the one-another message without the burden of Western church infrastructure.

This approach does not foster division or power struggles. Rather, the purposes for our gatherings are brought back into the light, driving tradition into its rightful role as a reminder or an illustration rather than an objective in itself.

³ See Volume 3, *Hegemonies*

⁴ See Volume 1, *Think as a Spirit*, Chapter 6: The Work of the Spirit.

Chapter 1: Worship

Common Perception

Most churches have a sign on the building or out in the lawn that publishes the times when the group meets. The majority use the words, Worship Service, to designate the focal meeting time. Unfortunately, the New Testament never puts worship and a gathering of Christians in the same context. The following pages address every passage containing worship along with the means for reproducing the search so that the reader may be certain that no deception is being perpetrated.

I am not privy to the motives of those, in centuries past, who settled on this unfortunate confusion of worship. So, those motives are best left in the past, undiscovered. Rather, I will address the problems that have arisen as a result.

Because most readers will be new to this point of view, I will begin with a few summary conclusions to avoid panic and fear of where this may lead. First, worship is a 24/7 thing, not limited to specific meeting times. Second, you can (and should) worship not only with others, but also by yourself. Third, worship is like breathing; you do not quit breathing during church times, and neither do you go to church to breathe. The rest of the chapters in this volume present what is special about church times, the things that should happen when the faithful get together. None of these reasons for assembling are odd or unusual. In fact, every church-goer will be familiar with all of them. My purpose is to bring the motives God intended for the assembly back into the forefront.

Worship is not the centerpiece of church time; one-anothering is. Also, when the faithful gather, Jesus should be attached to everything. Churches have fallen into ditches on both sides of that road. Some focus entirely on the “acts of worship,” much as the Pharisees focused on obeying every “jot and tittle”⁵ of the Law. Others focus entirely on good feelings and “relationships,” overlooking that Jesus should pervade everything we think, feel, and do.

The authority-driven crowd overlooks that authority destroys both faith and love.⁶ We are not commanded to perform certain acts in certain ways, we do them because God says we need them for our growth. We do it His way because we trust, not because we will be condemned if we fail. Faith is tested when we think we have a better idea, but do it His way instead. We do not do it because He commanded it, but because we trust that He is a lot smarter than we are and has our best interests at heart. God’s objective is a big family that lasts, not slaves. A God who commands worship rules by power, not love.

The relationship-driven crowd overlooks that God came to earth as a real person and demonstrated how relationships are supposed to work. Therefore, Jesus needs to be connected in an obvious way to everything in life. If we focus on interpersonal relationships without constant reference to how Jesus did it, we will do no better than what good people have done in the past – fits and spurts of success punctuated by war. Our time together should be spent learning how to absorb more of Jesus’ character through the power of the Spirit that dwells in the faithful.

Worship is important. We should do it all the time. So, rather than just proving that “worship service” is a misnomer, my point will be to expand worship to a full time endeavor.

⁵ Matthew 5:18

⁶ See Volume 3, *Hegemonies*, Honor, Obedience, and Authority

Research Method

The following method enables the reader to assemble all the passages that contain a certain Greek or Hebrew word. Because Dr. Strong numbered the entries in his Greek and Hebrew dictionaries in the back of his concordance, knowledge of Greek or Hebrew is not required. Often, translators have chosen to render multiple Greek words by the same English word, causing some confusion. This method unravels them. Evaluating the context of all passages that use the same Greek word reduces the likelihood of drawing conclusions too quickly, from incomplete information.

Bible translators are people. Certainly they have studied Greek or Hebrew extensively, but everyone has been influenced by his or her own baggage: life experience, family denominational affiliation, preconceptions, prejudices. As scholars, they do their best to exclude personal bias, but some part of it always creeps in. Someone armed with a Strong's Concordance is not equipped to re-translate the New Testament. But the concordance will allow us to assemble all the relevant contexts. We may, on occasion, find a hint or two about an old bias from a translator. We may be able to separate an English word into two or three lists because those passages used different Greek words, clearing up some confusion.⁷ This is not a reason to burn all copies of that translation or no translations would remain. Rather, as a result of finding some formerly unknown baggage, we see perhaps a little clearer than if we had not made the effort to find and compare everything. But, we should never take ourselves too seriously. If a trained translator with wonderful motives was influenced by his baggage, my conclusions will be at least as flawed, just in different ways. So, the effort is worthwhile first for its completeness and second for its opportunity to leave some of my own baggage behind.

1. Using a Strong's concordance with its Greek dictionary, look up "worship" and its related words (worship, worshipped, worshipper, worshippers, worshipping, worshipping).

 - a. Make a list of all the New Testament passages (book, chapter, and verse) that contain "worship" or related word.
 - b. With each citation, write down the number of the Greek word (2151, 2318, 2999, 3000, 3511, 4352, 4573, 4574, 4576).

2. In the Greek dictionary, look up each number. Knowledge of Greek is not required. With each Greek word, after its pronouncing and root guides, a listing of all the English words that were used in the King James Version to translate that Greek word is given. The English words are alphabetical, not by importance.

 - a. Make a list of the English words that have been used to translate the various Greek words in the list (serve, service, devout, religious, devotion, show piety).
 - b. Look up the new English words in the concordance. Scan down the lists of the new words to find the passages that came from the same Greek word numbers. List the new passages with the "worship" passages. Do not include words not on your number list.

3. Look up each passage and read its context. Write down what the context reveals about the key word. Continue adding context summaries until all passages have been analyzed. Coming to a conclusion before all the data has been gathered is bad science.

⁷ A good example is "blessed." Roughly half of the occurrences come from the Greek word from which we get "eulogy," to say nice things about someone. The others come from a different word that means "above the cares of this life." Knowing which passage means which "blessed" makes a big difference.

4. Develop definitions from the combination of all contexts for each Greek word group.

Results of the Search

Three main root words were found, along with one that was used once.

- 4352 – prokuneo - worship
- 3000 – latreuo – serve, worship (and 2999 – latreia – service)
- 4576 – seboimai – devout, religious, worship and its derivatives:
 - 4573 – sebazomai - worship
 - 4574 – sebasma – devotion, worship
 - 2151 – eusebeo – show piety, worship
 - 2318 – theosebes – worshipper
- 3511 – neokoros – worshipper (Acts 19:35 only)

Prokuneo

This Greek verb (Strong’s number 4352), used about 50 times in the New Testament, was always translated “worship” in the KJV. Because several notable people have built doctrines around this word, perhaps the best place to start is with the way Jesus used it.

In the Temptation accounts,⁸ Jesus cited the Law, “You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only.”⁹ Those words do not appear in exactly that order in the Law. Some have suggested that Jesus was giving a free rendition of Deuteronomy 6:13, “You shall fear the Lord your God and serve Him only.” However, that re-wording raises a difficulty through the connection between “fear” in Hebrew and “worship” in Greek. No such correspondence exists. The Hebrew word in Deuteronomy 6:13 is used often for ordinary fear. My opinion is that Jesus was simply giving the positive statement of a negative commandment, “You shall not worship [other gods] nor serve them.”¹⁰ This keeps the Hebrew-Greek correspondence intact. A short analysis of the Hebrew word translated worship has been placed after the analysis of the various Greek words translated worship, for completeness.

Whatever Jesus’ exact meaning, the context clearly portrays that He intended this Greek word to represent something distinctly and specifically related to God. Satan wanted Jesus to worship him,¹¹ which Jesus rejected as being reserved for God.

Interestingly, Jesus allowed people to worship Him while He was on earth.¹² Of course, Jesus was not in a position to object when the magi worshipped,¹³ but because the account was recorded decades later, Matthew certainly could have included an editorial comment if their actions were remiss. In the other cases, some have claimed that these were not worshipping as in worshipping God, but merely a prostration as has been and still is the custom in some cultures. However, that claim is difficult to maintain when the same authors, only a few pages earlier, had recorded the Temptation scene in which the same word was a point of contention between Satan

⁸ Matthew 4:1 – 11, Mark 1:12 – 13, Luke 4:1 - 13

⁹ Matthew 4:10, Luke 4:8

¹⁰ Exodus 20:5, Deuteronomy 5:9

¹¹ Matthew 4:9, Luke 4:7

¹² Matthew 8:2, 9:18, 14:33, 15:25, 20:20, Mark 5:6, John 9:38

¹³ Matthew 2:2, 2:8, 2:11

and Jesus. Further, when the disciples worshipped Jesus after He had walked on the Sea of Galilee, simple bowing was not the point.¹⁴ The same was true of the man with the legion of demons¹⁵ and the man born blind.¹⁶

Peter would not allow Cornelius to worship him,¹⁷ so Peter understood that this was more than a cultural phenomenon. And twice John tried to worship an angel in his visions,¹⁸ although his actions likely were more to make a point about worship than an outright mistake. Dividing the occurrences of *prokuneo* into two groups, one reserved for God and the other a cultural practice, cannot be supported from the contexts.

Less controversially, the disciples worshipped the risen Jesus,¹⁹ angels worship the Messiah,²⁰ the guards torturing Jesus worshipped Him sarcastically,²¹ the Israelites were reported to have worshipped idols in the wilderness,²² and Jacob worshipped in the context of blessing his sons.²³

Various people are described as worshipping God. Some came to the Temple to worship.²⁴ An unbeliever, after hearing his secrets revealed by a prophet in the church, would fall down and worship God.²⁵ Those of the synagogue of Satan would worship God at the feet of the Christians of Philadelphia.²⁶ The angels, the four living creatures, and the twenty-four elders in heaven all worship God.²⁷ The gospel and the song of Moses and the Lamb each include that all will worship God.²⁸

Conversely, worshipping demons, the beast, the dragon, or idols was a bad thing,²⁹ so the faithful refused to do it.³⁰

For those who focus on “acts of worship,” very few actions are described in the contexts where *prokuneo* appears. The most common action was to fall down.³¹ Other actions were to kneel,³² hold or be at the feet,³³ lean on a staff,³⁴ bring gifts,³⁵ and cast crowns.³⁶

The one odd usage of this word is in the parable of the unforgiving servant who worshipped before his master.³⁷ However, the master in the parable represents God, so perhaps

¹⁴ Matthew 14:33

¹⁵ Mark 5:6

¹⁶ John 9:38

¹⁷ Acts 10:25

¹⁸ Revelation 19:10, 22:8 - 9

¹⁹ Matthew 28:9, 17, Luke 24:52

²⁰ Hebrews 1:6

²¹ Mark 15:19

²² Acts 7:43

²³ Hebrews 11:21

²⁴ John 12:20, Acts 8:27, 24:11, Revelation 11:1

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 14:25

²⁶ Revelation 3:9

²⁷ Revelation 4:10, 5:14, 7:11, 11:16, 19:4

²⁸ Revelation 14:7, 15:4

²⁹ Revelation 9:20, 13:4, 8, 12, 15, 14:9, 11, 16:2, 19:20

³⁰ Revelation 20:4

³¹ Matthew 2:11, 4:9 – 10, 18:26, Luke 4:7 – 8, Acts 10:25, 1 Corinthians 14:25, Revelation 4:10, 5:14, 7:11, 11:16, 19:4, 19:10, 22:8 – 9

³² Matthew 20:20, Mark 15:19

³³ Matthew 28:9, Revelation 3:9

³⁴ Hebrews 11:21

³⁵ Matthew 2:11

³⁶ Revelation 4:10

³⁷ Matthew 18:26

Jesus stuck in that particular word to wake up the audience, so they would pick up on the meaning of the parable. Perhaps as a double-entendre, Jesus also may have been including the flippant attitude people had about worship, giving equal homage to God and men.

The final occurrence of this word is featured prominently in the discussion between Jesus and the woman at the well concerning where one ought to worship.³⁸ Jesus' contrast about worship is location (Samaria or Jerusalem) versus "in spirit and truth." The location question will become nothing more than an historical curiosity (although Jerusalem was the correct answer at the time) because a fundamental change was in process.

What did Jesus mean by "in spirit and truth"? As with general statements, several conclusions may be drawn that fit with the context. Rather than choosing one over the others, I propose that Jesus was intentionally vague to allow for various levels of thought. The surface meaning would be that the faithful would focus on the right attitude rather than the right place. Graduating from the physical mindset and thinking as a spirit, we may also conclude that God seeks faithful spirits who worship, not so much physical bodies who worship. The spirits of the faithful, whether their bodies are still breathing or not, are presently seated in the same place as Jesus, in the heavenlies.³⁹ Those who worship will focus on reality (the unseen) rather than the illustration (the seen). Jesus gave a reason for this transition: "God is Spirit." Therefore, worship by spirits is the objective; physical worship is a temporary illustration. This is not looking forward to the new heaven and new earth, but to the here and now; Jesus said, "And now is."

Jesus demonstrated, not just illustrated, the character of God, the ultimate reality. In contrast, the Law, which was "holy, just, and good,"⁴⁰ symbolized God,⁴¹ and reality was veiled.⁴² Worshippers in the church were to be fundamentally different than worshippers under the Law.⁴³ Over the centuries, Christians have had a lot of trouble making this transition. If we picture God's desires as a road, my interpretation of ecclesiastical history has us in the ditches a lot more than on the pavement.

Different groups have had and still have different practices, even in the original congregations described in the New Testament.⁴⁴ Symbols from the Law have been carried into the church, usually to satisfy a cultural comfort level. But Jesus wanted our worship to abandon the symbolism and go straight to the reality of spirits worshipping the Father of Spirits. Nowhere in the New Testament is a gathering of Christians called worship. Rather, as detailed in subsequent chapters, we meet for other, extremely important reasons. Jesus was not trying to say that the worship in Jerusalem was to be distributed across the globe to a multitude of little temples called church buildings. Rather, worship was to shift to being an exercise for the spirit, continuously. In the church, the spirit is reconnected to the physical person by God as a result of that person's faith. So, faithful spirits are quite capable of worshipping all the time (like the angels, twenty-four elders, and four living creatures in Revelation), not just at specified times and places.

Why the big change? Because, under the Law, only a small percentage of participants were faithful. The Israelites were contractors who were paid handsomely to act out some important

³⁸ John 4:20 - 24

³⁹ Ephesians 1:20, 2:6

⁴⁰ Romans 7:12

⁴¹ Hebrews 9:9

⁴² 2 Corinthians 3:7 - 18

⁴³ Hebrews 8:7 - 13

⁴⁴ Colossians 2:16 - 23, Romans 14:1 - 6

symbolisms to be brought to reality later by the Messiah and the church. In contrast to the small percentage of faithful Israelites, the church is composed of 100% faithful people (not the church directory, rather the real church)⁴⁵ whose spirits worship gladly in a non-physical realm that is now, since the war,⁴⁶ free from evil.

Faithful spirits worship constantly in the present heaven.⁴⁷ Those faithful spirits whose physical bodies are still breathing have been reconnected to those bodies, spiritually alive again. But what is this worship? The little summaries of worship in heaven give us a glimpse.⁴⁸ The character, power, honor, and worthiness of the Creator are extolled. In short, proper worship is acknowledging the many facets of the greatness of God, completely submitting to that Person, and being really happy about it. We no longer sporadically illustrate the greatness of God; the faithful do it all the time.

Latreo

Latreuo (Strong's word 2999) is the verb form and is closely related to *latreia* (Strong's word 3000), the noun form. Sometimes, these words appear in the same sentence with *prokuneo* (worship), so as to create a bigger picture, such as "You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only you shall serve."⁴⁹ The word addresses the physical activities of one who is dedicated to a particular deity. The attitude or spiritual relationship of worship spills out as service.

Twice, the deity of the *latreuo* context is an idol.⁵⁰ Usually the deity is God. Never is the word used to describe service to a human being. Performing the actions of the Law at the Temple is called service.⁵¹ Faithful spirits serve God in heaven.⁵² The same word describes what the physical bodies of faithful spirits do on earth, some contexts referring to faithful Israelites,⁵³ some to faithful Christians.⁵⁴ No mention is made of Christians serving God through a ritual. This word is never used in the context of a gathering of Christians.

Sebomai

Five variations of this word are translated as worship: 4576 *sebomai*, 4573 *sebazomai*, 4574 *sebasma*, 2151 *eusebeo*, and 2318 *theosebes*. Some contexts refer to pagan worship,⁵⁵ some to the worship of the true God.⁵⁶ Never are any of them used in the context of a gathering of Christians.

One odd pagan worship reference stands alone: Acts 19:35 neokoros, worshipper.

⁴⁵ Hebrews 8:8 – 13

⁴⁶ Revelation 12:9

⁴⁷ Revelation 5:8 – 14

⁴⁸ Revelation 4:11, 5:13, 7:12, 11:17 – 18, 19:4

⁴⁹ Matthew 4:10.

⁵⁰ Acts 7:42, Romans 1:25

⁵¹ Luke 2:37, John 16:2, Romans 9:4, Hebrews 8:5, 9:1, 9:6, 9:9, 10:2, 13:10

⁵² Romans 1:9, Philippians 3:3, Revelation 7:15, 22:3

⁵³ Luke 1:74, Acts 7:7,

⁵⁴ Acts 24:14, 26:7, 27:23, Romans 12:1, 2 Timothy 1:3, Hebrews 9:14, 12:28

⁵⁵ Acts 17:23, 19:27, Romans 1:25

⁵⁶ Matthew 15:9, Mark 7:7, John 9:31, Acts 16:14, 18:7, 18:13, 2 Thessalonians 2:4

Shachah

This Hebrew word (Strong's number 7812, appearing 166 times) is translated bow down, beseech, crouch, fall down, obeisance, reverence, stoop, and worship, depending on the context. The meaning of this Hebrew word depends heavily on its context, having been used to describe both human and divine relationships. Rather than consuming several pages with all the references, which are easily extracted from a concordance, I have chosen to list the activities associated with worship in the Old Testament to aid in building a definition.

Of the 166 occurrences, 34 describe one person bowing to another in a context in which the dominant person was not pretending to be a god (as the Pharaohs and Nebuchadnezzar did). For example, a dozen times people are said to have "bowed down" (the same Hebrew word as worship) to David, and David accepted it.

Interestingly, one Messianic prophecy predicts "princes also shall worship" the Redeemer of Israel.⁵⁷ The context favors the "worship" idea over the "bow down" idea. Because the context is unclear, and because we assume that God is clear, then the most likely understanding is that God meant both.

Beyond bowing or falling flat, the descriptors surrounding the worship of God include thanksgiving,⁵⁸ rejoicing,⁵⁹ gladness,⁶⁰ offerings,⁶¹ glorifying,⁶² praising,⁶³ asking to be led,⁶⁴ eating,⁶⁵ paying vows,⁶⁶ the worshipper being holy,⁶⁷ singing and playing the trumpet,⁶⁸ and confessing.⁶⁹ Sacrifices and offerings were connected to worship as part of the "celebration of forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God."⁷⁰

Summary

Worship and the Christian assembly are not found in the same context. So, for the Christian assembly to be called worship or a worship service is a misnomer at best and a travesty at worst. The earliest Christians often were described as atheists because the group had no temples, no priesthood, and no rituals. The people of that time could not fathom a religion without those earmarks. It appears to me that the church has been trying to meet the expectations of pagans ever since. Historically, the assembly began to be called worship as Jewish practices (priesthood, sacred buildings, rituals, incense, and such like) were introduced.

⁵⁷ Isaiah 49:7, see also Genesis 27:29 and 49:8

⁵⁸ Deuteronomy 26:10, 1 Chronicles 16:29 – 36

⁵⁹ Deuteronomy 26:10

⁶⁰ 1 Chronicles 16:29 – 36, 2 Chronicles 29:28 - 30

⁶¹ Genesis 22:5, Deuteronomy 26:10, 1 Samuel 1:3, 1 Chronicles 16:29 – 36, Psalm 96:9, 1 Chronicles 29:20 -

22

⁶² Genesis 24:26, 24:48, 1 Chronicles 16:29 – 36, Psalm 5:7 (mercy), 22:22 – 31, 29:2, 86:9

⁶³ 2 Chronicles 7:3, 20:18 – 19, Psalm 22:22 – 31, 66:4, 138:2

⁶⁴ Psalm 5:7

⁶⁵ Psalm 22:22 – 31, 1 Chronicles 29:20 – 22

⁶⁶ Psalm 22:22 – 31

⁶⁷ 1 Chronicles 16:29 – 36

⁶⁸ 2 Chronicles 29:28 – 30

⁶⁹ Nehemiah 9:3

⁷⁰ See a full description of sacrifice in Volume 3, *Hegemones*

The spirits of the faithful (seated in heavenly places⁷¹) are reconnected to their hearts and minds, thereby governing their physical bodies (those who are still breathing, of course). If our spirits and hearts are truly reconnected, then we worship all the time.⁴⁷ Classifying certain activities as acts of worship was among the downfalls of Israel.⁷² The ritual became the reason rather than the result. If we are worshipping God, we will praise Him, glorify Him, sing, pray, keep our promises, ask for leadership, and such like. But if we do those things, we are not necessarily worshipping. No pattern was laid out for “acts of worship.” Even in the Law of Moses, the rituals were never called worship but service. Such a concept was developed from an unsupported assumption that blossomed into a series of damaging doctrines. Worship was to be a time of rejoicing and gladness, not a solemn assembly.

Worshipping all the time, on an earthly level, means that we are constantly seeing the character of God around us. We see His gracious nature in the fact that Jesus came here to seek us, not waiting for us to recognize that we had failed Him. We praise His overwhelming desire to fix what ails us (the definition of mercy). We rejoice at the successes of faith. We find comfort, confidence, boldness, and hope in “God’s God and I’m not.” What would my future be if I were in charge? Our lives are a constant worship service: “Present your bodies a living sacrifice...which is your reasonable service.”⁷³

⁷¹ Ephesians 2:6

⁷² Isaiah 1:11 – 17, Jeremiah 6:20, Hosea 6:6 (Matthew 9:13, 12:7), Hosea 8:13, Amos 5:21 – 24, Malachi 1:8

⁷³ Romans 12:1

Chapter 2: Assembly

Christians meet in different places and in different ways all around the world. Some people go to church because it is what they do. They haven't thought about it much more than that. Others think they have to attend or be in trouble with God. Others are looking for a spiritual experience, a type of non-drug-induced high that makes them feel really good for a little while. The reasons go on and on. Some of them we can understand. Some make no sense to us at all.

The most common pattern for church meetings are those based on Western culture. Western churches have enough disposable income to fund missionaries. Unfortunately, their gospel is laced with a significant dose of their culture. For example, Western congregations assume that a building is normal. In Third World countries, buildings are a Western extravagance that clouds the gospel with economics. Western orderliness and timeliness are hindrances in more relaxed cultures. Even conservative Western fashion may be outrageously indecent in one culture, while ridiculously impractical in another.

Objectives of the Assembly

Why do some Christians assemble and some not, or perhaps sporadically? Why do some assemble for an hour a week, some two, some four, or the really strange ones, ten hours or even more? Of course, some settle at the frequency they do because that is what they were told many years ago, so that is what is comfortable. But, among those who make a conscious choice of how much time to set aside for assembling with fellow believers, why do they settle on the number of hours they have chosen? What are the objectives of those assemblies? The following eight reasons appear in the New Testament in descriptions of the church. An easy way to investigate the topic for yourself is to use a concordance and find all the places where the words, "one another," are used because you cannot one-another by yourself. I do not claim that my list exhausts the possibilities. Rather, I hope to enlarge expectations.

Remember the situation in the early congregations described in the New Testament. Culture was being carried into the church by new converts – and since 100% of them were new converts, that was a lot. As long as the church has been in existence, people have had a hard time being objective and shaking off what they have always done. I am certain that God has not been surprised. After all, God made people, and He put people in the church and let them run it. The church was going to be a mess. But that was part of the plan. It is as if God were saying, "I can work with this." The miracle is that the church still exists despite the people. And I don't mean the people who, over the centuries, have tried to stamp out the church from the outside. The miracle is that the church has survived the damage from the inside.

Determining the correct practices for church meetings starts at the wrong end. Historically, the church has remembered the rituals and forgotten the reasons, so ritual became the reason. Traditions are all mixed up with culture and the craziness that is people. To begin to straighten this out, our objective should be to determine what we are supposed to gain in our times together so we can shake off the outside world and think as spirits.

Some practices may be found in the New Testament, but the details are sketchy. Starting from incomplete information, we tend fill in the blanks with assumptions in a dubious attempt to mimic those messed-up first century congregations. A much more profitable route is to categorize the reasons for being together, then find ways to make all of them happen in the same meeting time. Borrowing some of the methods of the early church seems prudent, not for the

purpose of making our practices acceptable, but because they had teachers (apostles and prophets) who had a much more direct connection to the top than do we. Filling in the gaps in the illustrations with assumptions is always tricky, so should be kept to the minimum allowed by the cultural baggage we brought with us.

Edification

“How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.”⁷⁴

What is edification? Twenty-two times in the New Testament, the same word describes literally to build a building. Eleven times it is used to describe the church as a whole.⁷⁵ Twenty-two times it is used figuratively to describe building a person.⁷⁶ But what does it mean to build someone up? How? In most churches, edification is interpreted as teaching. Classes and sermons dominate the time during which the faithful are assembled. But is that what was intended by the authors of the New Testament?

The most repeated building material in those 33 figurative uses of “build up” or “edify” is sensibility – common sense. I don’t think that common sense is imparted effectively in a lecture, maybe in a group discussion. Usually, we come by common sense through observation followed by conversation about what we have seen.

If you think you have at least a little common sense, how did you come by it? Think about the skilled trades: carpenter, plumber, electrician, concrete worker. You may avail yourself of a certain amount of classroom training, but the real learning happens on the job. You see the old guy doing the job a certain way; his way is fast and effortless, you are breaking your back and re-doing most of what you do. You figure out his methods and copy them, and wonder why you never thought of doing it that way because it’s so simple and obvious. Common sense is imparted from person to person. It’s not like learning a complicated, really difficult skill, probably best learned in a classroom followed by endless repetition. Common sense is realizing how really simple and easy some things are. The most common example of Christians being built up is in the imparting of common sense, making faithful life seem really simple rather than horribly complicated and frightening.

Of course, conventional teaching is in the list of 22 examples of edification – both by big-name people like apostles, and by one another.

Among the other examples of how we build each other up is the teaching of selflessness by example (not by lecture, homework, and tests). We are built up by thanksgiving. We are built up by singlemindedness – reminders of our unity and fellowship. We are built up by compassion for each other and the comfort we provide for each other. We are built up by our collective fear for the lost. Woven through all these methods for building up is the work of the Spirit that dwells in us. Edification is not just one thing or another. Edification focuses on the result, not the pathway. Sometimes we are built up by learning more of what is in the Bible. Sometimes,

⁷⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:26

⁷⁵ Matthew 16:18, 21:24, Mark 12:10, Luke 20:17, Acts 4:11, 15:16, Romans 15:20, 1 Corinthians 3:10 – 14, 2 Corinthians 5:1, Galatians 2:18, 1 Peter 2:7

⁷⁶ Acts 9:31, 20:32, Romans 14:19, 15:2, 1 Corinthians 3:9: 8:1, 8:10, 10:23, 14:3 – 5, 14:12, 14:17, 14:26, 2 Corinthians 10:8, 13:10, Ephesians 2:20 – 22, 4:16, 4:29, Colossians 2:7, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, 1 Timothy 1:4, 1 Peter 2:5, Jude 20

we are built up by seeing faith played out in a very simple and practical way. Sometimes we are built up by the fact that someone cares that I exist and is even happy to see me. The list goes on. We build each other up using the tools that work best for the part that needs building. When we assemble, our expectation should be that we will be built up in a variety of ways, with facts and with passion, with clarity and with application.

Referring back to the verse cited at the beginning of this section, “Whenever you come together, each of you...” Whom should the primary builders be? Before you leave home to assemble with fellow believers, do you prepare to build up the others? If that expectation of the assembly were not part of your tradition, you likely did not prepare anything.

Most congregations have adopted auditorium seating with a few designated teachers. Certainly, trained teachers can impart information more efficiently and perhaps also with greater emotional impact. Yet, Paul wrote, “Each of you...” I am not advocating that the assembly time become an exchange of ignorance by the unprepared. Rather, whatever methods and means we choose should allow everyone to edify in some way. I have not developed a fool-proof guide for building up the assembly. I merely raise the question and have included a few suggestions. Certainly, we have carried considerable culture into our practices. Edification is the poorer for it. Unfortunately, anything we change will create turmoil through unfamiliarity. God has demonstrated a high degree of patience as we have, historically, fumbled repeatedly. So, we should not be panicked that He will remove our candlesticks⁷⁷ before the end of the fiscal year, but if we claim to be disciples, we ought to start learning. My hope is that various groups will find better ways to incorporate the many facets of edification that can then be shared and compiled.

One of the biggest hindrances to edification is the American fascination with time. In other countries, I have met with groups who considered three hours the minimum for assembly; anything less was not worth the effort to get there. My American experience has been that an hour in the auditorium was plenty long enough for what could be accomplished, although significant parts of edification were never addressed.

Of course, we need some structured education. But even there, we shoot too low. In our state, the minimum hours for an academic year in primary and secondary school is slightly over 1100 hours. For those who attend an hour of church instruction per week, twenty years would be required to graduate from first grade. Or, if you prefer to make Bible study just one class, each academic credit would require 2.8 years. But that assumes 50-minute classes, and sermons are rarely that long. So, under the heading of education, the edification we receive needs some significant improvement if we hope to develop those who can make coherent arguments for the hope that lies within them.

Worse yet, academics are only one small part of edification. We need time, space, and formats that enable thanksgiving, build fear for the plight of the lost, and reinforce unity despite diversity. Plus, we must have that one-on-one (or very small group) time for consolation, comfort, and connectedness. Developing such a system without creating chaos or driving away those who like the old way is daunting. I recommend adding one thing at a time. Within two years, the new thing will be considered tradition, so something else may be addressed. God has a long history of patience.

⁷⁷ Revelation 2:5

Celebration of Forgiveness

“Therefore my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.”⁷⁸ The context stretches back more than a chapter,⁷⁹ concerning the Lord’s Supper.

The Lord’s Supper is, primarily, a one-another activity. But can’t I do it by myself? Yes, you can perform the actions. You can get some unleavened bread and fruit of the vine and remember Jesus. But remembering Jesus is only one part of the many images tied up as a package that is called the Lord’s Supper. By my count, there are fourteen images tied together, all of which are developed in a subsequent chapter (Chapter 4: Lord’s Supper). Of those 14, three cannot be done by yourself.

The image referenced above (“when you come together to eat”) is that of a Mosaic sacrificial meal in which they celebrated forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God. That was the model God built for true sacrifice, which is fully explained in a subsequent volume. Pagan sacrifice is an attempt to manipulate my god to do what I want, which you can do by yourself. God’s version of sacrifice is a shared event. God made sure that the Israelites sacrificed as a group by requiring that three-quarters of an animal be eaten by morning. You needed a good size group for that.

Based on the obvious intention of God for us to celebrate forgiveness as a group, the Lord’s Supper should be re-enacted with that backdrop in mind. The Israelites enjoyed a hearty meal; during which they did not sorrowfully contemplate the untimely death of the sacrifice. Certainly, the death of Jesus is part of the picture, but just a part, and not this part. Western tradition compresses the entirety of the Lord’s Supper into a few minutes, which is far too short to appreciate even a fraction of the images within it. Somewhere in the re-enactment must be time to celebrate group forgiveness, not just a passing reference to individual forgiveness.

What’s the difference? Certainly, God accepts the faithful individually, not as groups. We can and should express thanks to God for His plan that resulted in our insurmountable personal debt to justice being paid. But, a group of individuals praising God for the end of the right-and-wrong system and each person’s bailout misses the importance of one-anothering. An essential characteristic of our time together is celebration that others have been forgiven, not just me. An alarming number of God-fearing people have a “Me and Jesus” attitude; others are not in the picture. The terminal objective of the plan of God is a big family that will last, not a collection of individuals who are connected to the Creator independently. We each need to find a way to express to the others that I am genuinely pleased that we will be spending eternity together. Unfortunately, I have been in places where that vibe was missing; many were displeased about their potential fellow guests at the marriage supper of the Lamb.⁸⁰

Of course, the Mosaic sacrificial meal and the Lord’s Supper have some contrasts, as well. For example, the meal under the Law was big, featuring so much meat that one often had to invite the neighborhood to consume it all. The Lord’s Supper certainly should be somewhat smaller, not designed to replace a regular meal: “If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home.”⁸¹ But, I suspect Western tradition (a crumb and a sip) has swung too far in the other direction. An early second century church manual, gave directions for the prayer following the Lord’s Supper

⁷⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:33

⁷⁹ 1 Corinthians 10:14 – 11:34

⁸⁰ Revelation 19:9

⁸¹ 1 Corinthians 11:34

that began, “After you are filled, pray this way...”⁸² Certainly, such commentary is not inspired, but it reflects the common understanding of the time, when some who had known the apostles personally were still alive. Perhaps we would do well to extend the time occupied by the Lord’s Supper to include a hearty snack of matzos and fruit of the vine in which we toast one another in anticipation of a timeless family meal.

Fellowship

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the fellowship of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the fellowship of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.”⁸³

Another symbol in the Lord’s Supper is that of fellowship – which does not mean eating together. Fellowship is connectedness of spirit. A part of the Lord’s Supper is renewing the connection between our spirits. Outsiders think that’s kind of weird, because their spirits have been dead a long time and they have totally lost track of where they might be. Conversely, a Christian is controlled by the eternal part, the spirit, that has been re-connected with God and is now seated in the heavenly places in Christ.⁸⁴ One of the symbols of the Lord’s Supper is a renewing of that invisible bond between the real spirits of real people. We cannot re-enact a spiritual union by ourselves. Of course, when the assembled group is large, personal interaction with everyone becomes impractical. But neither do we want to let that be an excuse for impersonal gatherings. Bigger groups require creativity to maintain the chemistry. A variety of exercises could be included, from the impersonal announcement to the small-group breakout to a communal meal designed for interaction.

Fellowship is larger than that of which we remind ourselves in the Lord’s Supper. The spirits with whom we connect consist of all faithful spirits: those in the room, those whom we have met, those we may meet later, those whom we will never meet in this life, those who have died physically, faithful angels (yes, faithful angels are in the church⁸⁵), and God. But, being humans of limited cognition, we use our physical assemblies to remind us of the larger assembly of spirits that it represents.

How might we emphasize and practice this connectedness of spirit that is part of the Lord’s Supper? Certainly, due to the unfamiliarity of the topic, some teaching may be needed. More than that, we need one-on-one time, particularly with those in the assembly whom we do not know. The logistics seem daunting, but the potential gains are great.

This connection is much more than intellectual. Can we feel it? The New Testament does not mention a feeling, and I have not come up with a way to prove or quantify emotions. So, I don’t make any claims. Paul was against speculation in general.⁸⁶ And, such heartfelt and confident imaginings tend to lead to high-mindedness.⁸⁷ So, I will leave the sensation of synchronicity to the individual. I suggest that a profitable path is to jot down those odd, reflexive feelings of connection and follow up with how accurate the unexplainable intuition actually was. My ledger is quite far to the positive.

⁸² *Didache*, chapter 10.

⁸³ 1 Corinthians 10:16 – 17

⁸⁴ Ephesians 2:6

⁸⁵ Hebrews 12:22 – 23

⁸⁶ 1 Timothy 1:3 – 7, 6:4, 6:20, 2 Timothy 2:16, 4:4, Titus 3:9,

⁸⁷ Romans 12:3, 12:16

Affirming Miraculous Unity

Another symbol of the Lord's Supper that we cannot do alone is reaffirming our miraculous unity. Jesus prayed in the Garden in the night in which He was betrayed, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one, as You Father are in Me and I in You; that they also may be one in Us that the world may believe that You sent Me."⁸⁸ One of the evidences that Jesus is God is supposed to be the miraculous unity of Christians. I say miraculous because no human institution in all of history has been able to achieve it.

Those are just three of the several purposes of the Lord's Supper – three that cannot be accomplished by yourself. Christians need to gather in order to celebrate forgiveness, re-affirm connectedness, and validate unity. It's a time of joy, not a solemn ritual.

Teach and Admonish in Song

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."⁸⁹ One of the ways we should teach is in song. Have you noticed that song lyrics do not contain complex theology? Song lyrics must boil down the thought to bite-sized pieces. Songs are memorable and simple. And with those same songs, we admonish.

What is it to admonish? To admonish is to remind others that they can do better. A friend who is a substitute teacher started using a line that was somewhat effective. She switched from correcting to admonishing. Instead of telling misbehaving kids just how bad they were and exactly what they were supposed to be doing, she'd say, "You know better than that." Or, "You are better than that." Or, "You can do better." Admonishing is gentle, recognizing that the other person knows the right thing and wants to do the right thing – but somehow it just didn't come out that way this time.

Teach and admonish. How many of our songs actually do that? What is our expectation of the songs we sing? A lot of the modern ones are just fluff, no content. The value of a song has very little to do with what it means to me or how it makes me feel, but how well it serves as a tool with which I can teach and admonish others.

Stimulation

"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."⁹⁰

Stimulate, stir up, encourage, and exhort. Those are all positive ways to motivate. In fact, all of the passages in the New Testament that deal with one Christian motivating another are like that. Adjectives such as gentle or humble or kind are in the context. James contains a couple of

⁸⁸ John 17:20 – 21

⁸⁹ Colossians 3:16

⁹⁰ Hebrews 10:24 – 25

very pointed reminders: “Do not speak evil of one another,”⁹¹ and “Do not grumble against one another.”⁹²

But, like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, many people have come up with creative justifications for being critical of a fellow Christian, especially when that other Christian is not around. In the South, you can call anyone a dirty rotten scoundrel as long as you end it with, “Bless his heart.” People justify gossip by claiming that they are just speaking the truth in love, but I don’t hear a bit of love in it.

Out in the world, most people change the things they don’t like by negative reinforcement. In the church, we effect change by positive reinforcement: stimulating, encouraging, and exhorting. We build up their faith, having confidence that more faith will result in behaviors that I like. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people in churches who have no faith, so they deal with things they don’t like in the same way as the worldly people they really are. That’s what Jude says – that those worldly people in the church cause divisions because they do not have the Spirit.⁹³ They are not really Christians. When you hear grumbling, gossip, or speaking evil of another, don’t sink to their level. Ask the complainer or grumbler or gossip, “How are you going to encourage that person to increase his faith, because, obviously, if you increase his faith, this problem will take care of itself.”

When Christians are together, they build up one another through encouragement and exhortation. Exhortation – that’s a really strong pep talk. It’s the half-time locker room speech. Great coaches stimulate their teams to levels of performance that they ordinarily cannot achieve. We need to learn to do the same, stirring up each other to impossible levels of love and good deeds, because until we start doing the impossible, we are still mired in the world. When we unleash the power of God through faith, the impossible happens.

Comfort

Sometimes, being exhorted to achieve new heights of love and good deeds doesn’t work very well because the world has been beating us up and we feel really lousy. The Christians in Thessalonica were enduring severe persecution. They were spreading the Word and loving each other, but they spent more hours in the world each week than they did with fellow Christians, so the bad stuff began to look like a mountain. That’s normal. Paul reminded the Christians of Thessalonica about Judgment Day and being caught up in the clouds with Jesus and being with Him forever, ending with “Therefore comfort one another with these words.”⁹⁴ And he repeated himself with, “Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing.”⁹⁵

Several of these expectations of the assembly don’t seem to fit in the customary auditorium format. We can be edified by the sermon, although the “one another” part sort of gets left out. We can re-enact the Lord’s Supper together, but we are seated in a theater-like setting where we can interact only with the back of someone’s head. We can teach and admonish in song together, but we are all facing the same direction. And the other reasons that we get together are even harder. How do we stimulate and stir up and encourage and exhort and admonish and comfort one another? The one-another part seems to be restricted. Using some legalistic thinking, I

⁹¹ James 4:11

⁹² James 5:9

⁹³ Jude 19

⁹⁴ 1 Thessalonians 4:18

⁹⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:11

could say that I do all those things because I put money in the collection plate. I pay others to do those things, so I get credit on God's ledger. Wrong. Remember that first passage, "Let each one..."⁹⁶ There's a lot to do when Christians get together, and about two-thirds of it cannot be done in a classroom setting. Attending the general assembly at 11 o'clock accomplishes a few of God's goals, but only a few. Attending all three classes and the assembly accomplishes mostly the same ones. Some of the objectives are not given an opportunity.

When you see the world pressing in on a fellow Christian's life, comfort. How do we know when they need comfort? We have to know them. How do we know when they need stimulation instead? We have to know them.

Edifying, re-connecting our spirits and reviving our unity in the Lord's Supper, teaching and admonishing in song, stimulating, encouraging, and exhorting to love and good deeds, comforting – these are all things that are supposed to go on when Christians assemble. If we lose the personal connection and become a bunch of individuals in the same room, we will drift either into legalism, in which we feel satisfied because we met some arbitrary benchmarks, or we will drift into the spiritual experience platform where I can weave my head around, sway back and forth, get a little dizzy, and think that by this I have connected with God – and there's not a bit of "one another" in it.

Bear One Another's Burdens

"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."⁹⁷ The previous objective, comforting, was for those who were having a rough time because of the pressures of this world. This one, bear one another's burdens, is different. This is how we help those who have been overcome by the world, who have made really bad choices.

When we make bad choices, we generally suffer consequences. If you drink and drive, you are likely to pay a big fine, lose your license, or even go to jail, not to mention the additional problems if you hit something at the same time. If you cheat on your wife, you are likely to lose your family. If you don't get out of bed and go to work, you are likely to lose your job. These are natural consequences of bad choices. Of course, it is our job to help this fellow Christian get out of the ditch and back on the road – in a spirit of gentleness. But more than that, we bear their burdens. We pick up the weight of their stupid mistakes. We help them get back on their feet. Of course, there is a certain amount of wisdom needed here. We can bear their burdens, or we can enable their weakness. How do we know where the line is? Only by knowing them really well. That's the one-another part. Without one-anothering, we'll just make things worse. Pray for wisdom, build up your faith, and dive into the messy lives of other Christians. You will make bad decisions – less often as time goes on. But the alternative, letting them sink on their own, is worse.

Confess Faults

So far, all these expectations of the assembly have been about what I need to do for others. Number seven would be easier to take if it were that way, but this one goes both ways, "Confess

⁹⁶ 1 Corinthians 14:26

⁹⁷ Galatians 6:1 - 2

your faults one to another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”⁹⁸

I don’t know about you, but I’m not real big on telling everyone about my flaws. I would rather keep them well hidden. I’ll listen to you when you need to get something off your chest, but don’t expect me to reciprocate. Isn’t that how most people feel? Well, that’s a problem. How do we overcome that problem? First, by being so close to one another that we can trust that (1) it’s not going to be told all over town, and (2) you won’t think I’m really strange because of my particular weaknesses. So, announcing my sins in the auditorium setting would be inappropriate. I’d be announcing my sins to some people with whom I have no connection. No, we need to do this with those with whom we share that connectedness of spirit, in whom we have trust. Again, the general assembly at 11 o’clock is not going to fulfill this part of healthy Christian relationships – this one-anothering. So our one-another time needs to get bigger. “Exhort one another daily, while it is still called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”⁹⁹ That citation says daily, not weekly.

Submit to One Another

And finally, number eight, “All of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility.”¹⁰⁰ What does that mean, be submissive to one another? If we did that in everything, we would be in real trouble if two people came to the door at the same time. “After you.” “No, after you.” “No, after you.” “No, after you.” So, what is Peter getting at? I think it is like Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12 about the parts of the body being all equally important to the proper functioning of the body.¹⁰¹ Or as Peter wrote about using the gift you have.¹⁰² Or as James wrote about not esteeming the wealthy as more important than the poor.¹⁰³ I think Peter’s point here in being submissive to one another is to view each person’s contribution to the assembly as just as important as any other contribution. Some people are teachers, some are encouragers, some are comforters, some are admonishers, and some are singers. A study of why people stay at a particular congregation is not so much about the teaching, but the encouraging.

Summary

Why did the early Christians meet? Because they loved each other and because they had a tangible connection between their spirits that tugged at them all day long. That’s the basis of 1 John. In Acts, “Now all who had believed were together and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all, as any had need. So, continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people.”¹⁰⁴ “Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul.”¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ James 5:16

⁹⁹ Hebrews 3:13

¹⁰⁰ 1 Peter 5:5

¹⁰¹ 1 Corinthians 12:12 – 27

¹⁰² 1 Peter 4:7 – 11

¹⁰³ James 2:1 – 9

¹⁰⁴ Acts 2:44 – 47

¹⁰⁵ Acts 4:32

We meet to build up our faith; to re-vitalize the connection between our spirits and to re-affirm our unity through the Lord's Supper; to teach and admonish in song; to stimulate, stir up, encourage and exhort to love and good deeds; to comfort those being abused by the world; to bear the burdens of those who fell off the wagon; to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another; and to demonstrate to one another that we all consider the others more important than ourselves. These are things we cannot do by ourselves. This stuff requires teamwork, and it's not going to happen in an hour in an auditorium setting, or in four hours if you include all the classes.

The way assembly times are organized is culture, not Bible. Some groups pretend they are reproducing the New Testament church by filling in a few sketchy details with lots of speculation, and ignoring the fact that the early church did not have buildings or pews, not to mention electronics, utilities, thermostats, or printed materials. The objective is to build up and connect with one another. The mechanics of it are only important to the extent that our practices don't detract from our objective. Unfortunately, sometimes we do exactly that. We can bore people or fail to connect with people or expect them to fit into the way we are comfortable doing it. Although our habit is to consider the auditorium time somehow more important than other times, in reality, all the times we are together are equally important.

Really, do you go to a family holiday meal for the food? Same thing with the church. It's about one another.

Some one-another activities are fairly common: coffee and donuts, taking a moment to interact with your pew-mate, and such like. Where we attend, we have potluck every week so we will spend two hours catching up every Sunday. We put up a fence around some playground equipment, which is easily monitored from where we eat so the kids can run and play while the parents continue to interact. A good percentage of the people make a point of sitting across from people they don't know very well. On Wednesdays, we combine supper with Bible class. If we did not, preparing and eating supper before going to the building would force the start time too late for the younger set (and the older set). A side benefit has been that, having learned to multi-task, a significant number now have a Bible open at lunch at work, too. We physically arrange the class areas so people look at each other, not the teacher. The teachers organize their lessons such that the applications are group discussions that sometimes run far afield.

The Group Mentality

We talk a lot about the promises of God, that faith is making choices based on those promises even though we have no idea how God might pull that off. We talk about the power of the Spirit that dwells in us, who gives us the ability to do what normal people can't do.

Those promises can be categorized into three main groups: Judgment Day, character development, and usefulness. The Judgment Day promises are pretty straightforward. On that Last Day, the question will be, "Faith or not?" The kicker is that the faith He will be asking about is His brand of faith, not some generic substitute made up by theologians. Character development is promised, through the work of the Spirit, in the areas of overcoming ourselves, cultivating a gracious nature, being at peace, having an intense desire to fix what ails others, doing what is best for others regardless of the effect on me, understanding God, making wise choices, and experiencing flashes of insight for explaining the gospel to the lost – just to name a few. The third category, becoming useful, is the one that really makes you feel good. We, the faithful humans, are essential to achieving the purpose of creation: a big family that will last.

We are the vehicle by which the message is transmitted, through whom people meet God. Just the thought of pulling off such a huge responsibility can be daunting, but, again, we have the power of the Spirit to get the job done.

And how do we take advantage of those promises? Prayer. Reading the Bible. Singing. Education. Church stuff.

And therein lies the problem. How do we leap-frog to that level of faith through which this power of the Spirit becomes automatic? In *real* life, we get a little depressed when things go wrong, so we don't have the initiative to hunker down and "endeavor to be filled with the Spirit."¹⁰⁶ Or, things are going pretty well, so we get this notion that we can skip a day or two and have a much-deserved break. Or, being part of the 1% who care anything about God, we discover that outsiders are real downers and they *infect* us with their lousy attitudes.

So, in a practical way, how do we *obtain those promises*? Is it all about having superior self-control and dogged determination? If that is the case, all we've done is convert faith back into works. Success would be dependent on me taking the time to pray without ceasing, to meditate on the Word, and to seek and save the lost. But we all know that those seemingly simple steps keep looking taller the closer you get to them.

So, I pondered that dilemma for a while and noticed something I hadn't noticed before: most of the New Testament was written to groups. Certainly not Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and 3 John, but all the rest are to groups. The underlying key to success in the kingdom is being part of the group. Why is this important? Because God has engineered the *group* to energize the *individuals*. It's not "Me and Jesus," and I'll interact with other faithful people when needed. No, it means that we *need* the group. The attitude of going it alone (with Jesus, of course) doesn't work. The group, not the individual, provides gateways to success. Not only will these gateways of the group enable you to have the initiative to pray and meditate on the Word, but also you will have new things to say to your multitude of friends who have become discouraged with the churches they know and have decided to go it alone. I've listed six simple objectives based on this group theory.

Emotional Uplift.

Here's a sampling of the uplifting words in the sections of the New Testament that talk about groups of Christians: built up, connected, having hope, peace, joy, comfort, and contentment. There are more than a hundred such passages just in the letters addressed to groups. When Christians get together, this is what is supposed to happen. And I don't mean just at stated meeting times. Any time we need a lift, we need to connect with other Christians. And, if we are doing well enough to exercise love, doing what is best for others without regard to the effect on me, these are the emotions we need to be transmitting to those not doing so well. Doing it during stated meeting times gives you a higher probability of success by virtue of the number of connections you can make in a short period of time. But, all connections are important – any day, any time.

Certainly, there are times when we don't have love in high gear. We are so down in the dumps that all we can see is our own mess. Whether others around me are doing better or worse isn't on my radar. I just assume that they are all doing better than I am. Such an attitude is normal. It does not make you a bad person. God promises comfort – and if you didn't need comfort sometimes, He wouldn't have promised it.

¹⁰⁶ Ephesians 5:18

This is where contentment grows. When you are by yourself, what you don't have can cast a big shadow over what you want. Being in the midst of people who love you reorganizes your perspective. Hope needs this kind of foundation. Peace happens. Rejoicing over the successes of other people's faith re-focuses life.

I have lost track of how many times I have heard someone in our little group say, "I really wasn't in the mood, I was really tired, but I got up and came. And now I feel a whole lot better." If that's not happening, we, as a group, have messed up. Certainly, it is not all about me and what I receive – but on some days, it is. Plus, reaching out to lift up another Christian encourages you in the process. Some days we will have more to invest in others; some days we are just about emotionally bankrupt. Either way, this is where we need to be – or we need to manufacture some quality time with fellow Christians. Quality time with outsiders is just not the same. The connection is missing.

Some people drown their sorrows, drink liquid courage, or forget about life for a while. Others seek better living through chemistry. In contrast, we have something that actually works, which may be a good enticement when talking to outsiders about why you think "going to church" should be high on your agenda.

A Reminder of What is Important

Using the Lord's Supper as the first example – fourteen reminders are built in: connection, unity, being reserved for Godly purposes, the fact that Jesus bailed us out of maxed out justice credit cards, being transformed into His image, and such like. None of this is rocket science. But, we do tend to forget. Bible classes and sermons are reminders of obvious stuff. The lyrics of the songs are rememberable summaries of key topics.

When we have been trampled as a result of being out in the world for a while, the simple stuff somehow gets shouted down. When we come together, we should be reminded of just how simple it is: trust God, love people. We are reminded of what God has promised. We are reminded that we are part of a close family that will enjoy each other's company forever. We are reminded that we are so important to God that He came here to *have* all those depressing human experiences, to demonstrate what success looks like, and to pay off the justice that was going to catch up with us in the end. Again, this is really simple stuff. But, it tends to get lost in figuring out how to raise kids and be a wife or husband. We sometimes lose it when a co-worker or neighbor or store clerk is being really obnoxious or demanding or taxing our patience. The simple reminder that clears the path is that God's got your back. Whatever this is I'm stuck in, He's got it figured out and will lead me through it. However worthless the world makes me feel – which is a trick the world uses to control you – God considers you of such value that He left heaven to come here. Seriously, would you?

And those people on the outside, when they chide you, maybe ridicule you, about needing your church fix, you can say, "I can mellow out without pharmaceuticals." What we do here is cheaper, faster, and far more reliable than the best we chemists can synthesize.

Burst Your Bubble

When we are alone, or with people on the outside of Christianity, reality becomes relative. I can understand how outsiders get there. Their world makes no sense. They are manipulated constantly by those who convince them that they are not educated enough or not intelligent

enough or just too busy to appreciate the subtleties of their shampoo or automobile or political position, so just accept what I say. We, on the other hand, have a handful of absolutes upon which everything is built. We can come to clear, simple answers because we know the difference between the important and the immaterial. We get into trouble when we spend too much time on the other side of the fence where logic is in short supply.

At regular intervals, all of us need someone to burst our self-deception bubbles. I think that is why Hebrews 3:13 says, “Encourage one another daily.” It doesn’t say weekly or biweekly or when you see a need for encouragement. We need daily encouragement because we are the few among the many. Certainly, we need to be out there in the world or the world will not be exposed to that which they really seek, but just don’t know it yet. But this is dangerous duty. Like a contagious disease, our excuses start making sense.

The earliest Christians in Acts 2 met daily. The Bereans search the Scriptures daily, in Acts 17, to see if the thing Paul said were true. Paul taught daily in Ephesus in Acts 19. I suspect that they did not meet all day, abandoning their farms and businesses. Rather, they made it a habit to make contact daily. That little reminder of what is really important and really simple protects us from the insanity around us.

So how did Christianity lose this daily-contact mentality? I think we can trace it back to the fourth century when the Roman emperor Constantine closed the courts on Sundays to honor his favorite citizens, the Christians. This made Christianity fashionable. The church was inundated by slick speakers with confusing theories. And, the Sunday meeting became the focal point. Until that time, Sunday was just another workday. Christians met before or after their 12-hour shifts. They had no buildings; they gathered where it was convenient, usually in a house. I still smile about the guys in Pakistan who meet in a pavilion in the city park – hiding in plain sight. Over the centuries, the Sunday meeting became so dominant – because everyone had the day off – that the connection of the faithful became weekly instead of daily. The meeting took on a more formal environment. Then, as the church became more authoritarian, church leaders likened the Sunday church meeting to the Jewish Sabbath and declared that one could connect with God only at an approved meeting. You all know how many church leaders have used guilt and authority to keep the weekly meetings going. As people began to see holes in the logic, the predictable rebound effect occurred. Competition for the time slot arose. We rationalize missing the weekly meeting because of work or family time constraints.

The problem is not whether you should change jobs if you are required to work during the designated church meeting time, or if you should keep your kids out of normal kid activities for the same reason. The problem is not the competition for the time slot. You can have both. Our meetings are not weekly. The concept is daily. We need to burst that bubble that we need to choose one thing or the other. We have liberty – do both. Our connection time is essential. Burst the bubble initially blown by a pagan Roman emperor. Yes, we need to connect on Sundays, but also on Mondays, and Tuesdays, and Wednesdays...you get the point. On Sunday, we make a special point to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus – every Sunday is Easter. But every day we need to get our excuses popped.

I think this would be an eye-opener for your friends who would identify themselves as Christians, but don’t connect with faithful people on a regular basis.

Love

If we want to lay blame for our misunderstanding of love, the English language is a good scapegoat. English casts a wide net with that word, capturing everything from potato chips to God. But really, God's version of love is a gift, not a built-in. "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."¹⁰⁷ As we spend time in the world, we will not see God's version of love often. If we do, we might want to strike up a conversation with that person because we may have just spotted that rare species, a fellow believer.

But what is God's version of love? 1 John perhaps is the best place to go, since it discusses this brand of love from end to end. Just as a sample, "We know we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And so we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth."¹⁰⁸

If we have that knee-jerk response by which we just can't stop ourselves from helping fellow believers, we know that the Holy Spirit has been busy, that God approves of our faith and has given us that down payment. "No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been made consistent in us. By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit."¹⁰⁹

But because of that English-language disconnect about love, spending so much time with outsiders causes us to lower the bar. We begin to accept claims of love as real even though the selflessness isn't there, when actions say the opposite. We need to get together with fellow believers as a refresher on what love looks like. If all you see are knock-offs, the name brand begins to look strange. And, if you don't see the love described in the Bible among those in a congregation, look elsewhere. If we have no expectation of God's version of love, then we have no hope, no comfort. God promised to put this love in escrow in us. If the account is empty, don't doubt God's promise, start looking for the embezzler.

Again, this is not a once-a-week thing, or something we pick up when we can finally not be sick and not have kid events and so forth. This is not about meeting at the appointed time. This is something for which we need boosters daily. Getting vaccinated at stated meeting times on Sunday or Wednesday is probably more cost effective. But you don't need to worry about how much the insurance will cover if you go out of network. God's health insurance has no deductible. Get your prescription filled daily.

For your go-it-alone friends who don't see the need to assemble with fellow believers, try this one. You get together for a refresher course on what love is.

Faith

The problems we have understanding faith are a lot like those we have understanding love, although from a slightly different direction. The definition of love has been mushed up and

¹⁰⁷ Romans 5:5

¹⁰⁸ 1 John 3:14 – 18

¹⁰⁹ 1 John 4:12

spread out by applying it to anything and everything at varying low levels of commitment. Faith has been squeezed into a whole new package: believing that for which there is no proof. The world's faith paradigm proposes a complete disconnect between belief and action. As with love, our time in the world makes us inclined to lower the bar.

Twice in 1 Corinthians and once in Philippians, Paul advised his readers, the target *group*, "Imitate me,"¹¹⁰ or "Join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern."¹¹¹ In Hebrews, Paul uses the term, hegemony – following someone because it makes good sense to you to do so. The word specifically excludes authority or enforcement. A hegemon is someone you see as successful, so you do what they do. "Remember those hegemonizing you, who have spoken the Word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct."¹¹²

Whose faith follow. We can learn about Jesus and His faith and love, but sometimes that example is just a little too big for us to grasp. Paul's point was not that we replace Jesus with faithful people, but to use them as object lessons and concrete examples performed by people who face the same cultural obstacles as we do. We look at the outcomes they achieve because of that faith and get a handle on how to put faith into practice. That's one of the reasons we get together, spend time together: to get a handle on faith based on the practical example of someone a few steps farther along than I am.

Understanding faith is not an academic exercise, something that can be mastered by reading a book and imagining ourselves making those faith-filled choices. We need the physical time together. Fortunately, in our electronic age, we can do that efficiently without long travel times. But we need the connection by any means necessary.

For the "me and Jesus" crowd, you might remind them that the point of getting together is not ritual but a practical exercise for learning how faith works.

Opportunity for the Gospel

Here's an example. Paul related that he had prayed to God three times to remove some physical malady from him. He called it his "thorn in the flesh." Paul saw this illness or condition as hindering the spread of the gospel. God saw otherwise. He answered Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."¹¹³ God saw opportunity where Paul saw only hindrance.

Many early Christians experienced negative events. I'm certain that none of them wanted those bad things to happen. But hardship was a common event. They did not seek out suffering, but it surely found them. How did they handle it? Pagans under the same circumstances would see that as a defeat for their god.

When bad stuff happens to us, we are not happy about it. That's normal. But someone needs to ask the question, "How is this an opportunity for the gospel?" If the bad thing happens to you, you probably will not be in the mood to ask that question. Understandable. Normal. Probably healthy. So, you need someone else to ask the question. When bad stuff happens, you need to be around fellow Christians not just for the comfort, but also for seeing the next step, the opportunity.

¹¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 4:16, 11:1

¹¹¹ Philippians 3:17

¹¹² Hebrews 13:7

¹¹³ 2 Corinthians 12:7 – 10

This is overcoming, the kind of overcoming at which outsiders marvel. We have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.”¹¹⁴ Overcoming is not an individual sport. It’s a team sport.

Summary

These are reasons to get together, to make contact, frequently. These are survival skills that make the next step possible. We can beat ourselves up for not taking enough time to pray or read our Bibles. Or, we can spend time together and let it happen naturally. The emotional uplift puts you in the mood to move forward. Reminders about the simple stuff like the love of God and His promises put life in perspective. We need our self-deception bubbles popped once in a while so we can get back to reality. The outside world only has one option, deception, because the truth is too painful. We get to live in reality. We need those physical examples of how love works, as demonstrated by those who have the real thing. Then we will have the boldness and confidence to carry on because we see the Spirit working through us. We need to see faith in action so we can imitate it. And, we need to re-interpret the negatives of life as opportunities for the gospel. Therefore, we connect with each other as often as we can, the end result being that we mature, we pray more, and we search the Scriptures more. Sounds like a pretty good deal.

¹¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:7

Chapter 3: Fellowship

Fellowship in modern Christianity may describe a social gathering often including a meal, an association between people, or endorsement between groups. None of these does a good job of applying the New Testament Greek word, *koinonia* and its variations as different parts of speech (Strong's numbers 2842 – 2844). Translators of the KJV used communicate, communication, communion, distribution, fellowship, companion, partaker, and partner. Modern translators have added a few more. In the following pages, all 27 of the places in which the Greek word is used are examined with the objective of composing a single definition that works in every case. Of course, as with almost all words, *koinonia* may be used literally or figuratively. I find the figurative cases to be richer and easier to understand if left as figures of speech. The New Testament is great literature, not a legal document, so the artistry of its images contributes to the meaning. Substituting an explanation of the figure into the translation, trying to help the reader understand the application, robs the reader of the imagery and makes the assumption that one substitution captures all the intended meanings. I have found that this is rarely the case. Biblical figures often have several applications. They are often food for thought with no absolute definition, intended to spark mental images and multiple tangents. Of course, legalists intensely dislike multiple meanings because liberty of thought becomes much more difficult to control. Authoritarians are not fond of the concept either because the party line becomes very broad.

Developing a Definition

“...that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that our joy may be full. This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”¹¹⁵

“God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹¹⁶

Fellowship is a type of relationship. In this example, it characterizes one facet of the relationship between faithful individuals as well as that between faithful individuals and God. This relationship does not imply knowing a lot about each other or being in the same place, because John, through his declaration of the facts about Jesus, established fellowship with his readers. Further, this relationship is the result of “walking in the light,” which may be achieved by faithful people who may never communicate with each other. So, this relationship is intangible, based on something different than other relationships. Normally, we develop relationships by getting to know one another, or, in the case of God, getting to know God's personality and history. Those more familiar relationships are good and useful and helpful, but they are not fellowship.

Fellowship also is characterized as a type of sacrifice: “Do not forget to do good and have fellowship, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”¹¹⁷ Many modern translations have

¹¹⁵ 1 John 3 – 7

¹¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:9

inserted “sharing” in place of fellowship, reducing the impact to generosity. But, I can find no linguistic reason to do so.

First, remember that sacrifice is a celebration of forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God. Good works are performed as a celebration of forgiveness, not as the price of admission. Fellowship is the same. The extent of the family is larger than traditional church “fellowship,” encompassing all faithful people of all times and places. Just as good works are easily overwhelmed by the cares of this life, so is fellowship. Without specific attention, it degenerates to physical sharing. Rather, as an extension of our celebration of forgiveness, we consciously incorporate the importance of our spiritual connections. Jesus sometimes spent all night working on His.

The same word also was used of a different type of relationship:

“Inasmuch then as the children have fellowship in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.”¹¹⁸

Fellowship, in addition to the relationship described by John above, also describes the relationship between a faithful human and his or her physical body. The context indicates that the children in the Hebrews quote above are those who are on their way to a parade of positive character traits (being brought to glory), who are reserved for godly purposes (sanctified). Such people also have fellowship with their physical selves.

I characterize fellowship as a connection. In the case of each faithful person with God, the connection is spirit to Spirit. Between two faithful people, again the connection is spirit to spirit because many of them will never physically meet. But what about the Hebrews example of spirit to physical body? We know that every person has a spirit that will continue after physical death. We know that people have difficulty achieving consistency between character (spirit) and action (physical body including the intellect). Unbelievers are stuck in that unfortunate disconnection. The indwelling Spirit works on rebuilding the connection for the faithful. In simplified terms, reconnection of character and body or spirit and mind is through faith (rather, the work of the Spirit that is given as the result of faith). All of these types of connections are different than any relationship experienced by outsiders, something unique to the eternal kingdom. So, when we first encounter the gospel, we will not know what it is or what to expect.

The Importance of Connection

On three occasions, fellowship is presented as highly significant in the earthly life of a Christian.

“If there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.”¹¹⁹

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”¹²⁰

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Hebrews 13:16

¹¹⁸ Hebrews 2:14

¹¹⁹ Philippians 2:1

¹²⁰ 2 Corinthians 13:14

In each case, fellowship was placed in short lists of highly significant topics. Since no explanation surrounded them, I make the assumption that the authors expected their original target audience, the faithful of the first century, to know what was intended. Two of the lists specify fellowship of the Spirit, the third has no modifier. Rather than guessing the intention, I prefer to leave it open-ended. Perhaps the third one includes all the varieties of connections between spirits.

In the first reference, fellowship is grouped with consolation (or encouragement), love, affection, and mercy (or compassion). The result of this series of rhetoric questions was to be the miraculous unity for which Jesus prayed.¹²² So, this intangible connection between spirits arises from some facet of selflessness.

In the second reference, fellowship is juxtaposed with the grace of Jesus and the love of God, so probably focuses more on the connection between the spirits of the faithful and God. Comprehending the significance and nature of connection ranks with understanding grace and love.

In the third reference, the earliest Christians (Jewish Christians meeting daily in the Temple) included a study of fellowship (connection) among the major coursework of their introduction to the Eternal Kingdom. In addition to the connection between spirits (human and divine, local and dispersed), this open-ended reference may well have included teachings about how the spirit and the intellect became re-united.

This reference also addresses a point of confusion regarding the facets of God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the Word). If these four represent one God, why did Jesus, while on earth, address the Father in prayer? Muhammed was exposed to the traditional church teaching on the Godhead early in the seventh century. He found it little different that a belief in four gods (Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and Mary). I sympathize. What he was taught would not have made sense to me, either. I suggest that all of Jesus' conversations with the Father (prayers) were connections between Jesus' intellect and Jesus' Spirit, who was God. Jesus maintained that connection through His faith just as faithful people today connect their own intellects with their own spirits (their character) which in turn is connected to all faithful spirits, human and divine. Obviously, Jesus was very comfortable with this connection, as should we be. It is the essential pathway for putting our characters back in charge of our intellects, for tapping into the work of the Spirit, and for experiencing a huge family of faithful people both breathing and not. From an earthly point of view, that's a little weird. But without that connection, our intellects are like ships without rudders, pushed about by every wind of society.

One reference takes fellowship is a slightly different, but equally important, direction: "...to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things."¹²³ To summarize the next few verses, the mystery was that the eternal purpose established before creation, along with the multi-faceted wisdom of God, would be made known by the church to the angels. The same picture in much more figurative language may be found in Revelation 5 (and following).

The important part of that passage for this study of fellowship is that the previously unrevealed objectives, that all should see, are connected. The purpose of creation, God coming to earth as Jesus,¹²⁴ and the church are all related to each other. Further, these interconnections

¹²¹ Acts 2:42

¹²² John 17:20 – 21

¹²³ Ephesians 3:9

¹²⁴ John 1:14

will be understandable to faithful people and the way that those faithful people play this out will teach angels the purpose of existence. From the first volume, *Think as a Spirit*, the universe was created as an incubator for faith, and the terminal objective is a big family that will last. And faithful angels are included in that family, not just faithful humans. This last passage contributes to the definition the thought that connectedness is organized and sensible and purposeful, not random, subjective, or incomprehensible. So, when we have fellowship, that connection has purpose on a grand scale.

Growth of Connection

Judging by the history of fellowship in the church, this is not an easy concept. So, how did God provide the tools by which to build it? How do we grow our appreciation and use of it? Perhaps the simplest is with reference to the Lord's Supper, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the fellowship of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the fellowship of the body of Christ?"¹²⁵ The Lord's Supper contains more than a dozen symbols (see Chapter 4: Lord's Supper), one of which is fellowship. Although there is some overlap depending on the reference chosen,¹²⁶ I will separate the two sentences of the citation above into the blood of purification¹²⁷ and the body of sacrifice for sin.¹²⁸ The 1 Corinthians reference is not specific, but this separation of ideas is convenient.

The cup, the fruit of the vine, represents a connection to the cleansing of the consciences and the sanctification of the faithful, much as the Temple utensils and furniture were purified and sanctified before moving on to the work of sacrifice. One of the several reminders built into the Lord's Supper is that this is one of the things Jesus did for the faithful when He returned to heaven and first purified the original, non-physical Temple and then offered Himself.¹²⁹ We have a connection to this purification and sanctification in much the same way that we are connected to the mystery.¹³⁰ The faithful are not just intellectually aware of the process. Neither are we re-purified and re-sanctified whenever the Lord's Supper is repeated, or Jesus would need to offer His blood and body frequently, which is clearly not the case.¹³¹ So, in what way are we connected to this sprinkling of blood symbolized in the Lord's Supper? The faithful are reminded that this blood enables the connection, spirit to spirit, with God and other faithful spirits. We are not contaminating the others as the unclean contaminated the clean. We are worthy and acceptable because of that cleansing, and so are all the other faithful,. Therefore, we should treat each other in that way, not declaring the clean to be unclean. This is not a somber moment, but a remembrance bringing joy.

The bread represents the body of Jesus, that which He offered as the once-for-all sacrifice. Jesus accomplished this not through a compression of the space-time continuum (which is nonsense), but by paying off the right-and-wrong system once and for all. Remember that a sacrifice is a celebration, not a period of mourning for the death of the sacrifice. We are connected to His sacrifice in that we, too, have the authority to lay down our lives and take them

¹²⁵ 1 Corinthians 10:16

¹²⁶ For example, blood for sin is referenced in Hebrews 9:7.

¹²⁷ Hebrews 9:14

¹²⁸ Hebrews 7:27

¹²⁹ Hebrews 9:11 – 28

¹³⁰ Ephesians 3:9

¹³¹ Hebrews 9:25 - 28

up again.¹³² We are living sacrifices.¹³³ The importance of the connection image is that we are the image of the Son.¹³⁴ Again, this is not an intellectual exercise but a connection of spirits, in this case the merging of my spirit with God. The symbolism of eating the bread and drinking the of the cup represent taking Jesus into us, the concept with which Jesus rocked the Jews in John 6:30 – 58. This kind of connection includes intimacy to the point of merging.

The repeated reminder of the Lord's Supper revitalizes connections that are beyond our physical senses. Connections with spirits physically far off are easy to lose. This includes both divine beings and faithful spirits who are not nearby or within electronic communication range. This feeling of connectedness is important, classed with the most prominent themes of the gospel.

Although in general I am opposed to basing my motivation on feelings, connectedness is the exception to my rule. My example is the great collection of people who are lonely. They feel alone in a crowd. Many make bad decisions about whom to marry in a desperate attempt to feel connected. On the other hand, some people are never alone even if they are the only one in the room. They are vitally connected to others. So it should be with the faithful.

“That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.”¹³⁵ Fellowship is in parallel with knowledge, power and transformation. Investigating the three that are more familiar may provide some backdrop for fellowship. When we come to know Jesus, we can image His thoughts in the scenes recorded in the gospels. If we read the many psalms that are the prayers of the righteous appealing to God, we gain insight into what surely Jesus was thinking as He dealt with this broken world. When we have an appreciation for the power into which we have entered, that which planned, announced, and accomplished His resurrection, we no longer feel helpless in life's many challenging situations. When we see death as a tool or a capital asset rather than a path of last resort, we are conformed to His viewpoint. Maintaining the theme of the centrality of Jesus in successful life, when we understand His choices that led to a less than comfortable lifestyle, yet He remained the most joyful and satisfied human to have ever walked the earth, we are connected through that attitude.

“Suffering” was used in several ways in the First Century. Just as we have our euphemism for death, passed away, they described the occasion of someone's death as that person's suffering. However, their colloquialism did not hijack the word entirely. Discomfort also was “suffering.” The context determined whether death or discomfort was intended. Since the fourth phrase in the list is “conformed to His death,” the third phrase, “the fellowship of His suffering,” means discomfort, or else Paul would have said the same thing twice in a list of four.

In this context, what was Jesus' suffering? If we transport Him to Western culture, He would suffer poverty when He had the skills to be wealthy; He suffered disrespect when He really was God; He suffered from lack of sleep because people were selfishly demanding of Him. When we connect with how Jesus dealt with those pressures, we have fellowship.

“But rejoice to the extent that you have fellowship with Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.”¹³⁶ The context indicates that this suffering is discomfort, not death, because the readers are enduring fiery trials, yet are alive

¹³² John 10:8

¹³³ Romans 12:1

¹³⁴ Romans 8:29

¹³⁵ Philippians 3:10

¹³⁶ 1 Peter 4:13

enough to read the letter. Again, this connectedness with Jesus' suffering is not an intellectual understanding but an emotional identification.

Perhaps you have known people who have great difficulty understanding or appreciating how other people think. Of course, some people are just self-centered. But my study has convinced me that people are born with a certain amount of empathy. That natural empathy, which is in different degree in every person, may be trained up or down, but only within limits. So, people with Asperger's syndrome simply do not pick up on cues from others and have no ability to appreciate how someone else may feel. Many can avoid the ditch but ride on the shoulder as they interpret how others feel by how they perceive they would feel in the other's situation – even though the other person does not think that way at all. At the other end of the spectrum, some people are so wrapped up in how others feel that they yield control of themselves. Those between the extremes have varying degrees of success in understanding others and responding appropriately.

Peter says to rejoice when we connect with how Jesus handled the discomforts of life in a broken world. He did not say to rejoice in suffering, which is masochism, but to rejoice in the connection. Connection grows much in the same way as human interactions grow. When we are so close to another that we know what they are thinking, whether they are present or not, we are connected. Fellowship lifts us out of legalism and scholasticism and self-centeredness because we merge.

“That the fellowship of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in us in Christ Jesus.”¹³⁷ Many translations substitute “sharing,” suggesting that Philemon needed to up his game in evangelism. But the sentences before and after suggest connectedness. Philemon had love for and trust in all fellow believers. Paul rejoiced and was comforted because other believers were refreshed by that connection. Therefore, Paul was comfortable bringing a bold challenge by sending Onesimus, Philemon's AWOL slave, back to his master. Paul set Philemon up for success because of connectedness.

How do we grow this fellowship? By repeatedly reminding ourselves of our part in sanctification, not only our own but also that we promote it in others. We further remind ourselves of our participation in the sacrifice, as in eating a sacrificial meal, celebrating forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God, which also reminds us that we, too, are potential sacrifices for outsiders. We grow our connectedness to divine, angelic, and human spirits by comprehending how Jesus handled the down side of this broken world, not just understanding how it worked for Him, but that it just makes sense that it work the same for us. We challenge those to whom we are connected, demonstrating our trust in them by setting them up to do the right thing, not afraid that they might go wrong but confident that they will succeed, which leads to the death of the authority mindset because authority distrusts those who follow. Connectedness grows when we focus on all the things the faithful do well, by which trust also grows. We remember that which went well and promote that which could have gone better. That's what family does.

Applications of Connection

The New Testament contains several lists of bad behaviors not as a legal code but as a reminder, to burst the bubbles of our self-deception. Historically, people rationalize their own poor choices. So, the writers of the epistles published their lists because, as in every age, even

¹³⁷ Philemon 6

faithful people fool themselves into believing bad is good. The same may be said of fellowship. In our connectedness we may fool ourselves into accepting bad behavior from a friend out of misplaced loyalty.

Paul and John combine for five such prompts¹³⁸ concerning misplaced connection. To be consistent (or, as the KJV translates the word, perfect), we should be connected to light but not also darkness, to God but not also demons, to purity but not also sin, to good works but not also evil works. That is not to say that we cut all ties with any spirit that chooses badly. Rather, as in Philemon, we acknowledge every good thing. Jesus dealt with a broken world with patience and compassion, but not compromise. These five passages remind us to be partners but not enablers. Evil has no partnership, rather the partnership offered by evil is invariably deceitful.

Paul provided physical applications for this connectedness in eight places.¹³⁹ His suggestions are very much like the suggestions for the natural outgrowth of faith, which is good deeds. The natural outgrowth of connectedness is taking care of needs and expressing confidence. The needs may range from meeting essential daily needs of food and clothing, providing for the faithful adversely affected by natural disasters, and monetarily supporting missionaries. The example of an expression of confidence as a symbol of connectedness is when James, Peter, and John extended to Paul and Barnabas “the right hand of fellowship.”¹⁴⁰ The handshake had cultural significance that cemented the acceptance inherent in fellowship.

Fellowship has physical results, but fellowship is not defined by its sharing or handshakes. Just as some have lost the meaning of faith by focusing on the outgrowth of faith rather than faith itself, our focus must be on the connectedness that transcends time and space in which we never walk alone.

I know some faithful men in Islamic countries to whom fellowship is a lifeline, not just a pleasant memory. As the very few among a population who would heartily endorse their executions, the fact (not imagination) of the connection of their spirits to spirits around the world keeps them going. Were it not for the reality of that connection, they say that they would likely give up. Fellowship strengthens spirits.

¹³⁸ 1 Corinthians 10:20, 2 Corinthians 6:14, Ephesians 5:11, 1 Timothy 5:22, 2 John 11

¹³⁹ Romans 12:13, 15:27, 2 Corinthians 8:4, 9:13, Galatians 2:9, 6:6, Philippians 1:5, 4:15

¹⁴⁰ Galatians 2:9

Chapter 4: Lord's Supper

Repetition of the Lord's Supper may be found in almost all churches. Frequency varies from daily (the Mass) to weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually. A great number of Western churches have switched from wine to pasteurized grape juice, some by doctrine and some by convenience. Most use unleavened bread, although many omit the symbolism of it being unleavened. Practices vary as to who may participate, who decides who may participate, if the participant receives both the bread and the fruit of the vine or just the bread, and who may officiate and why. But, no matter the manner, the general meaning is the same for all. So, rather than justifying the practices over which many churches have split, I find it much more useful to delve into the meaning of the symbolism. If we know what the symbolism is supposed to mean and to what we are committing ourselves, we may find the motivation to adjust our traditions to incorporate more meaning and less ritual.

Passover

The Last Supper scene occurred during a Passover meal. The Passover meal was not remodeled or replaced by the Lord's Supper. Rather, that was the backdrop for what has become a major Christian practice.

The Passover meal was described in the Law of Moses. The Israelites in Egypt were told by Moses and Aaron to prepare and eat this meal in a certain way, after which the Death Angel killed the firstborn of every household in Egypt that did not have the blood of the Passover lamb on its door posts and lintel.¹⁴¹ Further, the Israelites were to re-enact this meal as a memorial annually, on the same day on their lunar calendar.¹⁴² Those who were inadvertently unclean on that day had a make-up Passover on the fourteenth of the next month.¹⁴³ The Feast of Unleavened Bread was celebrated on the following seven days,¹⁴⁴ but that is not in the scope of this discussion.

For that original Passover, a high-quality, yearling lamb was to be sequestered on the tenth of the month and slaughtered on the fourteenth at twilight. Some of the blood was to be painted on the lintels and doorposts. The meat was to be roasted over a fire, not raw or boiled, with its head, legs, and entrails intact. None of its bones were to be broken.¹⁴⁵ Along with the meat were served bitter herbs (think, salad) and unleavened bread. All of the lamb was required to be consumed that evening, adjusting the number of people at the table as necessary or, in case of miscalculation, burned the next morning. Proper attire consisted of that normally worn for travel: with a belt, sandals, and staff. Only Israelites were to eat it, including circumcised slaves who had been purchased (as opposed to indentured servants).¹⁴⁶ These particulars were repeated in the subsequent regulations about the annual Passover meal.

An additional regulation for the annual observance after taking possession of the Promised Land was that the Passover lamb could be sacrificed only at the tabernacle or Temple.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴¹ Exodus 12:12 – 23

¹⁴² Exodus 12:14, 24 – 28, Leviticus 23:5, Numbers 9:2 – 5, Numbers 28:16, Deuteronomy 16:1 – 6

¹⁴³ Numbers 9:9 – 14

¹⁴⁴ Exodus 12:15 – 20

¹⁴⁵ Exodus 12:46

¹⁴⁶ Exodus 12:43 – 45, 48

¹⁴⁷ Deuteronomy 16:5 – 7

In the interval between Moses and Jesus (about 1500 years), the meal itself accumulated a series of traditions. The following description was written down from oral tradition around 200 AD by Rabbi Judah ha-Nassi. These practices probably date from about a century before Jesus and likely are what Jesus and His disciples did.

Every Jewish meal began with foot-washing as the guests arrived. A servant generally was appointed to that task. At the Last Supper scene, Jesus washed the feet of the disciples after supper because no one had done it when they arrived (no servants and no volunteers).¹⁴⁸ Before the meal officially began, those in attendance were free to drink wine as desired.

When all expected guests had arrived, everyone performed the ritual hand-washing. Water was poured over one hand twice, then the other twice, after which both are dried with a towel. This was followed by a blessing. Obviously, the purpose was not hygiene but ritual cleanness (as opposed to being “unclean”).

Everyone reclined at a low table (perhaps 18”) on pillows. Generally, the most important person reclined at one end and the others at distances according to importance. This probably was not an important consideration at the Last Supper scene, but could erupt into a major social disaster at a typical celebration.

A prayer of sanctification was followed by the first of four cups of wine. Then, the bitter herbs were passed and transferred to the plate. This was consumed before the next item was started. After the bitter herbs, the serving dish was removed and the second of the four significant cups of wine was poured. At this time, a small question-and-answer period ensued. Then, the rest of the food was put on the table and Psalms 113 – 114 are recited by the leader with the others saying, “Hallelujah,” at the appropriate times. Then the second cup was blessed and consumed.

Because bread was coming up, ritual handwashing was repeated. Then the serving dishes were passed and plates were filled. Before everyone started eating, a special blessing of the bread was invoked with a symbolic breaking of the bread in which each person broke the bread of the person adjacent, counterclockwise around the table. Each shared the broken bread with the neighbor on each side. Generally, the bread was dipped in a vegetable broth.

After the symbolic breaking of bread, the meal was consumed. After everyone was finished, the third of the ritual cups of wine was poured. The last of the unleavened bread was blessed, broken, and eaten. Then the third cup of wine was blessed and consumed.

After a short period of conversation, the fourth ritual cup of wine was poured and blessed. Psalms 115 – 118 were sung together and the fourth cup of wine was consumed.

The Last Supper

The brief descriptions of the Last Supper scene in the gospels¹⁴⁹ do not reveal at what point in the traditional Passover meal this took place. Matthew's and Mark's accounts seem to place Judas adjacent to Jesus as one with whom Jesus had broken bread,¹⁵⁰ but John's account¹⁵¹ gives a little more detail and leaves the seating arrangements less certain.

¹⁴⁸ John 13:1 - 15

¹⁴⁹ Matthew 26:26 – 30, Mark 14:22 – 26, Luke 22:19 – 20

¹⁵⁰ Matthew 26:23, Mark 14:20

¹⁵¹ John 13:21 – 26

Matthew and Mark preface the original Lord's Supper with, "While they were eating..."¹⁵² So the event occurred during the Passover meal, not after it. This could have been while all the food was on the table, or it could have been during the third ritual cup of wine that was accompanied by the last of the unleavened bread. Luke's account has two cups of wine,¹⁵³ the first not being a part of the traditional observance of the Lord's Supper, but a part of the Passover meal, probably the first ritual cup of wine.

Jesus implied that the Twelve should repeat the practice,¹⁵⁴ but they were not told to spread the observance to others. However, Paul reviewed the practice of the early church by summarizing what Jesus had done,¹⁵⁵ so the intention of repetition in the church is clear.

Occasion

The vast majority of churches meet on Sunday, the exception being the Seventh-Day Adventists with its varieties. Most re-enact the Lord's Supper on Sunday only, although the Roman Catholic Church offers the Mass daily, as do many Orthodox churches.

The church at Corinth repeated the Lord's Supper at their assemblies,¹⁵⁶ but the frequency of those assemblies is not stated explicitly. Although one reference in that letter specifies "the first day of the week,"¹⁵⁷ that specification may relate only to the gathering of funds for famine relief in Judea.¹⁵⁸ Some argue that Christians met only on Sunday based on a reference to the Paul's meeting with the church in Troas,¹⁵⁹ but again the wording is not specific. An equal probability exists that the date was chosen for convenience of travel to hear a special speaker. The earliest church met daily,¹⁶⁰ and the writer of Hebrews enjoined the same.¹⁶¹ Although Jewish Christians, in general, still observed the Sabbath, Gentile Christians would not have the option of forsaking their work for church meetings, the typical workweek consisting of seven 12-hour days. So, the meetings must have been localized to cut down travel time by foot, and probably did not last very long to allow for proper sleep, the dangers of neglect being illustrated in Troas.¹⁶² This unfortunate accident prompted by Paul speaking very late supports the supposition that the particular meeting was special, perhaps not dependent on the day of the week.

Comments by early Christian writers are few and tend toward mysticism and authority. With that caution, consider that the *Didache* (c.a. 120 AD) says, "When you have eaten your fill." At least at the time of that writing, the Lord's Supper was more than the modern practice of a crumb and a sip. However, the original practice was not a huge meal, as Paul enjoined, "Do you not have houses to eat in?"¹⁶³ So, several passages referring to "breaking bread" or "feasts" perhaps should be included in the references concerning the Lord's Supper.¹⁶⁴ The implications

¹⁵² Matthew 26:26, Mark 14:22

¹⁵³ Luke 21:17, 20

¹⁵⁴ Luke 22:19

¹⁵⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:23 – 25

¹⁵⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:17 – 34

¹⁵⁷ 1 Corinthians 16:1 – 2

¹⁵⁸ 1 Corinthians 16:3 – 8, 2 Corinthians 8 – 9

¹⁵⁹ Acts 20:7

¹⁶⁰ Acts 2:46

¹⁶¹ Hebrews 3:13

¹⁶² Acts 20:9

¹⁶³ 1 Corinthians 11:22, 34

¹⁶⁴ Acts 2:42, 2:46, 20:7, 20:11, 2 Peter 2:13, Jude 12

of Jesus' words cited by Paul, "As often as you drink it,"¹⁶⁵ may lean toward incorporating an observance of the Lord's Supper into every meal that includes unleavened bread and wine, which were common staples of the time.

Certainly, some of the symbolisms listed below work better on a Sunday. But, many do not relate to Jesus' resurrection, so any day of the week would work equally well. As a point of comparison, few churches insist that baptisms be performed only on Sunday despite the fact that resurrection is one of its symbolisms.

However, I am not insisting that everyone adopt daily communion as necessary for true faith. Rather, the lack of clear instructions should lead us not to insist too heavily on our particular traditions, which is legalism. The point is not the day of the week or the frequency but the symbolism. Our question should be how to develop the applications of the symbols for maximum efficacy, not straining to meet a physical benchmark. If meaningful applications are found, which will differ from place to place, the frequency will take care of itself.

Symbolism

The following paragraphs address the many symbols within the Lord's Supper that are suggested in the New Testament. I suppose that we could, by speculation and free association, propose hundreds more. But, the ones directly assigned by Paul provide more than enough material to fill the chapter.

People from groups which perform the Lord's Supper less often than weekly generally attribute the low frequency to a desire to keep the practice special and to avoid ritualizing it. From my observations of how the Lord's Supper is practiced across a number of groups, I can see their point. What they do is really dull and one-dimensional. I suggest that, if a different symbol were emphasized at each occasion, the freshness would return and the ritualistic overtones would disappear. But, tradition is hard to change. So, my hope is that the reader will appreciate the breadth of the symbolism on a theoretical level and seek ways to expand whatever the group is doing now, growing the practice back to its original scope. God's patience with Israel was phenomenal, as has it been with the church. But, being careful to stop short of tempting God, we should push people a little out of their comfort zones each week, although not to the point of division.

Remember Jesus

Paul quoted Luke's account of the Last Supper to the church at Corinth.¹⁶⁶ Although not explicitly stated, the implication is that what should be remembered is His sacrifice. However, dividing the history of Jesus into separate categories is very difficult, so the boundaries of this remembrance are nebulous. Many issues may be derived from the one sacrifice: selfless love, without sin, redemption once for all, acceptance by faith, and many other interconnecting facets. John drew a parallel between Jesus laying down His life and that which Christians should do.¹⁶⁷ Limiting the concept of laying down His life to a moment on the cross would be shortsighted. I propose that Jesus laid down His life years before He stopped breathing. Further, Jesus

¹⁶⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:25

¹⁶⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:23 – 25

¹⁶⁷ 1 John 3:16

emphasized that He laid down His life voluntarily.¹⁶⁸ So, exploring just the facets of remembering Jesus could easily occupy many occurrences of the practice without covering any of the same ground.

Proclamation of His Return

Effective proclamation cannot be accomplished alone. Paul asserted that the action of repeating the Lord's Supper was a proclamation that Jesus will return.¹⁶⁹ Since the paragraph describes what the Christians of the church at Corinth were doing when they met, the proclamation was between Christians, each one in attendance both reminding others and being reminded of that promise.

Why is this important when only fellow Christians (and the odd visitor) will participate? In the First Century, many had difficulty with the lack of specificity. Due to the long wait between the resurrection and the writing of 2 Peter, some had begun to scoff about the promise.¹⁷⁰ Others were confident in their predictions of that coming.¹⁷¹ Jesus, Peter, John, and Paul all proclaimed that the coming was certain, but the date was not discernible.¹⁷² Coming to terms with Jesus' return grows faith – trust that what God promised will happen, especially when we are not privy to the details. For the afflicted and oppressed, Jesus' return is a release from suffering, so a bringer of comfort and hope. For the comfortable, this reminder assigns disposable income much less importance. And, being prepared for Jesus to return at any unknown time produces an urgency both for taking the promises of God seriously and for evangelism before it is too late. Coming to terms with this reality must be far more than a ritual.

Fellowship

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the fellowship of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the fellowship of the body of Christ?”¹⁷³ As detailed in a previous chapter,¹⁷⁴ fellowship is a connection between spirits. In the sacrificial system, the blood figure is used two ways: the blood of sacrifice for forgiveness, and the blood of sprinkling for sanctification.¹⁷⁵ The body image also has two applications: the body of the sacrifice, and the body of Christ, the church. Because the chapter does not contain such detailed explanations, we should appreciate all the options. In the Lord's Supper, the faithful are affirming their understanding of their spiritual connection to Jesus and to one another, that the connection implies that we are reserved for godly purposes, and the our connection enables us to be “living sacrifices.”¹⁷⁶ Further, we are renewing our commitment to being tangibly connected to faithful people we will likely never meet – faithful people all over the world. For the faithful of Paul's day, news of other faithful people could be years away. Today, we have many forms of electronic communications, so we can make nearly “physical” connections to bolster the spiritual

¹⁶⁸ John 10:18

¹⁶⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:26

¹⁷⁰ 2 Peter 3:3 – 12

¹⁷¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:3

¹⁷² Matthew, 24:36 – 44, Luke 12:35 – 49, 1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11, 2 Peter 3:3 – 12, Revelation 3:3, 16:15

¹⁷³ 1 Corinthians 10:16

¹⁷⁴ Chapter 3: Fellowship

¹⁷⁵ Hebrews 9:11 – 28

¹⁷⁶ Romans 12:1

ones. The reality of connectedness is what makes the faithful a body rather than a bunch of individuals in the same or similar buildings. That connectedness is what makes the faithful a family with passionate relationships despite physical distance.

Unity

“For we, though many, are one bread and one body, for we all partake of that one bread.”¹⁷⁷ In addition to the fellowship angle, the faithful are, in the Lord's Supper, reaffirming their dedication to unity. As Jesus prayed in the Garden, the unity of His future followers would be a proof that He was who He claimed to be.¹⁷⁸ A congregation cannot be in the throes of division after such a declaration. Obviously, both sides in a church squabble believe sincerely that the chosen side is right and the other is wrong. Those who propose division as either unavoidable or the preferred option are not Christians¹⁷⁹ and should be shown the door.¹⁸⁰ Those with authoritarian views only feed the problem. Rather, the answer to unity is in the next verse after Jesus' prayer for that unity. “And the glory You have given Me, I have given them.”¹⁸¹ Glory is a parade of positive character traits. Unity is achieved by growth in those traits, perhaps by the sequential outline given by Peter,¹⁸² and certainly through the work of the Spirit.

Participation in Jesus' Sacrifice

“Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?”¹⁸³ Jesus drew the same comparison between His own flesh and blood and that of a sacrifice as well as manna that maintained the spirit rather than the body.¹⁸⁴ Paul called Jesus “our Passover.”¹⁸⁵ Jesus' sacrifice represented every type of sacrifice, as detailed in the next volume.¹⁸⁶ Very few whole sacrifices were burned. Usually, only a small portion of the fat was placed on the bronze altar. The vast majority of the meat was consumed either by the officiating priest with family, or the one bringing the sacrifice with friends and family.

The Israelites did not lament the passing of the animal, but celebrated forgiveness. Further, faithful Israelites did not consider themselves forgiven at the instant of the animal's death. Rather, they understood that they had already been forgiven but were, with the sacrifice, celebrating it. Imagine a faithful Israelite who lived a significant distance from the tabernacle or Temple due to the location of his ancestral land. If he were to go to the tabernacle or Temple on the occasion of every sin, he would be constantly on the road, and would spend most of his time unforgiven.

In the Lord's Supper, the faithful are not lamenting Jesus' death, but celebrating their own forgiveness because of that death. As with Mosaic sacrifices, the Lord's Supper requires a

¹⁷⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:17

¹⁷⁸ John 17:20 – 21

¹⁷⁹ Jude 19

¹⁸⁰ Titus 3:10 – 11

¹⁸¹ John 17:22 – 23

¹⁸² 2 Peter 1:2 – 11

¹⁸³ 1 Corinthians 10:18

¹⁸⁴ John 6:31 – 58

¹⁸⁵ 1 Corinthians 5:7

¹⁸⁶ Hegemones

sharing of this celebration with family and friends in the presence of God, not a bunch of individuals solemnly contemplating death.

Singleness of Purpose

“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons.”¹⁸⁷ This declaration of singlemindedness is called sanctification, being reserved for godly purposes. Our participation illustrates that we have only one Lord, and that He is Lord all the time, not just occasionally. In the Law of Moses, objects were sanctified, reserved for godly purposes, involuntarily. The bowl or pitcher or table did not have the ability to agree or disagree. Faithful people are sanctified by their own choice. So, the Lord’s Supper is a time of public reaffirmation of total commitment.

Self-Examination

A good friend¹⁸⁸ gave the following analogy to this facet of the Lord’s Supper.¹⁸⁹ When I was in school, if I had started thinking about the material on the test as the tests were being handed out, I would have been in serious trouble. But that is how most people approach the Lord’s Supper. The entire preparation for this examination starts when the surprise that the Lord’s Supper is really going to happen wears off, until the tray reaches them, generally less than a minute. What should happen is that we bring the result of a week’s worth of preparation to the event. Have I worked out how I will proclaim Jesus’ return? How will I play out my declaration of unity and fellowship? How will I demonstrate my singleness of purpose? In what ways will I take Jesus into myself? The Lord’s Supper is not something that I attend, but something for which I prepare.

The Body of Jesus

“This is My body which is for you.”¹⁹⁰ The sacrifice of the body of Jesus was compared to the Mosaic sacrifices.¹⁹¹ The different connections to the sacrificial system are not in conflict, but rather illustrate different facets of the same activity. The celebration of forgiveness aspect recalls the sacrificial meal. This image of the offering of His body focuses on the satisfaction of justice. However, the Lord’s Supper is not a repetition of that sacrifice, as some teach, but a remembrance of a sacrifice that happened exactly once.¹⁹² In the Lord’s Supper, participants should be reminded that the right-and-wrong system was paid off and cancelled long before they were born. Being freed from that behavior system enables the faithful to focus on trust in the promises of God.

¹⁸⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:21

¹⁸⁸ Gordon Adusei of Kumasi, Ghana

¹⁸⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:28

¹⁹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:24

¹⁹¹ Hebrews 10:10

¹⁹² Hebrews 9:11 – 28

The Unleavened Bread of Sincerity and Truth

“Therefore, purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed, Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed. Therefore, let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”¹⁹³ The context concerns a member of the group who “has his father’s wife.”¹⁹⁴ But in the directions that follow, Paul refers to an image from the Lord’s Supper to illustrate the inconsistency of their situation. Obviously, the congregation used unleavened bread in their Lord’s Supper, or Paul’s point would not work. So, the fact that only unleavened bread was available at the Last Supper (due to the celebration of the Passover) was not just a coincidence, but was intended to play a part in this multifaceted symbolism. When the participants eat the bread, one of the thoughts that should arise is that the faithful are dedicated to sincerity and truth, as opposed to malice and wickedness.

Additional images based on unleavened bread may be drawn from the Feast of Unleavened Bread,¹⁹⁵ but they would not be directly related to the Lord’s Supper.

The Blood of Jesus

“This cup is the new covenant in My blood.”¹⁹⁶ Matthew adds, “...which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”¹⁹⁷ The sacrifice image has been described above, but the “new covenant” idea introduces a new facet.

In ancient times, blood, generally that of an animal, was used to seal a contract. In its non-religious sense, the death of the animal said, “May it be done to me if I break the terms of this contract.” Obviously, Jesus was not taking such an oath because God has a history of meeting or exceeding the terms of every contract. Rather, the point was that Jesus’ sacrifice would be the official signing of the new contract. A concise contrast between the Old and New Covenants was first published by Jeremiah¹⁹⁸ before being cited by Paul.¹⁹⁹

The importance of this fact to the Lord’s Supper is that the participants are reminded that New Covenant has been sealed and set in motion. The Kingdom is composed of believers, not a random mixture as in Israel, and that His laws will be written in the hearts and minds of the citizens. The faithful are not waiting for the promises contained in the contract, but may expect them in the present. From the other side of the contract, the participants have entered into a contract with God and are warned not to forsake it as did the Israelites their covenant and be unable to enter the promised rest.²⁰⁰

Consuming the Blood of Jesus

“Most assuredly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and

¹⁹³ 1 Corinthians 5:7 – 8

¹⁹⁴ 1 Corinthians 5:1

¹⁹⁵ Deuteronomy 16:3, a symbol of affliction, haste, and release from slavery.

¹⁹⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:25

¹⁹⁷ Matthew 26:28

¹⁹⁸ Jeremiah 31:31 – 34

¹⁹⁹ Hebrews 8:8 – 12

²⁰⁰ Hebrews 3:7 – 4:10

I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food and My blood is true drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me.”²⁰¹ The Law specifically forbade the drinking of blood,²⁰² as did the apostles.²⁰³ Jesus’ image of drinking His blood (and eating His flesh) represents taking the character of Jesus into ourselves, as indicated by the promise of “abides in Me and I in him.” The same point of “abiding” is repeated several times in the writings of John.²⁰⁴

In drinking of the cup, the participants should review the significance of Jesus dwelling in them, and they in Jesus, and of being transformed by the Spirit such that the character traits of the faithful match those of Jesus.²⁰⁵

Points to Ponder

Was the Lord's Supper designed to be a small piece of the times when Christians come together, or was it to be the platform into which everything else fit? Using the Passover meal as an example, the ceremony was not just a special meal, but included singing, Scripture reading, and teaching. Certainly, these Passover traditions, aside from the date and the menu, are not dictated in the Law, but developed naturally. From a legalistic point of view, if the Lord's Supper is re-enacted with just the details as mentioned in the New Testament, it would be nearly impossible to accomplish. Plates are not mentioned. The dining table required reclining. The location was a rooftop room. By necessity, assumptions and choices must be made. If those decisions are made with an eye to the purpose of the event, to the take-away lessons, perhaps the educational value can be improved.

Several of the facets of the Lord's Supper refer to the Mosaic sacrificial system. Those offerings did not begin with the killing of an animal, but with preparation of both the sacrifice and the offeror. The killing and butchering were performed by the priests. Although most sacrificial meats were boiled, this one was roasted. While most sacrificial meals took place in the Temple courts, this one could be in a nearby location, limited by how far one could travel with the butchered meat and still have time to roast it. Although no specific applications of those or other practices are made in the New Testament, meaningful analogies may be drawn.

Unity and fellowship are demonstrated in a communal meal, not a number of individuals in private communion with God. As mentioned above,²⁰⁶ we may do well to change from a crumb and a sip to a hearty snack.

²⁰¹ John 6:53 – 57

²⁰² Leviticus 17:10 *et al*

²⁰³ Acts 15:20, 15:29, 21:25

²⁰⁴ John 15:1 – 10, 1 John 2:24 – 28, 3:6, 3:24

²⁰⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:18

²⁰⁶ Chapter 2: Assembly, Objectives of the Assembly, Celebration of Forgiveness

Chapter 5: Prayer

With an uncountable number of opinions, backgrounds, and expectations, where does one start describing prayer? This book focuses on the times when the faithful gather in one physical location, but addressing group prayer will raise questions about individual prayer. Further, many good and faithful people have been taught a wide varieties of formulae for prayer that are not exactly in the Bible, but rather are someone's personal application that worked for them, so might work for others. In this chapter, I propose to open up some ideas to consider.

As a start, the working definition of prayer will be a conversation with God. But conversation implies bidirectional communication. Do we just talk at God with no hope of a response in kind? How do we know if a response happens? What should we expect and what should we rule out?

The Physical Side of Prayer

Because we are physical beings who have learned everything through physical senses, an analysis of the many examples of the physical side of prayer seems a good place to start. Some people have been taught that certain actions must accompany prayer for the prayer to be effective. Some stand; some fold their hands; some kneel; some raise their hands. These and other customs are neither necessarily bad nor good. The effectiveness of the communication that results dictates the value.

In the Bible, some faithful characters have sat to pray,²⁰⁷ stood,²⁰⁸ knelt,²⁰⁹ knelt with outstretched hands,²¹⁰ stood with lifted hands and bowed heads,²¹¹ lifted hands without specifying a position of the body,²¹² toward Jerusalem,²¹³ and with gender-specific head coverings,²¹⁴ Obviously, these cannot all be performed at once. Perhaps the best summary is to adopt a body position that best matches one's mental state. A discussion fits with sitting. Kneeling or bowing the head fits with submission. Outstretched or upraised arms fit with requests. But all this is culturally specific. My advice is to make sure your body language matches your intellectual language.

Purposes of Prayer

Many of the references to prayer in the Bible do not include the purpose of that prayer, only that a prayer was offered. But, several contexts reveal the objective of the one offering the prayer: for action by God,²¹⁵ wisdom,²¹⁶ healing,²¹⁷ and possessions,²¹⁸ for all the saints²¹⁹ and

²⁰⁷ 2 Samuel 7:18

²⁰⁸ 1 Kings 8:22

²⁰⁹ 1 Kings 8:54, Ephesians 3:14

²¹⁰ Ezra 9:5, Daniel 6:10

²¹¹ Nehemiah 9:5 – 6

²¹² 1 Timothy 2:8

²¹³ Daniel 6:10, 1 Kings 8:42

²¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:5

²¹⁵ Acts 1:24, Romans 15:30, Ephesians 6:19, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 4:3

²¹⁶ James 1:5 – 6

²¹⁷ James 5:14 – 16, 3 John 2

government officials that we may live in peace;²²⁰ and thanksgiving.²²¹ Most of those purposes are very general, so would encompass a huge variety of topics. One caution should be appended, that we ask with good motives.²²²

Qualities of Prayer

Asking with good motives is not the only constraint. A prayer is not to be considered lightly, but rather should have certain qualities that accompany it. In the Sermon on the Mount,²²³ Jesus reminded His audience that prayers for the sake of notoriety are hypocritical.²²⁴ Rather, prayers should be private. However, some prayers are performed in a group,²²⁵ so the privacy issue is only in opposition to publicity stunts. Group prayer still needs to have the same qualities as private prayer. In the Matthew sermon, Jesus also cautioned against repetitious prayers (rituals or formulas). The model we know as the Lord's Prayer²²⁶ does not model content but quality. For example, continuing to pray "Thy kingdom come," is unnecessary, since the kingdom has already come.²²⁷ Being delivered from the evil one has already been accomplished.²²⁸ I find it humorous the Jesus prayed, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," during the period when Satan had unfettered access to heaven. So, I suppose Jesus' expectations for earth were not all that high. Jesus also taught via parable that prayers should be persistent and with high expectation,²²⁹ although in keeping with the desires of God.²³⁰

Confidence in prayer is essential. In James' admonition to pray for wisdom is the generalization that any prayer not coupled with persistent trust in God's promises will have no positive results.²³¹ However, confidence in one's own faith, if due to no more than humility, may falter, so John reminds his readers that God is greater than our hearts and knows us truly, meaning that our confidence may be in God's ability to interpret me.²³² Further, our confidence should be based on trusting the essential quality of Jesus and our love for one another, the quality of which is exhibited by the indwelling Spirit who provides the power to overcome and be transformed.²³³ Contemplating that nature of Jesus provides "boldness and confident access through the faith of Him,"²³⁴ rather than through the faith of me which may, on occasion, be lackluster. The fact that our High Priest can sympathize should further boost our boldness.²³⁵

²¹⁸ James 4:2, 3 John 2

²¹⁹ Ephesians 6:18,

²²⁰ 1 Timothy 2:1 – 2

²²¹ Philippians 4:6, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:18

²²² James 4:3

²²³ Matthew 6:5 – 15, 7:7 – 12

²²⁴ Matthew 23:14, Mark 12:40, Luke 20:47

²²⁵ 1 Timothy 2:8, Acts 1:24

²²⁶ See also Luke 11:1 – 4

²²⁷ e.g., Colossians 1:13

²²⁸ 2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6, Revelation 20:1 – 4

²²⁹ Luke 11:5 – 13, Luke 18:1 – 8

²³⁰ 1 John 5:14

²³¹ James 1:5 – 8

²³² 1 John 3:20

²³³ 1 John 3:22 – 24

²³⁴ Ephesians 3:12

²³⁵ Hebrews 4:16

In addition, as with all the pursuits of the faithful, the indwelling Spirit plays an essential role, trust in which can raise confidence and perseverance. The Spirit plays an editing and translating role,²³⁶ although I have often wished to receive back the edited copy. We are to pray “in the Spirit,”²³⁷ the execution of which often escapes us. The church at Corinth butchered this one, too, so Paul admonished them to “pray some Spirit...and some understanding.”²³⁸ Recognizing and depending on the role of the Spirit is necessary, not worrying about making perfect sense, but we each need to be as intelligible as the moment allows.

How do we dispose of the anxiety that chokes out the word and leave us unprepared? We have confidence in the faith of Jesus, His sympathetic nature based on His time on earth, and the power of the Spirit to make sense of what we really meant to communicate.

Occasions for Prayer

The most commonly recalled occasion for prayer is the table blessing. Jesus did it;²³⁹ Paul did it;²⁴⁰ and the practice was cited as a common event in that era.²⁴¹ Further, Jesus prayed extensively at other times. The authors of the gospels made special note of Jesus praying in conjunction with major events.²⁴²

Perhaps more telling is the short admonition in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “Pray without ceasing.” The word translated, “without ceasing,” is rarely used, so the translation was long uncertain. However, a packet of first century letters lost in transit from northern to southern Egypt has given a good backdrop. A man from the south had emigrated to the port of Alexandria for work. In his letter to his family back home, he relayed that he had caught a cold and coughed “without ceasing.” So, the idea is to pray a lot, but not so much in the formal sense, but rather a sporadic conversation. A friend gave the following illustration. “When I wake up in the morning, I talk to God, ‘Things are going pretty well so far, Lord. The day has begun and all is well. But, I’m going to get up now, so I may need some help.’ Get the conversation started, then just don’t hang up. All day long, be muttering to God at every turn, ‘What do you think, Lord? I could use some wisdom here...Looks like I’ll need a double dose of patience for the traffic today.’ All day long, I keep up the dialog, consulting with God at every turn, asking for growth, ideas, and opportunities. It’s much harder to fool yourself when you are putting the options before God. The world doesn’t get to you so quickly because you are talking with the Lord of all the nations. Finally, at the end of the day, I sign off, ‘Thanks, Lord. Time to sleep. See you in the morning.’”

Do I really think God is going to answer in my head? No, that would be walking by sight and not by faith. God has promised that the prayers of the faithful are heard and dealt with in the best way. Faith obviates the need for a physical response from God. The faithful trust the promise, so putting the request out here is enough. The faithful are confident that God will handle it, so whatever transpires will be the best it can be under the circumstances.

²³⁶ Romans 8:26

²³⁷ Ephesians 2:18, 6:18, Jude 20

²³⁸ 1 Corinthians 14:15 – 17

²³⁹ Matthew 14:19, 26:26 – 27, Mark 6:41, 8:6 – 7, Luke 9:16, John 6:11, 23

²⁴⁰ Acts 27:35

²⁴¹ Romans 14:6

²⁴² Matthew 26:36, Mark 14:35, Luke 3:21, 6:12, 9:29, 22:41, John 17

Recommended Requests

The writers of the New Testament relayed several examples of things to pray about. Although the following topics certainly do not exhaust the possibilities, this list is a good start.

One class of suggestions relates to our negative interactions with some people. Rather than invoking the wrath of God on those who perpetrate evil, Jesus recommended praying for those who persecute you,²⁴³ and for those who spitefully use you.²⁴⁴ Certainly, Jesus also promised that God would avenge His elect who cry out day and night to Him,²⁴⁵ but putting the passages all together implies that our reaction to the evil people of this world is to focus on their salvation, not their punishment. Leave vengeance to the professionals.²⁴⁶ Although the kings of Paul's day were all morally bankrupt, he wanted Christians to pray for them with the ulterior motive that those prayers would result in the ability to lead a quiet and peaceful life.²⁴⁷ God cannot subvert free will without ruining His own purpose for creation (a big family that will last based on mutual trust and selfless concern), so asking that God change them is pointless. But we can expect action from God when we ask that those same leaders be exposed to the gospel in a clear and coherent manner. Their responses are their problem.

Praying for our own self-improvement may, on the surface, appear self-serving, but James was specific about praying for wisdom.²⁴⁸ John prayed for the health and wealth of fellow believers.²⁴⁹ Although, clearly, the objective of faith is not personal comfort, we are not to seek out poverty and malaise. If a little comfort fits into God's plan, we should be all for it.²⁵⁰ If we are suffering, we should ask for relief.²⁵¹ Peter admonished those anxiously anticipating the rapidly approaching destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple to be serious and watchful in their prayers.²⁵² The objective is that outsiders will find the contentment of the faithful during adversity a remarkable achievement.

James bridged the gap between physical and spiritual illness by specifying the same cure for both, the prayer of faith.²⁵³ John expanded on the cure for spiritual illness, emphasizing that foolish sin can be fixed whereas purposeful sin is beyond the pale.²⁵⁴ Sometimes our logic and perception takes a vacation and we choose spiritually stupid paths that, at the moment, looked like the right thing to do. A caring brother's prayer that we wake up to reality is well placed. How God executes the response is His business; we just know that free choice will be preserved. But, when people consciously choose to reject the promises of God, nothing remains to entice them back.²⁵⁵

On several occasions, Paul illustrated his own confidence in the efficacy of the prayers of others when he asked congregations to pray that he be bold, clear, and safe.²⁵⁶ He could have

²⁴³ Matthew 5:44

²⁴⁴ Luke 6:28

²⁴⁵ Luke 18:7 – 8

²⁴⁶ Romans 12:19 – 21

²⁴⁷ 1 Timothy 2:1 – 2

²⁴⁸ James 1:5 – 8

²⁴⁹ 3 John 2

²⁵⁰ Philippians 4:12

²⁵¹ James 5:13

²⁵² 1 Peter 4:7

²⁵³ James 5:15 – 20

²⁵⁴ 1 John 5:16

²⁵⁵ Hebrews 6:4 – 6

²⁵⁶ Colossians 4:3 – 4, Ephesians 5:18 – 20, Romans 15:30

keep this request to himself, prayed for himself. But he found it useful to ask that others participate, not only gaining the impact of many prayers on the same topic, but also teaching his audiences that their prayers were valuable and would be fruitful.

Based on the number of mood-altering pharmaceuticals and self-help books on the market, anxiety is a major problem in the world today. Both Peter²⁵⁷ and Paul²⁵⁸ found the same problem in their day. Paul included some details on becoming free from anxiety.²⁵⁹ Remember the future spiritual body, pure character without the drain of this physical downhill spiral. Rejoice in the successes of faith. Combine thanksgiving with requests; let prayers be well-rounded. Focus on the good stuff of life.

Negative Responses

James asserted that the effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.²⁶⁰ But, before we blame the one praying when the requested result is not forthcoming, remember that several notable people received negative responses.

Moses pleaded to be able to enter the Promised Land to no avail,²⁶¹ although He had succeeded in changing God's mind several times previously.²⁶² In the Garden, Jesus asked that "this cup pass from Me."²⁶³ Paul prayed three times that his "thorn in the flesh" be removed, but God said, "No, My grace is sufficient; strength is made consistent through weakness."²⁶⁴

In Jesus Name We Pray

The custom of many groups is to end prayers, especially public prayers, with "in the name of Jesus we pray." Many have suggested that this phrase is equivalent to "by the authority of Jesus." An outgrowth of this mistaken idea is the English figure of speech, "Open in the name of the law."

"The name" of an individual, in ancient and some modern cultures, was tremendously important. Biblical names often were chosen to characterize the person, or changed to signify a change in the person. The "name" represented the essential quality of the person. Of course, in the New Testament, sometimes the word, name, signified just that: the person's name, such as, "His name is John."²⁶⁵ But many times, "name" was used to represent the whole person or the essential nature, not just an appellation.²⁶⁶

- John 3:18 He has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God
- John 12:28 "Father, glorify Your name."
- John 17:6 "I have manifested Your name to the men whom you have given Me."
- John 17:11 – 12 "Keep through Your name...I have kept them in Your name"

²⁵⁷ 1 Peter 5:7

²⁵⁸ Philippians 4:6

²⁵⁹ Philippians 3:20 – 4:18

²⁶⁰ James 5:16

²⁶¹ Deuteronomy 3:23 – 27

²⁶² Exodus 32:9 – 14, Numbers 14:11 – 20, 16:20 – 35, 16:41 – 48

²⁶³ Matthew 26:39 – 44, Luke 22:40 – 46

²⁶⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:7 – 9

²⁶⁵ Luke 1:63

²⁶⁶ Kittel, G., Ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Volume IV, pages 1022 – 1090 (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1967).

- John 17:26 “I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them.”
- Acts 1:15 The number of names was about 120
- Acts 4:12 There is none other name given under heaven for men whereby we must be saved
- Acts 5:41 Counted worthy to suffer for the name
- Acts 10:43 Through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins
- Philippians 2:9 – 10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow
- 1 Thessalonians 1:12 That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you
- Hebrews 1:4 He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they
- 1 John 2:12 Your sins are forgiven for His name’s sake
- 3 John 7 They went forth for His name’s sake
- Revelation 2:14 You hold fast to My name
- Revelation 3:4 You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments
- Revelation 11:13 About 7000 names were killed

“In the name of Jesus” describes His essential qualities, not His authority. The preposition is important. If authority were the point, the preposition would be “by,” not “in” or “into.” “In the name of Jesus” is a proclamation that I am “in the essential nature of Jesus,” therefore God will listen to me in the same way He listened to Jesus. Unfortunately, many have been taught to understand that the collection of letters, Jesus, is a magic formula at which evil trembles, overlooking that the same appellation would be spelled and spoken differently in Greek or Hebrew or any other language. Further, it was a somewhat common name in that time in Hebrew culture. Read the following using “essence” or “nature” as the definition of “name.”

- Matthew 10:42 Whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple... (*c.f.*, Matthew 18:5)
- Matthew 12:21 In His name will the Gentiles trust
- Matthew 28:19 Baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
- Mark 9:39 No one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me
- Luke 10:17 The devils are subject to us in Your name
- John 2:23 Many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did
- John 14:13, 15:16, 16:23, 26 The apostles were promised that they would receive whatever they asked while immersed in the character of Jesus (*c.f.*, James 4:3, Acts 4:30, James 5:14)
- Acts 2:38 (Acts 8:12, 16, 9:14 – 15, 21, 27, 29, 10:43, 48, 19:5, 22:16, 1 Corinthians 6:11, 1 John 3:23, 5:13, Revelation 2:13) Let every one of you be baptized into the name of Jesus Christ
- Acts 3:6, (Acts 3:16, 4:7 – 30, 5:28, 40 – 41, 16:18, 19:13, 17, James 5:14) In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk (contrast 4:7, 19:13)
- Acts 8:16 They had been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus
- Acts 10:48 He commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord
- Acts 19:5 When they heard this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus
- 1 Corinthians 1:13 – 15 Were you baptized into the name of Paul?
- 1 Corinthians 6:11 But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God.

- Colossians 3:17 Whatever you do in word or deed, so all in the name of the Lord Jesus
- 1 Thessalonians 4:1 We urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus

The “authority of Jesus” doctrine has been supported through poor hermeneutics.

- John 14 – 16 contains several “in My name” verses.
 - First, the reader must recognize that only eleven disciples were present and that Jesus’ words were directed to them. Applying the whole speech to all Christians leads to several difficulties.
 - 14:13 – 14 “And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.” Similar promises are made in 15:7, 15:16, and 16:23 – 26. If applied to all Christians, every faithful person would be in control of God.
 - 14:26, 16:13 The Spirit does not bring all of Jesus’ words to mind for all Christians, nor does the Spirit reveal the future to all Christians.
 - 15:16 Jesus’ reference is to His choosing of His apostles, not the choosing of all the faithful.
 - 15:27 Obviously, all Christians have not been with Jesus on earth from the beginning of His ministry.
 - 16:2 All Christians are not put out of synagogues.
 - Explanations that water down these passages so as to make them virtually meaningless have been invented so that the “authority” doctrine could be preserved.
 - Ordinary reading comprehension can separate the general truths from the specific promises to the Eleven.
 - If indecision arises, simply check the letters that were written to individuals and groups of Christians to see if the promise were repeated for a more general audience.
- Ephesians 5:20 (Hebrews 13:15) “Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” The context refers to being filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another through song, giving thanks to God, and submitting to one another. To be consistent with the authority doctrine, every song must end with “in the name of Jesus we sing.” The point of “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” in this passage is that each of these benefits or activities, to be effective, must be performed from within the essential nature of Jesus.
- Philippians 2:9 – 10 “Therefore, God has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...” The context begins in verse 5, “Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.” The quality of Jesus’ nature, not His authority, is what causes people to respond. As in 2 Peter 1:3, we were called by His glory and virtue.
- Colossians 3:17 “Whatever you do in word of deed, do all in the name of the Lord” The immediate context begins with verse 12, although even that section begins with “therefore,” so the previous paragraphs were included by Paul in the conclusions drawn. The point of the context is Christian behavior. The point being made was that whatever a Christian does should be with the character of Jesus, not by invoking His authority or repeating a group of English letters as a magic formula.
- 2 Thessalonians 1:12 (1 Timothy 6:1, 2 Timothy 2:19, James 2:7) That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you. The point of “name of Jesus” is that unbelievers

will see the behavior of Christians and know that ordinary people cannot live that way, so they glorify God and not the Christians.

Other passages use the phrase “in the name of Jesus,” or variations thereon, to express the essence of Jesus character:

- Matthew 7:22 Prophesied in Thy name
- Matthew 18:5 (Mark 9:37, Luke 9:48) He who receives one little child in My name receives me
- Matthew 18:20 Where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there in the midst of them.
- Matthew 24:5 (Mark 13:6, Luke 21:8) For many will come in My name and will deceive many
- Mark 16:17 In My name they will cast out demons
- Luke 24:47 (Romans 1:5, 1 Corinthians 1:2) Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations
- John 1:12 (John 2:23, 3:18) As many as receive Him, to them He has given the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.
- Acts 15:26 (Acts 21:13, 26:9) Men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ
- 1 Corinthians 1:10 (1 Corinthians 5:4 – 5, 2 Thessalonians 3:6) Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing

Asking for the Spirit

Luke 11:13 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.

The statement above was spoken by Jesus during His earthly ministry. Yet, the Spirit had not yet been given in the sense that all Christians have the Spirit.²⁶⁷ Jesus’ comment was directed to “the disciples,” but the concepts appear to be generic, not limited to “spiritual gifts” described in the letters.²⁶⁸

Jesus had spoken briefly concerning being “born of the Spirit” previously.²⁶⁹ Prophets of old had spoken of this concept.²⁷⁰ Apparently, Jesus assumed that His audience was familiar with these promises. By the time that Luke wrote, decades after the events described, teaching about the indwelling Spirit was well known.

The following list is limited to promises from God to the faithful, the execution of which are directly attributed to the Spirit. To accomplish these promises, we need to ask not only for the promise, but for the supernatural power to accomplish them:

- The ability to love as God loves (Romans 5:5)
- Overcome the flesh (Romans 8:13, 1 Thessalonians 4:8, James 4:5)
- Help with our prayers (Romans 8:26 – 27)

²⁶⁷ John 14:17, Acts 2:38, Romans 8:9 – 16

²⁶⁸ Romans 12:6 – 8, Ephesians 3:7, 4:7 – 16, Acts 8:20, 10:45, 11:17, 1 Corinthians 12:1, 4, 9, 28, 30, 31, 13:2, 14:1, 12.

²⁶⁹ John 3:5 – 8, 4:23 – 24

²⁷⁰ Joel 2:28, Isaiah 44:3, Ezekiel 39:29

- Hope (Romans 15:13)
- Transformed into the image of Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:18)
- Led (Galatians 5:18)
- Strengthened in the inner man (Ephesians 3:14 – 19)
- Collectively built into a dwelling place for God (Ephesians 2:22)
- Joy (1 Thessalonians 1:6)
- Renewal (Titus 3:5)
- Sanctified by the Spirit (2 Thessalonians 2:13, 1 Peter 1:2, Romans 15:16)
- Enlightenment (Hebrews 6:4 – 5)

Does God Hear the Prayers of Sinners?

“We know that God does not hear sinners.”²⁷¹ This line was spoken by the recently-cured man-born-blind. Certainly, his sentiments were recorded accurately, but he was not inspired. Rather, he was repeating a popular teaching of the time. The same may be said concerning the friends of Job. In the end, God said that their lengthy speeches were just plain wrong.²⁷² On the same line, Jesus was said to have a demon²⁷³ and to have spoken blasphemy.²⁷⁴ In each case, the accusation was recorded accurately, but the speaker was mistaken.

Although that comment by the man-born-blind does not settle the issue, the question remains. Does God hear the prayers of sinners?

First, what is meant by “hear”? Certainly, God can be said to take notice of everything that happens on earth. So, the question is not about sound waves but God’s attention to the utterances of certain individuals. Of course, a prayer from anyone does not obligate God to do what has been requested. So, the question is whether God considers the requests of a sinner, or just ignores them.

Second, what is meant by “sinner”? In a manner of speaking, everyone may be classified a sinner: “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”²⁷⁵ Among the faithful, sins are common: “I write to you so that you may not sin. And, if anyone sins...”²⁷⁶ The apostle called himself “the chief of sinners” in the present tense.²⁷⁷ To further muddy the water, a sinner who prays is, by the action of praying, reaching out to God. At what point does this qualify as faith?

So, the original questions must be reworded to sweep away most of the imprecision. Does God sometimes respond positively to the prayers of outsiders, those whom God considers lacking sufficient faith to be saved? In Luke 11:13, Jesus characterized His listeners as “evil,” yet recommended that they ask God for the Spirit with an expectation of success. In Acts 10:1 – 2, Cornelius was described in flattering terms. God heard him, yet he was not yet a Christian in a time when the gospel was available. These two examples show that the answer is not straightforward. God does not seem to have such a black-and-white system for deciding whose prayers to hear. Rather, the question may require a line of thinking that God does not employ.

²⁷¹ John 9:31

²⁷² Job 42:7

²⁷³ John 7:20

²⁷⁴ Matthew 26:65

²⁷⁵ Romans 5:8

²⁷⁶ 1 John 2:1

²⁷⁷ 1 Timothy 1:15

Several Old Testament passages have been cited in support of the position that the prayers of sinners go unheeded.

- Isaiah 59:2 “Your iniquities have separated you from God and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear.” Certainly, those described in this chapter of Isaiah were not to expect the favor of God while actively courting evil. However, at the end of the chapter, those who turn from transgression would be redeemed. The modern theological argument often neglects the possibility of that transition, asserting that anyone who has committed one or more transgressions should be classified “a sinner,” without allowing for a change.
- Malachi 1 describes those in his time who did not care about God at all, but are looking for minimum requirements like pagans.
- Jeremiah 14:10 – 12 God, in this case, swore that He would not have compassion on those who brought punishment on themselves.
- Proverbs 1:20 – 33 God promised to let calamity happen to those who brought it on themselves through ignoring God.
- Proverbs 21:13 This is very similar to the passages that say that we will be judged with the same standard by which we judge,²⁷⁸ that we will be shown mercy to the degree that we show mercy,²⁷⁹ and such like. God shuts His ears to those who shut theirs to the cries of the poor.
- Proverbs 28:9 God ignores those who ignore Him.

On several occasions, the Israelites cried out to God and were heard, despite the fact that they were obviously insincere, just wanting out of the present difficulty. Sometimes God had compassion, sometimes not. As Romans 9:15 (Exodus 33:19), “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.” Examples of times that God has heeded the prayers of Israel despite their sin:

- Exodus 3:7 God heard the cries of Israel in bondage. Yet, they did not follow Moses willingly, rebelled repeatedly, and complained constantly. Only Caleb and Joshua were deemed faithful enough to enter the Promised Land.
- Samson erred terribly, yet God heard him and gave him strength.
- 1 Samuel 9:16 The people wanted a king; God did not want a king for them. Yet, God heard their ill-conceived, faithless cry and helped them.
- David: Several psalms of David are his prayer after some great blunder.

The faithful were given several reasons why their prayers may be unfruitful. In fact, most passages cited to prove that “God does not hear the prayers of a sinner” are passages that were addressed to the faithful, explaining to them why their prayers did not bring the desired results.

- James 4:3 You ask and do not receive because you ask amiss.
- James 1:6 – 8 Let not the doubter suppose he will receive anything.
- Psalm 66:18 If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear.

God has a history of responding to some despite their sin, and not responding to some because of their sin. A blanket conclusion is not possible. God knows when His response would

²⁷⁸ Matthew 7:2

²⁷⁹ James 2:13

be fruitful and when He would be just enabling sin to continue. God's history neither includes nor excludes prayers based on the degree of sin being accomplished by that person. Rather, God appears to respond when His action may be profitable for the Kingdom, for the eternal family.

Chapter 6: Singing

Why Do Christians Sing?

Singing is common to almost all varieties of churches. A wide range of styles are represented. Arguments about how it should be done have been around since at least the 13th century, probably before that. The question that is often overlooked is why; why do Christians sing?

David wrote,²⁸⁰ “I will give thanks to You, O Lord, among the Gentiles, and sing praises to Your name.” Paul cited the verse²⁸¹ as proof that the Gentiles were intended to be a part of the Kingdom. Remarkably, singing was used in parallel with thanksgiving in an Old Testament passage about evangelism. Singing was to be a major method of transmitting the story of the One True and Living God among non-Israelites. Judging from the many volumes of writing by ancient rabbis, theology then and theology now have a disappointing commonality; both are far too complicated. The ideas about God could be efficaciously transmitted in song. Song lyrics, although sometimes literarily complex, must have a simple train of thought. The more imaginative the words, the simpler must be the message, or the hearer will get lost in the art and miss the objective. Singing should be a major communication tool for the gospel – and not just in church meetings, but also toward outsiders.

Jesus is said to have sung praises to God among His brethren (the faithful).²⁸² Although the gospels do not record Jesus singing any of His messages, the platform of the Psalms makes this entirely likely. Although Hebrew singing styles in the first century would be called chanting in ours, this was the music of that century and culture, and an effective means of communication of theological concepts.

The first-century church with the most problems was Corinth. Due to various cultural factors, those Christians messed up just about everything, including singing. So, Paul admonished them, “I will sing some Spirit, and I will also sing some understanding.”²⁸³ Singing by the faithful is not just a musical performance or a theological concept, but a demonstration of the work of the Spirit that dwells in them. Both facets are essential. Considering the context,²⁸⁴ one manifestation of the Spirit in Paul’s time could be the ability of the singer to switch to the language of the hearer without first learning the language. Modern application may include singing about topics that are exactly what the listener needed to hear, or a culturally appropriate adaptation, neither of which were humanly possible in the given circumstance but became possible by the power of the Spirit. At the same time, the meaning was clear and precise, also heavily dependent on the Spirit. Singing by the faithful was designed not as a ritual or an emotional release, or a soothing therapy as David played for King Saul. Rather, this singing was an effective communication enabled and molded by the Spirit.

Singing styles and genres have varied widely with culture and century. For example, the most popular style in this era is four-part harmony, which was in development as far back as the 13th century but not fully developed until the 16th. Before the 13th century, church music would have sounded very strange to us, and ours to them. Church music in the cultures of India

²⁸⁰ Psalm 18:49, 2 Samuel 22:50

²⁸¹ Romans 15:9

²⁸² Hebrews 2:12, Psalm 22:22

²⁸³ 1 Corinthians 14:15

²⁸⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:6 – 23

includes tones that Western music does not. Indians wonder why Western music sounds so anemic, while Westerners hear organized strangeness which to Indians is classical. Paul suggested that church music should cover a wide range of cultural expression: psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.²⁸⁵ However, the important part of both these passages is not the diversity of style but the purpose for doing it at all. In Ephesians, singing is a natural outgrowth of being “filled with the Spirit,” involving the heart of the singer, and including thanksgiving. The phrase, “to the Lord,” is appropriate in Paul’s application, but does not limit the scope of singing, since evangelism was also a major motivation. The Colossians passage describes singing as an outgrowth of wisdom pertaining to the Word of Christ, resulting in teaching and admonishing one another while demonstrating the gracious nature of God.

Finally, James noted that singing was a natural outgrowth of cheerfulness.²⁸⁶ Christians should be the most joyful people on earth, so singing should be a normal mode of expression.

The Mechanics of Achieving the Objectives

Instrumental accompaniment to religious music has a long history. King David organized the musical offerings in his reign, a generation before the Temple, when the ark was in Jerusalem and the tabernacle was in Gibeon.²⁸⁷ This system continued, apparently with God’s blessing,²⁸⁸ as long as the Temple stood.

The spiritual equivalents of both singing and musical accompaniment are in the present heaven.²⁸⁹

In the earthly church, instruments are not mentioned specifically, although modes of music that generally were accompanied with instruments are.

A spurious and nonsensical argument has been offered that, because instruments are not mentioned specifically, they cannot be used. A thorough debunking of this form of legalism may be found in the Appendix of the third volume in this series, *Hegemonies*. Unfortunately, another form of legalism was developed to oppose the first, advancing the equally ridiculous position that practices that are not specifically mentioned are permitted. Both overlook the purposes behind singing which will be enhanced by some modes and debilitated by others.

Further, many view the times during which Christians gather to be “worship.” Chapter 1: Worship shows that the faithful worship all the time, not at stated times, and the gatherings of Christians are not for that purpose, but for edification, comfort, stimulation, encouragement, and such like. Instrumental displays as “worship” defeat the purposes of singing. However, banning instruments entirely seems unwarranted. Rather, wisdom is required to separate the excuses from the enhancements. Certainly, applications will vary by tradition, but that should not be frightening or daunting. Clearly, the faithful have liberty, so variety is to be expected.

The opinions of prominent theologians are not Scripture. But, their conclusions are not unimportant. They were all very intelligent and committed to their beliefs. If we disagree with them, we need to know why.

²⁸⁵ Ephesians 5:18 – 21, Colossians 3:16

²⁸⁶ James 5:13

²⁸⁷ 1 Chronicles 16:39

²⁸⁸ Psalm 68:24 – 26, 33:1 – 5, 87:7

²⁸⁹ Revelation 5:8 – 9, 15:2

- Thomas Aquinas: Our church does not use musical instruments as harps and psalteries to praise God withal that she may not seem to Judaize.²⁹⁰
- John Calvin: Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of other shadows of the Law.²⁹¹
- Adam Clarke: I am an old man and an old minister; and I here declare that I never knew them productive of any good in the worship of God; and have reason to believe that they were productive of much evil. Music, as a science, I esteem and admire; but instruments in the house of God, I abominate and abhor.²⁹²
- Martin Luther: The organ in worship is an ensign of Baal.²⁹³
- Charles Spurgeon: The great congregation . . . has no organ to assist them in singing their praises to the God and Savior. They find their vocal organs sufficient. . . I would just as soon attempt to pray to God with mechanical instruments as to sing to Him with them.²⁹⁴
- John Wesley: I have no objection to instruments in the house of God, as long as they are neither seen nor heard.²⁹⁵

In summary, excesses of musical accompaniment to singing have been problematic for a very long time. Wisdom demands that we consider the purposes of singing: teaching outsiders about God, teaching and admonishing one another, and thanking God, all while displaying the work of the Spirit. Certainly, instruments should not compete with ability of the hearer to understand the words, since communication of ideas, not musical virtuosity, is the objective.

²⁹⁰ Aquin. 2da 2dae Quæst. 91 Artic 2..

²⁹¹ Calvin, J. *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* trans. James Anderson, Volume I (Edinburgh: The Edinburgh Printing Company, 1845), 539 (Psalm 33:2)

²⁹² Clarke, A. *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments: the Text...* (N. Bangs and J Emory, 1826) Volume 4, page 415, commentary on Amos 6:5.

²⁹³ Jennngs, D. *Jewish Antiquities* (London: T. Eggs & Son, 1837).

²⁹⁴ Spurgeon, C. *The Treasury of David* 1885 on Psalm 42:4.

²⁹⁵ Clarke, A. *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments: the Text...* (N. Bangs and J Emory, 1826) Volume 4, page 415, commentary on Amos 6:5.

Chapter 7: Baptism

Cleanness under the Law

Under the Law of Moses, certain animals were unclean.²⁹⁶ Touching an unclean animal, living or dead, made one unclean.²⁹⁷ Various medical conditions, or touching someone in that condition, also made one unclean.²⁹⁸ An unclean person could not participate in sacrificial meals.²⁹⁹

Cleanness rituals were accompanied by either immersion or sprinkling as specified for the type of uncleanness incurred. Immersion and sprinkling were not interchangeable or optional. As a side note, the process by which a Gentile became a Jew, which is not covered in the Law of Moses, included immersion. The connection with baptism is that Jewish people in the time of Jesus were familiar with religious immersion in water, so the practices of John the Baptist and Jesus were not viewed as strange, countercultural, or mysterious.

Jewish immersion was performed in a pool called a *mikveh*. Dozens had been constructed adjacent to the Temple entrances for the cleanness rituals, along with thousands more scattered around the country. The high-volume *mikvehs*, such as those at the Temple, had a stairway into the water divided by a handrail. The unclean went down one side; the clean emerged and came up the other side. The platform at the base of the steps brought the person to about shoulder depth, at which point the person simply ducked to be totally submerged. For those who were physically unclean as well as ritually, bathing facilities were provided at the top of the entry steps.

The Baptism of John and Jesus

The English word, baptism, was invented by the translators of the King James Version in 1611. The king had decreed that, if this new translation created religious problems or was untrue to the Greek text, the translators would be executed. But, the Church of England practiced sprinkling, not immersion. The Greek word, *baptizo*, should be translated immerse. To meet the two requirements for survival, the Greek scholars transliterated the word rather than translating it, passing the responsibility of explanation to the various and diverse clerics. The ruse worked; the translators lived; and the new word, baptize, has been part of the vocabulary of Christianity ever since.

“John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance into the remission of sins.”³⁰⁰ John’s primary message was that of “the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight the highway of the Lord.’”³⁰¹ So, this preparation for the Messianic kingdom included a ceremony illustrating repentance and becoming “clean.”

²⁹⁶ Leviticus 11

²⁹⁷ Leviticus 5:2, 7:19 – 21

²⁹⁸ Leviticus 12 – 15

²⁹⁹ Leviticus 7:20

³⁰⁰ Mark 1:4, cf Luke 3:1 – 18, Matthew 3:1 – 12, Mark 1:2 – 8,

³⁰¹ Isaiah 40:3, Matthew 3:3, John 1:23

After Jesus was baptized by John,³⁰² immersion was practiced by the disciples of both groups.³⁰³ These immersions were in water.³⁰⁴ However, John made mention of the fact that Jesus would later baptize in the Holy Spirit,³⁰⁵ which is described in the next section.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit

The promise that Jesus would baptize in the Holy Spirit (and fire, which is referenced only in Luke 3:16) does not contain much detail. The resurrected Jesus reminded the disciples of the promise and further informed them that the first instance of it would be “not many days from now.”³⁰⁶ Based on the fact that He also told them not to leave Jerusalem until it happened,³⁰⁷ this extra detail most likely was given near the time when He ascended,³⁰⁸ which was 40 days after He was resurrected.³⁰⁹

Several years later, Peter provided a clear statement of two occasions when this baptism in the Spirit occurred, when he recounted the conversion of the household of Cornelius, citing the promise and applying it to the events of Acts 2³¹⁰ and Acts 10.³¹¹ The events of Acts 19:1 – 7 in which Paul laid his hands on twelve men resulting in the Spirit coming upon them does not mention the promise, so may or may not be the same thing. The same may be said of Philip and the conversion of some Samaritans, upon whom the Spirit did not come until the apostles laid hands on them.³¹²

Certainly, this event can no longer occur in exactly the same way as the two known occasions because prophecy has passed away with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD,³¹³ as did miraculously learned languages,³¹⁴ demon possession,³¹⁵ and miraculously appointed leaders (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers).³¹⁶ However, claiming that God stopped providing miraculous help to the faithful would invalidate prayer, because any time God changes the course of events away from what would happen naturally in response to a request, a miracle happens. Further, gifts from God vary widely, far more than the very narrow list of prophets, tongues, demons, and leaders. Some of those promised gifts are wisdom,³¹⁷ enduring temptation,³¹⁸ enlightenment,³¹⁹ a gracious nature,³²⁰ serving, sharing, exhorting, and being

³⁰² Matthew 3:13 – 17, Mark 1:9 – 11, Luke 3:21 – 22

³⁰³ John 3:22 – 23, 4:1 – 2

³⁰⁴ Matthew 3:6, 11, 13, 16, Mark 1:5, 8, 9, Luke 3:16, John 1:26, 31, 33, 3:23

³⁰⁵ Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:5 – 9, Luke 3:16, John 1:25 – 33, Acts 1:5

³⁰⁶ Acts 1:5

³⁰⁷ Acts 1:4

³⁰⁸ Acts 1:9

³⁰⁹ Acts 1:3

³¹⁰ Acts 11:15, 2:4

³¹¹ Acts 11:16, 10:44

³¹² Acts 8:14 – 17

³¹³ Daniel 9:24 – 27 as confirmed by Luke 21:20; Zechariah 12 – 13 as confirmed by John 19:37; also 1 Corinthians 13:8 – 10

³¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:8

³¹⁵ Zechariah 13:2

³¹⁶ Ephesians 4:11 – 16

³¹⁷ James 1:5

³¹⁸ James 1:12

³¹⁹ Hebrews 6:4 – 5

³²⁰ 2 Corinthians 9:15

merciful.³²¹ For a complete description, see volume 1 of this work, *Think as a Spirit*, chapter 6, The Work of the Spirit.

Worthy of note is the confusion of prepositions inserted by modern translators. The actual phrase is “baptism in the Holy Spirit,” not “with” or “by.” The faithful all have the Spirit dwelling in them.³²² So, “immersed in the Holy Spirit” most likely refers to this new connection between the spirit of a faithful person and the divine Spirit. The visual representation of tongues and prophecy were necessary at the occasions of Acts 2 and Acts 10 so the observers would know that God had done something at that moment. Paul described a similarly visual sign of the miraculous transformation of the faithful caused by the indwelling Spirit, but without tongues and prophecy, in 2 Corinthians 3:16 – 4:11.

Clearly, the apostles baptized with water.³²³ The immersion in water is a symbol of several things, one of which is buying into the promises of the work of the indwelling Spirit. So, in that sense, every Christian is baptized in the Spirit. The resulting miraculous manifestation of the event varies from person to person. Gifts are different and entirely under God’s control. Certainly, prophecy, tongues, casting out demons, and miraculous appointment to leadership are off the table because the New Testament says so. Anything else that God promised is fair game if you can prove that God did it. Christianity is the only religion based on evidence, so we need to stick to what we can verify.

Symbolism of Christian Baptism

People cannot compel God to do things. Pagan religions are characterized by attempted manipulation of their gods, either to obligate the god to work in my behalf, or to get my god off my back. In contrast, our ritual of immersion cannot coerce God into accepting us. This is not to say that our rituals are not important. If God sent the message that we should do a certain practice, then we should if only because taking the advice of someone smarter than oneself just makes sense. Each ritual has a purpose described in God’s message about the practice. The focus must be on the purpose instead of the action, or we fall into the same problems about which the prophets harangued the Israelites and about which Jesus hammered the Pharisees.

I Accept that Jesus’ Sacrifice Atoned or Remitted My Sins

Jesus obtained redemption for all, once, when He offered His own blood in the tabernacle not made with hands, in heaven.³²⁴ The fact that He did this exactly once is a recurrent theme.³²⁵ That atoning sacrifice was for all people, not just for the faithful.³²⁶ In effect, Jesus paid off the right-and-wrong system so the idea of justice can no longer be used against us. Instead, the question at Judgment will be, “Faith or not?”

But every other facet of life runs on justice, right-and-wrong. From civil laws to interpersonal relationships to business, we have a sense that right should prevail and wrong

³²¹ Romans 12:6 – 8

³²² Romans 8:9, for example.

³²³ Acts 8:14 – 16, 8:36 – 38, 10:44 – 48, 11:16

³²⁴ Hebrews 9:11 – 14

³²⁵ Romans 6:10, Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 9:26, 9:28, 10:10, 1 Peter 3:18,

³²⁶ 1 John 2:2

should be punished. One of the symbolisms of immersion is that we accept this invisible redemption and stop carrying with us the mistakes of the past.

Saul of Tarsus, on the road to Damascus, learned that those tales of Jesus' resurrection were true. Saul was a young scholar, a quick thinker. Over the next three days of physical blindness, he had time to reflect on just how wrong he had been. When Ananias, under instructions from God, went to Saul to tell Saul of his being chosen for a special task (apostle to the Gentiles), Ananias said, "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord."³²⁷

Saul, along with the rest of humankind, was redeemed shortly after Jesus' ascension in Acts 1, years before Saul met Jesus. Saul's sins had been paid off then. Ananias said that Saul's sins would be washed away in his immersion because the one being baptized is, by that action, swearing to the legitimacy and effectiveness of that sacrifice previously offered at the altar in heaven.

Hebrews 10:22 uses the same image of washing and adds another image, sanctification, not through the offering of Jesus' blood, but through the sprinkling of it (see the next section for the full explanation). 1 Corinthians 6:11 uses the same multiple imagery.

Redemption (paying off a debt) and forgiveness (pushing aside a well-deserved negative reputation so that a relationship may be re-established) are different concepts with considerable overlap. In Colossians 2:11 – 15, Paul focuses on the forgiveness idea, although the illustration is a "certificate of debt." The principalities and powers whom He made a spectacle³²⁸ were the powers of evil, headed by Satan, who were quick to accuse humans for violations of any right-and-wrong precept,³²⁹ were defeated by removing the right-and-wrong economy once and for all. The one being baptized is acknowledging not only redemption but also re-establishment of a relationship of mutual trust.

At the first public preaching of the promises of the Good News, in response to the rising panic of the crowd upon realizing that they had participated in the execution of the Messiah for whom they, as a culture, had waited 1500 years, Peter said, "Repent, and let every one of you be immersed upon the quality of Jesus Christ into the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."³³⁰ Based on the quality of the life of Jesus, the 3000 who responded accepted the fact that their sins had been remitted already, although for them, the redemption had been only days or weeks earlier. In response to this display of faith, God promised to give each of them the Holy Spirit, whose primary functions were to be character development and adverse behavior suppression, described in a later section.

I Agree to be Reserved for Godly Purposes

We can choose to get on board with God's desires, or not. Immersion is our commitment to God that we accept certain responsibilities and commit to certain understandings. As a result of this commitment (and God knows whether the commitment is heartfelt or not), we are promised the gift of the Holy Spirit, the many facets of which are described elsewhere.³³¹ That gift is the ultimate act of mercy. For example, you may sympathize with someone who is having

³²⁷ Acts 9:1 – 19, 22:1 - 21

³²⁸ Colossians 2:15

³²⁹ Revelation 12:10

³³⁰ Acts 2:38

³³¹ *Think as a Spirit*, chapter 6, The Work of the Spirit.

a bad time; you may empathize if you have been in a similar situation. Both involve compassion: feeling bad for the other person. Mercy is one step beyond compassion, and includes a compelling desire to fix the problem that is causing the bad times. God gives us the Holy Spirit to repair the damage we have done to our characters, our consciences, or our way of thinking. I cannot take the Spirit; God must give it.

The rituals of the tabernacle or Temple described in the Law of Moses included many occasions when an object or person or people were sprinkled with blood. This symbolized the dedication of the thing or person sprinkled to being reserved for godly purposes (sanctified). Hebrews 10:22 includes both the redemption symbol (washing) and the sanctified symbol (hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience), as do other passages.³³²

Committing to sanctification is difficult because, if we look at ourselves objectively, our probability of success is essentially zero. We are damaged goods. So, in baptism, we are expressing confidence that the gift of the Spirit will enable us to maintain our reserved status.

As an illustration, if you play with a school basketball at school, that is appropriate. If you take the ball home, that is stealing. The ball is sanctified to school purposes. So, we are agreeing that our bodies are reserved exclusively for God's purposes, and that we are confident that the Holy Spirit will repair the damage incurred in the past so that we may stay on course.

I Commit to Being a Sacrifice Like Jesus

“Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death.”³³³ “Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”³³⁴ The purpose of Jesus death was as a sacrifice through which the demands of justice were met; the debt to justice incurred by the sins of all people was remitted.³³⁵

Two points of view are expressed: being the sacrifice and presenting the sacrifice, which is what Jesus did.³³⁶ How does one play out this symbolism in baptism?

The symbolism of Mosaic sacrifice was a celebration of forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God. As the sacrifice, the old person dies;³³⁷ a new person arises.³³⁸ Continuing the image of the sacrificial animal, the faithful person becomes the main course in a celebratory meal, that which nourishes others to a godly life.

The image of the presenter illustrates the attitude of the one being baptized, being ritually clean, bringing only the best, and participating in the celebration. So, the one being baptized is committing to a pure life, to placing the Kingdom at the top of the priority list, and rejoicing in God's plan for rescuing us from ourselves.

The phrase, “We were buried with Him through baptism into death,”³³⁸ obviously refers to the time Jesus was in the tomb. However, a simple application in baptism specific to that burial is not forthcoming. Rather than speculating, I prefer to think of this as just good writing since the person being baptized spends no appreciable time “buried.”

³³² 1 Corinthians 6:11, Ephesians 5:26

³³³ Romans 3:3

³³⁴ Romans 12:1

³³⁵ 1 John 2:2

³³⁶ Hebrews 9:14

³³⁷ Romans 6:6

³³⁸ Romans 6:4

I Am Confident that God will Grant the Power to Overcome the Flesh

Many have been taught that, as long as they are on earth, they will be helpless to overcome the desires of the flesh. Baptism symbolizes the opposite, that the one being baptized is accepting the promise of God that overcoming the deeds of the flesh can be accomplished through the power of the indwelling Spirit.³³⁹ We are freed from slavery to sin.³⁴⁰

The “newness of life” picture was introduced briefly in the section above.³³⁸ The concept is further illustrated in Colossians as overcoming through the power of God.³⁴¹ The letter to Titus describes the process as “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.”³⁴² The faithful must be confident in that power if overcoming is to happen.

I Am Confident of Being Resurrected to Life on Judgment Day

A necessary facet of faith is a realistic expectation of heaven.³⁴³ Baptism is one’s first announcement of that fact.³⁴⁴

A great many sincere church-goers have been taught that confidence is arrogance, or that they can never be certain that God approves of them. As explained in detail in another volume,³⁴³ one can be certain of acceptance when one sees the Spirit producing the humanly impossible through him or her.

Others have been taught that, once an individual commits to God once (whether through baptism or other denominational ordinance), resurrection and life in heaven are assured. Again, the doctrine has gone to seed, reaching unwarranted conclusions. First, the faithful do not lose their ability to make choices when co-habitation with the Spirit starts. Even the faithful have the ability to walk away. Suggesting that those who have rejected God are still acceptable because they once made a commitment is ludicrous. Heaven would be just like earth, only longer.

We cannot manipulate God into accepting us by participating in a ritual. That was the primary mistake of the Pharisees. Instead, the faithful have confidence based on two facts: God promised eternal life with Him to the faithful and the faithful see humanly impossible actions and attributes emanating from themselves. In baptism, that confidence begins, not because a box was marked on the salvation checklist, but because of God’s promises of visible results.

I Anticipate and Promise to Participate in Miraculous Unity

“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and all in one Spirit have been made to drink.”³⁴⁵

Historically, people do not get along. Certain allegiances have more or less importance in certain situations, but, bottom line, people never hang together for long. Jesus built on that fact when He prayed, “That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I in you, that they also may be one in US, that he world may believe that You sent Me.”³⁴⁶ An enduring proof for the

³³⁹ Romans 8:13

³⁴⁰ Romans 6:6

³⁴¹ Colossians 2:11 – 15

³⁴² Titus 3:5

³⁴³ See *Think As a Spirit*, chapter 4, “The Faith Economy”

³⁴⁴ Romans 6:5

³⁴⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:13

³⁴⁶ John 17:21

credibility of Jesus was to be the unity of future believers. The history of the church falls embarrassingly short.

In baptism, one swears to this evidentiary unity. In the surrounding context, unity is not uniformity, because everyone is different and has a different function. We have liberty; we are responsible for ourselves. But we still must display unity. The authority-driven church maintains unity by force, which contradicts liberty and personal responsibility and shows no confidence in the Spirit. Paul's point is that this required unity only happens by the power of the Spirit who indwells each faithful person. In baptism, we assert that we will participate in this miraculous role of the Spirit.

I Accept and Expect Transformation by the Spirit

“As many of you who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”³⁴⁷ The concept of putting on Christ is expanded elsewhere as “being transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord,”³⁴⁸ and “He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.”³⁴⁹

As explained in detail elsewhere,³⁵⁰ the Spirit that is given to each faithful person has as a primary function the character development of the individual. The transformation was described in the present tense in a letter to physically living Christians. The one being baptized is announcing a confident expectation that this Spirit will be given and that the Spirit will begin immediately regenerating the heart (character or spirit) of that person. However, the participation of the one baptized is necessary and expected.

I Expect to be Rescued from a Broken World

Peter wrote that Noah and the ark were an illustration to the faithful about baptism, that they should expect to be rescued from the brokenness of this world.³⁵¹ Noah did not get immersed in the Flood. Rather, the water carried him and his family away from the society that so troubled him. But, reading the story in Genesis,³⁵² Noah still had troubles after the waters receded. In the same way, Christians will be protected from the broken world of our time, although troubles will still come along.³⁵³ This protection is contained in the promise that the faithful cannot be overcome by anything.³⁵⁴ The various evils of this world will cause discomfort, but the faithful would prefer to move on anyway.³⁵⁵ Choosing to be baptized announces that those promises have been acknowledged and accepted.

³⁴⁷ Galatians 3:27

³⁴⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:18

³⁴⁹ Romans 8:29

³⁵⁰ See *Think As a Spirit*, chapter 6, “The Work of the Spirit.”

³⁵¹ 1 Peter 3:18 – 22

³⁵² Genesis 6 – 9

³⁵³ 1 Thessalonians 3:3, 2 Timothy 3:12, *et al*

³⁵⁴ John 10:28 – 29, Romans 8:38 – 39, Ephesians 6:11, James 4:7, 1 John 3:8, 4:4, Jude 24

³⁵⁵ Philippians 1:21, Romans 8:18 – 23

I Understand That the Spirit Will Dwell in Me

Baptism proclaims to all that the one being baptized expects to experience the Spirit taking up residence, also known as the gift of the Spirit and baptism in the Spirit.³⁵⁶ Most of the functions of this indwelling Spirit have to do with character development, understanding, and wisdom.³⁵⁷ The one baptized receives acknowledgement of that gift when superhuman behaviors become evident: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control.³⁵⁸ This familiar list does not exhaust the possibilities. The effects caused by the Spirit are not minimal or explainable or the result of ordinary human endeavor, but rather is epitomized by the disappearance of broken character traits that the one baptized had given up ever being able to fix. Certainly, all faithful people must participate in the transformation and not tempt God by being lazy. Further, my experience has been that focusing on the problem does not work because the focus is on failure, not growth. Rather, focus on building faith in its several facets and be surprised by the character repairs coming to light.

How Much Does One Need to Know to be Baptized Properly?

Many practice infant baptism, which is more fully addressed in the next section. Others come close to it with child baptism. Both miss the point. Baptism involves making several important and life-changing commitments. Those not yet in the abstract mode of thinking cannot comprehend them. Certainly, children can be coached to give the “right” answers to some simple questions, but no one would assert that they are capable of making life-time commitments like marriage, let alone become part of the Bride of Christ. Jesus’ comment at the end of the events surrounding the healing of a man born blind addresses this issue, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but you say, ‘We see.’ Therefore your sin remains.”³⁵⁹ If you cannot understand abstract reasoning, you are safe.

But what about those who are responsible for themselves? How much must they understand? Must they be able to recite all of the symbols embodied in the action? Giving a quantitative answer will end in legalism. Paul had the best illustration. The quality of the building materials will dictate the survivability of the structure.³⁶⁰ Baptism is not magic. We cannot manipulate God into accepting us. The objective is to be well and fully taught before committing to it. The critical measurement is the breadth of knowledge of the teacher. Each symbol must be understood in its context of the realm of spirits, not ritual adherence.

Infant Baptism

Infant baptism arises from the assumption that people are born with a corrupt nature, inclined toward evil from birth. As the theory goes, this depraved nature is inherited from our parents. All sin performed later in life is a consequence of this nature which remains with us even when we are forgiven. Further, guilt for sin is inherited.

³⁵⁶ Acts 2:38. See also Baptism in the Spirit above.

³⁵⁷ See *Think As a Spirit*, chapter 6, Work of the Spirit.

³⁵⁸ Galatians 5:22 – 23

³⁵⁹ John 9:41

³⁶⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:11 – 15

At least two explanations of how Jesus escaped this inherited sin are popular. Either explanation makes it hard to explain how Jesus was "tempted in all points just as we are."³⁶¹ Catholic Church doctrine asserts that Mary did not have this sinful nature, so she could not pass it on. They do not explain how Mary escaped inheriting sin. Others teach that sin is inherited only through the male parent. Since Jesus did not have an earthly father, He was not born sinful. No Scripture addresses this.

According to the assumption, we retain this sinful nature even after being redeemed, forgiven, and transformed. Therefore, the children of those who have been reckoned as righteous still inherit that sinful nature. Several Scriptures are used to support this understanding of the Scriptures.

- "In sin did my mother conceive me"³⁶² *In sin* modifies *mother*, not *me*, so the psalmist is either acknowledging his mother's sin, or the fact that his mother lived in a sinful world. This is part of an hyperbole. The psalmist laments that not only does he sin on his own, he was born into a sinful world. Proof that it is a figure of speech is in verse 7, where the cure for sin is found in a branch of hyssop. The author's point is that he has been very sinful for a long time. His purpose was not to describe inherited sin. The same author, David, wrote in another psalm the opposite view, that he was "cast upon Thee from the womb,"³⁶³ describing his lifelong commitment to the Lord.
- "The wicked are estranged from the womb."³⁶⁴ The next few lines reveal that this also is hyperbole, since the "wicked" are said to *go* astray, which involves choosing, and *speak* lies, which requires the ability to speak.
- "Visiting the impurity of the fathers on the children."³⁶⁵ Either this teaches inherited sin or inherited consequences, and one must have a reason to choose the figurative consequences rather than the literal sin. Ezekiel 18 (the whole chapter) specifically addresses the concept of inherited sin, denying that any such transfer of guilt from father to son is possible with God. So, what are inherited are consequences.
- "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth."³⁶⁶ In the Bible, a youth is anyone under thirty. Soldiers and bridegrooms have been described as youths. A youth is one who can make decisions, so a case for inherited sin cannot be made here.
- "You have been called a transgressor from the womb."³⁶⁷ Verse 1 of the chapter identifies the transgressor as the nation of Judah. From Old Testament history, it is quite true that the nation was sinful at its birth. But that has no connection to inherited sin in people.
- "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked"³⁶⁸ This line is in the midst of repeated comparisons between the righteous and the wicked. This one line cannot be taken out of its context to apply to all people since God applied it to only one of two groups.

³⁶¹ Hebrews 4:15

³⁶² Psalm 51:5

³⁶³ Psalm 22:10

³⁶⁴ Psalm 58:3

³⁶⁵ Exodus 20:5

³⁶⁶ Genesis 8:21

³⁶⁷ Isaiah 48:8

³⁶⁸ Jeremiah 17:9

- "So death passed upon all men."³⁶⁹ Reading the whole sentence, death passed to all men because they sinned, not because they inherited it. Secondly, the death that Adam introduced was spiritual death, not physical.
- "We are by nature children of wrath."³⁷⁰ - Many have wished to dispose of the word *nature* by redefining it as "long standing habit or custom." The literal meaning has no such connotation. It is used as we use it: that which is a part of our inherited make-up, including both physical attributes and instincts. The New Testament speaks of natural functions, natural branches, natural affection, divine nature, the nature of angels, and being by nature uncircumcised. (There is no equivalent Hebrew word, so there can be no Old Testament references.) This nature is not all bad, since "the Gentiles do by nature the things of the Law" (Romans 2:14), meaning that morality is instinctive. So, this nature in Ephesians is either literal and we are born with an instinct for sin or it is figurative, expressing the extremeness of our sin. If sin is instinctive and morality is instinctive, we are made with an inner conflict. But that is exactly the explanation used by many for Romans 7 (although the explanation requires circular logic and falls apart if one also reads Romans 8). Since the word *nature* is used only 14 times in the New Testament, it is difficult to determine if a figure of speech based on that word is intended. However, Galatians 2:15 seems to be such an example of figurative usage. Paul describes his relatives as "Jews by nature." Although one did become a member of the Kingdom of Israel by birth, Paul's point in that paragraph had to do with the works of the Law, which are certainly not instinctive. This alone is not proof that Ephesians 2:3 is figurative, but at least the possibility exists. In Ephesians 2, Paul's point is that Jews were no different than Gentiles in that they were equally sinful. To create a doctrine from one phrase of a paragraph not about inherited sin, in direct contradiction to an entire chapter of Ezekiel which was written specifically to combat that mistaken doctrine seems at least tenuous.

The concept of inherited sin is debunked in Ezekiel 18. The concept that babies are born with an inclination to sin is contradicted by the Scripture, "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes."³⁷¹ Further, the origin of Adam's sinful nature is not given. If guilt for sin is inherited, why is righteousness not inherited? Jesus redeemed all people of all time (not just the faithful) at one point in time, when He offered His own blood once and for all in the tabernacle in heaven.³⁷² The debt was paid long ago.

Three Odd Teachings

One Baptism

"In body and in Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; into the Lord, one faith; in baptism, into the God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."³⁷³

Disputes concerning whether the "one baptism" of the common translations is that of water or of the Spirit goes away when the literal text is used. Instead, the point of baptism here is its

³⁶⁹ Romans 5:12

³⁷⁰ Ephesians 2:3

³⁷¹ Ecclesiastes 7:29

³⁷² Hebrews 9:11 – 14, 24 – 28, 1 John 2:2

³⁷³ Ephesians 4:4 – 6

symbolism of merging “into” spiritual union with God, akin to the prayer of Jesus, “...that they may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us...”³⁷⁴

A Doctrine of the Immature

“Therefore, having left the beginning teachings about Christ, we should go upon consistency, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith upon God, of instruction of baptisms, of laying on of hands, moreover resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.”³⁷⁵

This list of sermon topics describes the most common subjects that have been taught in churches for two millennia. These topics were to be the foundation which leads to becoming consistent. The author had found that congregations were failing to move beyond repetition of basics to application of these simple ideas to the more complex situations of life. So, in this context, baptism is a teaching for the immature. Those who have made that commitment need to move on to weightier concepts.

Baptism for the Dead

“Otherwise, what will they do who are baptized on account of the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized on account of the dead?”³⁷⁶

The proper preposition of which “the dead” is the object has been debated. The most famous among those who claim that one may be baptized for the benefit of a dead person is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints along with its varieties. The point cannot be settled satisfactorily through analysis of Greek grammar because a minority will be unconvinced. A better argument arises from following each of the two positions to their logical results.

A practice has arisen in the LDS movement in which volunteers are baptized for long-dead and presumably unrighteous people so that the unforgiven may spend eternity in heaven. Variations on the doctrine provide baptism only for “good” people of history, or those who had not heard the message as described by the modern group. However, God’s purpose always has been to build a big family that will last based on two essential characteristics: mutual trust and selfless concern. If the process is short-circuited to include people without those traits, heaven quickly will become just like earth, only longer. If the deceased missed the message, or was unrepentant, God will handle each case appropriately. God has a history of getting the message to those who need to hear it. And the unrepentant are not suitable candidates for the long-term family.

Paul referenced the impact that deceased faithful people can have on the living. If a living person responds to the gospel as a result of the faithfulness exhibited by one now deceased, the living person is basing that decision on the potential for resurrection.

³⁷⁴ John 17:21

³⁷⁵ Hebrews 6:1 – 2

³⁷⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:29

Chapter 8: Tithes

Review of the Law

The tithe was composed of a tenth of all agricultural production: seed, fruit, and livestock.³⁷⁷ The assumption was made that the livestock tithe was of the increase since the previous year, not 10% of the entire herd each year, but the calculation method was not stated explicitly. Further, if herds were taxed only on the increase, then the cost of seed should be subtracted from agricultural harvest.³⁷⁸

“Redeeming a tithe,” has created significant controversy. The method of redeeming one’s tithe presumably would be with cash, 20% above market value. Various authors have offered explanations of situations when this might happen. A fanciful explanation, without foundation in the language, is that, if one failed to tithe, one could redeem oneself with a 20% late fee. Others claim, again without foundation, that cash contributions must be 20% higher than agricultural contributions. In contrast, two explanations fit the context, although only the first is economically feasible. If the farmer believed that commodity or livestock prices would increase more than 20%, he might find it advantageous to give cash at harvest time in hopes of future profit. Another possibility could arise if the farmer pledged the same produce twice. For example, if the farmer had contracted for 9000 bushels, expecting a harvest of 10000 bushels, but the actual yield was less than expected, the farmer may need to buy back some produce so as to meet his contractual obligation. However, this is unlikely since it would be cheaper to buy produce on the open market rather than pay the 20% penalty. Certainly, the Law gave opportunity for clever manipulation to lower the tax burden.

The tithe was not gathered in the same way each year. Every third year, the tithe was brought to a local storehouse. That produce was to be distributed over the next several years to the local Levites, the stranger, the orphans, and the widows.³⁷⁹ In the other years, the tithe was brought to a place of the Lord’s choosing (the tabernacle or Temple), but not all of it was turned over; a significant amount was used for a very large festival. Foodstuffs that had been designated as holy (a future sacrifice or tithe) could not be eaten in the region of residence, but only at the designated location. The Levite was not to be forgotten, but details are lacking.³⁸⁰

If the place of the Lord’s choosing were too far to transport the produce or livestock, the tithe could be converted to cash. At the tabernacle, the money was to be converted back into produce and then presented and/or eaten. The offeror could choose what foods to buy upon arrival at the tabernacle; the purchased food was not required to be of the same type as the sold food. The money was not to be donated, but only agricultural products.³⁸¹

From the tithe that was presented to the Levites, a tenth of the tenth was presented the Lord as an offering. The other 90% of the tithe was payment for services at the tabernacle, because the Levites did not receive a land inheritance. The tithe was to be presented according to the regulations for a “heave offering,”³⁸² summarized as a hind quarter of all animal offerings and most of the crop offerings. The offeror received back about 75% of each animal and a small

³⁷⁷ Leviticus 27:30 – 32

³⁷⁸ Deuteronomy 14:22

³⁷⁹ Deuteronomy 14:28 – 29, 26:12 – 13

³⁸⁰ Deuteronomy 12:6 – 28

³⁸¹ Deuteronomy 14:22 – 27

³⁸² Exodus 29:27 – 28, Leviticus 7:14, 32 – 34, 10:14 – 15, Numbers 6:20, 15:17 – 21, 18:8 – 20, 31:29, 41, Deuteronomy 12:5 – 19

amount of the grain, flour, wine, and oil, to be used for a large feast to be held in the tabernacle courts. The priest's payment could be taken out of the tabernacle area to their homes for storage and consumption. The entire family, not just the priests, could eat of it.³⁸³

Other Income for the Levites

As repeated many times in the Law, the tribe of Levi did not receive a land inheritance. Rather, they received 48 cities spread out relatively evenly across the original nation,³⁸⁴ which included the six cities of refuge. Included with each city was a belt of farmland around the town for their gardens and livestock. In addition to these cities and a portion of the tithe, the priests received substantial income from their portions of most sacrifices. So, the tribe of Levi dominated the leather trade (from the skins of the sacrifices), preserved meats, plus a substantial flow of grains, flour, wine, and oil. Hence, Levitical families tended to be merchants. Further, due in part to their charge to teach the people the words of the Law, and also because they were in the cities, not small farming communities, the Levites dominated the teaching profession in a highly literate society.

- A front quarter of the sacrifices from the consecration of priests became a heave offering, retained by the priests.³⁸⁵ Peace or thank offerings of grain as fine flour in unleavened cakes was mostly returned to the offeror. None was burned; one cake from each offering was retained by the priest.³⁸⁶ A front quarter of peace or thank offerings of animals went to the priest.³⁸⁷
- Grain offerings as fine flour (less a handful that was burned), or a grain offering as baked goods (less a loaf or two that were burned) went to the priests.³⁸⁸
- Sin and burnt offerings brought by the poor (one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour, less a handful which was burnt) went to the priest.³⁸⁹
- Sin offerings were retained by the priest.³⁹⁰ Trespass offerings (less some fat and the kidneys which were burned) were retained by the priests.³⁹¹ The hide of the sin and trespass offerings were retained by the priest.³⁹²
- In connection with a Nazirite vow, the priest retained a boiled shoulder of the sacrificial ram, one unleavened cake, one unleavened wafer, and quarters of two lambs.³⁹³
- The priests were to receive 1.1% of the spoils of war.³⁹⁴

³⁸³ Numbers 18:21 – 32

³⁸⁴ Joshua 21:1 – 42

³⁸⁵ Exodus 29:26 – 28

³⁸⁶ Leviticus 7:11 – 14

³⁸⁷ Leviticus 7:28 – 34, 10:13 – 15, Numbers 18:8 – 20

³⁸⁸ Leviticus 2:3 – 10, 6:14 – 18, 7:9 – 10

³⁸⁹ Leviticus 5:11 – 13, Numbers 28 – 29

³⁹⁰ Leviticus 6:24 – 30

³⁹¹ Leviticus 7:1 – 6, Deuteronomy 18:1 – 8

³⁹² Leviticus 7:7 – 8

³⁹³ Numbers 6:13 – 20

³⁹⁴ Numbers 31:25 – 31

Other Mentions of Tithes in the Scriptures

- Genesis 14:20 Abraham gave a tenth of his spoils of war to Melchizedek after rescuing Lot and his family. Giving a tenth of the spoils to God was the custom of the time.³⁹⁵ So, this action indicated that Abraham considered Melchizedek to be a proper priest of the only true God.
- Genesis 28:22 Immediately after the Jacob's Ladder vision, Jacob swore to give a tenth of his income to God.
- 2 Chronicles 31:2 – 12 During the reformation under Hezekiah, the tithe began to be practiced again. Hezekiah gave as the reason that the priests and Levites might devote themselves to the Law of the Lord.
- Nehemiah 10:32 – 39, 12:44, 13:5, 12 During the time of Nehemiah, the tithes were brought for the priests who were ministering in the house of God. The Levites received these tithes. A tithe of the tithes went to the storehouse in the Temple. The tithe was so that they would not neglect the house of God.
- Amos 4:4 Amos complained about the calf worship cult and its tithes.
- Malachi 3:8 – 10 Bringing less than the prescribed tithe was deemed robbery of God.
- Matthew 23:23, Luke 11:42 Jesus chastised the Pharisees for attending scrupulously to tithes while overlooking justice and mercy and faithfulness.
- Luke 18:12 A self-righteous Pharisee considered his tithe a mark of righteousness.
- Hebrews 7:5 – 10 The summation is that Abraham considered Melchizedek to be a legitimate priest of God. Further, Abraham considered Melchizedek to be greater than himself in some way. So, Melchizedek was presented with a tenth of the spoils of war. However, no reasons were given in the text for this gift. A reasonable conclusion is that Abraham considered this to be the right thing to do.

Is the Tithe God's Eternal Standard for Giving?

No reference is made in the New Testament of an individual Christian or group of Christians practicing the tithe. This lack of mention casts some doubt on whether the first century church maintained this practice. While this observation cannot disprove the existence of the practice, it seems odd that something of that magnitude would escape mention, considering the several descriptions of Christian sharing.³⁹⁶ The scene in Acts 4:35 describes people divesting personal wealth, not presenting a portion of income.

Two parts of the tithe cannot be reproduced in the church: presenting only agricultural products (not cash) and burning a portion of that which is presented.

Two aspects of the tithe may be difficult to apply to the church, largely dependent on one's view of church facilities and clergy. Many view church buildings as a convenience. Certainly, such facilities are not suggested or recommended in the New Testament, whereas part of the tithe was for facility maintenance. Many reject the position of a priestly class in the church, espousing the priesthood of all believers,³⁹⁷ so maintenance of the priestly class becomes obsolete.

³⁹⁵ Keil, C.F.; Delitzsch, F. *Commentary on the Old Testament* I:207, (Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1983)

³⁹⁶ Acts 2:45, 4:34, 1 Corinthians 16:1 – 9, 2 Corinthians 8:1 – 9:15, James 1:27, 2:14 – 17

³⁹⁷ 1 Peter 2:4 – 10, Revelation 1:6, 5:10, 20:6

Observations

The early Christians shared for many purposes: famine relief in Jerusalem, support of traveling teachers, support of teachers in general, elders, prisoners, widows, orphans, and ne'er-do-well brethren. This certainly does not exhaust the list, but it's a start.

Matthew 5:20 plainly states that the righteousness of the faithful must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. They were famous for making a great show of performing the tithe while finding loopholes to retain their wealth. Our sharing must significantly exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, both groups being agreed that a tenth was the requirement. Further, in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Paul was stunned by the liberality of the gifts of the Macedonians. Paul was a Pharisee, so he understood tithing. The gifts of the Macedonians must have been significantly greater than a tenth.

The Levites did not receive 10% of the gross national product. Rather, in two of three years, the Levites were invited to share in the sacrificial meals along with relatives, friends, and the needy, plus they kept significant parts of each offering. In the third year, the expense of the sacrificial meal was not included in the tithe. Rather, the whole tithe was made available to the Levite, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. The giver had the choice concerning with whom to share. The Israelites were cautioned not to overlook the Levite, but no specific proportion was due them. I see this as voting with your wallet.

The Israelites were composed of a vast majority of unfaithful and a minority of faithful people. Therefore, they needed laws to force them to share.³⁹⁸ If God had not made a law that 10% of their gross income was for sacrificial meals, the Levites, and the needy, such generosity probably would not have happened. The same is true today. Our government does not believe that its citizens will take care of the needy voluntarily, so sharing is enforced by law.

The tithe was 10% of gross income, not net income. The tithe would be between 30% and 50% of net income. When Israel became a monarchy, another tithe went to the government, then two-tenths. When the government tax hit 30%, there was a revolt.

The tithe was the first 10% harvested, not 10% of what had been gathered. The part to give came off the top as an estimate. If you exceeded your estimate, you could thank God later. If the estimate was high or, for example, there was a fire, God still got His.

A good way to spend a significant part of your income is to finance parties for the purpose of thanking God, to which friends, family, and the needy are invited.

Estimate what to share and do it. Don't wait until the storehouses are full; they never will be.³⁹⁹

Share your money as you see needs. God will not ask if you gave to the system, but if you helped those who needed it.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁸ 1 Timothy 1:9

³⁹⁹ Matthew 6:24 – 34

⁴⁰⁰ Matthew 25:31 – 46

Chapter 9: Women in the Church

Christian Marriage is an Illustration

The gender roles described in the New Testament are for Christians who respond to those roles by faith. Dictating gender roles to non-Christians would be as inappropriate as enforcing baptism or the Lord's Supper for unbelievers. Of course, many of the behaviors deemed acceptable by a culture are listed as unacceptable to God.⁴⁰¹ However, the church does not have the task of enforcing;⁴⁰² the civil government does,⁴⁰³ even though the civil government may be seriously off target at times.

Gender roles in the church have a purpose; Christian couples are living illustrations of the relationship between Jesus and His church.⁴⁰⁴ A Christian married to an unbeliever has a different role, which also is described in the New Testament.⁴⁰⁵

Many have applied this relationship in the same way as the Israelites used the Law of Moses, as regulations of human conduct, as commands. But that is not the case. The marriage relationship between two Christians is another of the many ways in which we illustrate the good news to the lost and to ourselves. Unfortunately, many times over the past twenty centuries the illustration has been taken out of its context and used only as a set of rules for the power structure of marriage, rather than as a teaching tool for understanding the gracious nature of God, developing that characteristic in ourselves, and relating to one another and God as spiritual beings.

After creation, God was not surprised by the relationship between male and female. Neither did He generate after the fact a framework for an existing relationship. God could have created people and their family connections in an infinite variety of ways. The animal kingdom includes a wide selection of models. Various animals participate in the birth and growth of their young in various ways, sometimes with both parents, sometimes with one, and sometimes with neither. Some animals mate for life, some not. Marriage between Christians is neither a necessity dictated by our physical composition nor a cultural construct. God set this up as part of the picture of the gospel that was to come to fruition in the church.

Interestingly, the illustration works both ways. Christian couples can look to the relationship of Jesus and the church as a model. The church can look to the relationship of marriage for help in relating to Jesus. Further, this illustration works well as a teaching tool for the lost so they can understand both relationships. Christian marriage is fundamentally different than the plethora of marriage styles found in the many cultures of this world. The organizational style of the church is fundamentally different than the various models of business and government. Unfortunately, this two-way illustration can and has been corrupted in many different ways. But, those various missteps can be corrected by looking for consistency. For example, the authoritarian model for marriage has no counterpart in the relationship of Jesus and His church. From the other direction, the authoritarian church leaves out the husband role altogether, or substitutes the written Scriptures in place of the Son. As a result, the church becomes a gaggle of wives working out a pecking order. The authoritarian husband finds no

⁴⁰¹ Example: Romans 1:24 – 32

⁴⁰² 1 Corinthians 5:9 – 13

⁴⁰³ Romans 13:1 – 7

⁴⁰⁴ Ephesians 5:21 – 33

⁴⁰⁵ 1 Corinthians 7:12 – 16, 1 Peter 3:1 – 2

counterpart in the church, since Jesus does not micromanage (although the leaders chosen by various groups do) but rather leads by serving.⁴⁰⁶ The same inconsistencies arise if wives or congregations usurp the leadership role.

The letter to the church at Ephesus is all about grace, and also contains significant sections about church leadership and Christian marriage. The first three chapters are a description of grace; the last three are the results of grace. The description has four sections: the relationships of grace, the proofs of grace, the memories of grace, and the qualities of grace. The results of grace also are four in number: unity, morality, subjection, and strength.

Although Christian marriage is described in chapter 5, the relationship or the leadership style of Jesus and the church is throughout the letter. All of those facets of leadership should be modelled in a Christian marriage, not just the ones in chapter 5, or the illustration will be incomplete.

Marriage is an Illustration of Grace to the Natural Man

“But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.”⁴⁰⁷ The natural man, the best that this world has to offer, cannot understand the good news. This fact could cause a problem for evangelism. Yet, the New Testament is filled with many occasions when the gospel was taught to outsiders with the expectation of understanding. The natural man can understand many things; evidence and logic are important tools. What Paul identifies as that which cannot be understood are the things of the Spirit, the things that the Spirit does that are not in the realm of normal human accomplishments. One of those things is leadership in the eternal kingdom. Good, honest, sincere people in whom the Spirit does not dwell have great difficulty comprehending the leadership style of the church. Their experience is limited to the business model and the government model, both authoritarian systems. Unfortunately, many congregations have not left that business and government baggage behind, but rather have dragged it into the church, resulting in an authority-driven leadership model rather than a selfless serving leadership model. God established the unique relationship of a Christian couple to model the leadership style of Jesus. Both relationships are based on grace, which is the collection of godly character traits.⁴⁰⁸

The Church is the Fullness of Jesus

“And He [the Father] put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him [Jesus] as head over all things in the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁶ Matthew 20:25 – 28

⁴⁰⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:14

⁴⁰⁸ See volume 3 of this series, *Hegemony*. Many have taught incorrectly that grace is unmerited favor – a legalistic concept. Looking up all the passages containing the word reveals that grace is a collective term that includes all of God’s character traits. When grace is shown to people by God, they are experiencing a response from an exactly balanced character, a gracious nature. The faithful are to develop the same gracious nature. For example, most of the epistles begin with “grace and peace.” Since the recipients have already experienced God’s gracious nature, being Christians, the author’s hope is that the readers develop that nature also, as well as experience peace.

⁴⁰⁹ Ephesians 1:22 – 23

“For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.”⁴¹⁰

The much-abused concept of subjection will be addressed in a following section. Here, the part of the marriage illustration under consideration is the concept of fullness. If the church is the fullness of Jesus, then a Christian wife is the fullness of her Christian husband. If Jesus fills the church, then the Christian husband fills his wife.

Fullness is the noun form of the verb “to be made full.” Literally, bread in a basket was called its fullness.⁴¹¹ Reaching a planned length of time was its fullness.⁴¹² When a need was satisfied, it had reached its fullness.⁴¹³ Well-satisfying joy was called fullness.⁴¹⁴ The concept in its more figurative sense was to reach the intended pinnacle.⁴¹⁵ So, the church, composed of both human and angelic spirits,⁴¹⁶ is the intended pinnacle of God’s plan which declared Jesus to have achieved His purpose. As the mature church is to reach the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,⁴¹⁷ the Christian wife is to reach full spiritual maturity. As Christ fills the church, the husband is responsible for building up his wife. The illustration to the outside world is that, in the church, leadership means total dedication to the needs and growth of the followers: service. In marriage, the husband is totally dedicated to developing the character, the glory, of his wife.

The church and its individual spirits are being built together as a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.⁴¹⁸ Outsiders have difficulty grasping the concept because, in general, outsiders are self-centered, focused on what is in it for them. The idea of being a dwelling place for God does not mesh well with the common objective of “going to heaven.” So, Christian marriage is the illustration in which the husband is focused on the spiritual development of his wife with the end result that he lives through her.

God’s purpose in creation is illustrated to angels by the church.⁴¹⁹ By virtue of their respective dwelling places, the “good” angels (not those exiled from heaven⁴²⁰ and presently chained in pits of darkness⁴²¹) must walk by sight and learn faith by observing the flesh-bound spirits who walk by faith. Outsiders have a similar problem. They cannot comprehend the concept of walking by faith because faith is outside their experience. Christian couples illustrate trust (faith). The husband trusts that the selfless love of Jesus will work in his leadership role in marriage. The wife trusts that following someone who has her best interests as the primary objective will work.

⁴¹⁰ Ephesians 5:23 – 24

⁴¹¹ Mark 8:30

⁴¹² Acts 7:23, John 7:8, Galatians 4:4, Ephesians 1:10

⁴¹³ Philippians 4:18

⁴¹⁴ Acts 2:28, 1 John 1:4, 2 John 12

⁴¹⁵ John 1:16, Romans 11:22, 11:25, 15:29, 1 Corinthians 10:26, 10:28, Ephesians 3:19, 4:13, Colossians 1:19, 2:9

⁴¹⁶ Hebrews 12:22 – 24

⁴¹⁷ Ephesians 4:13

⁴¹⁸ Ephesians 2:19 – 22

⁴¹⁹ Ephesians 3:9 – 12

⁴²⁰ Revelation 12:7 – 12

⁴²¹ 2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6

The Church Illustrates the Many-Faceted Wisdom of God

Paul preached among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, which is paralleled with the manifold wisdom of God later in the sentence.⁴²² The Christian marriage relationship illustrates this concept.

For example, the enmity between Jews and Gentiles was broken down by Jesus.⁴²³ But this was not the only culturally-induced schism. Paul, in other places, also referenced the problems of male-female equality, slave-free equality,⁴²⁴ and ethnic equality.⁴²⁵ Christian marriage was designed to illustrate how groups who normally had trouble getting along would become one in the church.

In the first century, various cultures had wildly different customs for the male-female relationship. In some, women had no standing, no rights. They often were of less worth than cattle. In other cultures, specifically Hellenistic culture, women were completely equal. In Jewish culture, worldly ideas had crept in, so, in many places, Jewish women had no standing, despite the many positive references to the role of women in the Law and the Prophets.⁴²⁶

In Ephesus, many cultures were represented, which posed a vexing problem for retailers. In some cultures, a woman could not form a binding contract, but only transmit information of her husband's bid. In other cultures, women could haggle and reach a legally binding agreement. To overcome this issue, retailers came up with a fashion statement. Since shawls were popular, if a woman wore her shawl over her head, she could not ratify a contract. If she wore it over her shoulders, she could. That practice was adopted by Paul for female prophets.⁴²⁷

Imagine the problems of many cultures being merged in the fledgling church. A Hellenistic woman would be accustomed to being independent of men, and would have felt superior to women in male-dominated societies. A woman from the other end of the spectrum would be accustomed to having no choices at all, so would find liberty an exciting prospect.

The wisdom of God was illustrated in Christian marriage. The independent wives voluntarily followed their Christian husbands so as to illustrate how independent people can be subject to Christ. Newly liberated wives voluntarily followed their Christian husbands to illustrate that even this new-found independence was of less value than a relationship with Jesus.

Another complex cultural issue was the extended family, the clan, the tribe, or the nation. Competition for loyalty was fierce. An ancient Arabic proverb enjoins, "Me against my brother; me and my brother against the family; me and my family against the clan; me and my clan against the tribe; me and my tribe against the nation; me and my nation against the world." Christian marriage was designed to illustrate that unity and loyalty are not in opposition. The "leave and cleave" prescription⁴²⁸ was specifically applied to Christ and His church.⁴²⁹ Yet, in the same short letter, gentle and humble unity was a guiding principle,⁴³⁰ not uniformity. Instead, the differences between people were celebrated as those differences worked together to

⁴²² Ephesians 3:8 – 12

⁴²³ Ephesians 2:14

⁴²⁴ Galatians 3:28

⁴²⁵ Colossians 3:11

⁴²⁶ For example, Proverbs 31:10 – 31

⁴²⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16

⁴²⁸ Genesis 2:24, Ephesians 5:31

⁴²⁹ Ephesians 5:32

⁴³⁰ Ephesians 4:1 – 6

the goal.⁴³¹ Christian marriage was designed to illustrate that people can be very different, as different as male and female, yet work together as equals and utilize the strengths of each to achieve a common goal. Certainly, Jesus is the head of the church. Husbands play that role. But Jesus demonstrated that leadership based on service and love was the only truly successful formula. Christian husbands are to model the same.

Further, just as Christians are enjoined to walk worthy of their calling,⁴³² Christian couples are enjoined to demonstrate the partnership of Jesus and the church, knowing that such a relationship is fitting, proper, and wise.⁴³³ Different cultures have had a diversity of outlooks on sexual relations. Political alliances, business partnerships, and procreation have, historically, been the most common motivations for marriage. Only recently and in the Western world has romance entered the picture. All of the aforementioned leave open the question of sexual relations outside of marriage. Most cultures boil it down to “don’t ask; don’t tell.” The church has not helped the matter by insisting that the goal was physical purity, a legalistic point of view. Many have taught that marriage was a lesser estate rather than a choice, even to the point of insisting that sin is transmitted from parents to children through the sexual union, a concept thorough debunked in the Scriptures.⁴³⁴ Paul summarized the designated context of intimacy as, “If you want to have sex, get married.”⁴³⁵ But remember that, in forming that relationship, the goal is not sex, but to illustrate the relationship of Christ and His church. The New Testament uses a variety of words to describe inappropriate sexual relations. But sex in a Christian marriage is euphemistically called a kindness or good will.⁴³⁶

Christian marriage also was designed to illustrate how God deals with the missteps of the faithful. The outside world uses various methods of behavior modification to achieve the desired relationship. In each case, the leader manipulates the follower into the leader’s objective. The church works differently. Using the letter to the Christians at Ephesus as an example, Paul extolled what they were doing right and prayed that they would improve.⁴³⁷ Positive interactions were enjoined rather than negative.⁴³⁸ God’s response to humans was governed by His gracious nature rather than being based on meeting expectations. This does not make sense to outsiders. Being patient and gentle in the outside world leads to chaos as followers realize that punishment is not on the horizon. Power relationships are the common experience. So, God designed Christian marriage to illustrate a far more successful model of mutual trust and selfless concern. Certainly, outsiders need the stick for government to function.⁴³⁹ But such relationships are not appropriate in the church.

And Gave Himself Up for Her

Unscrupulous men have used the subjection passages concerning marriage⁴⁴⁰ to gain authority over women, preventing even education and the right to participate in the planning of

⁴³¹ Ephesians 4:16

⁴³² Ephesians 4:1

⁴³³ Ephesians 5:3 – 4, 15

⁴³⁴ Ezekiel 18

⁴³⁵ 1 Corinthians 7:1 – 16, 25 – 40

⁴³⁶ *E.g.*, 1 Corinthians 7:3

⁴³⁷ Ephesians 1:15 – 19

⁴³⁸ Ephesians 4:29 – 32

⁴³⁹ 1 Timothy 1:9, Romans 13:4

⁴⁴⁰ Ephesians 5:24, Colossians 3:18, 1 Peter 3:1

their own lives. Terrible, sinful practices have been justified by the corruption of these Scriptures. Because of these departures from good reading comprehension, many, especially women, have been driven away from faith. The concept of marriage between two Christians is not an endorsement for a male-dominated society, but rather a call to a society in which the men give themselves up,⁴⁴¹ their health and well-being and their very lives, for their wives. This is a call to selflessness on the part of every Christian husband for the building up of his wife unto sanctification. Christian husbands are to model for the world Jesus' attitude toward the church.

Christian husbands illustrate the gracious nature of Jesus and His consistent godly character to a lost world in a way that is sometimes shocking, and always on the edge of being unnatural. All across the world, in every major society, men think they should run the show. Even in marriages where the wife clearly is the head, the disrespected husband believes that he should be in charge. Men in the world appeal to custom, to law, to the fact that they are bigger in order to gain authority. This is not grace but power. People understand power, not to mention ruthlessness and domination. They do not understand how a gracious nature can produce a viable relationship, for it is spiritually appraised.

The Greek language has many of the same verb tenses as English. But Greek has one that English does not, so it does not translate well. As an example, we could use what is called the active voice, "His foot kicked the ball." Or we could turn the sentence around and use what is called the passive voice, "The ball was kicked by his foot." Greek has one more voice, called the middle voice, "The ball allowed itself to be kicked by his foot."

In every description of subjection between individuals in the New Testament, subjection is in the middle voice. It includes the concept that the relationship was entered into voluntarily by the one who is in subjection. The New Testament always says, "Voluntarily subject yourselves" to husbands,⁴⁴⁰ or masters,⁴⁴² or leaders,⁴⁴³ or the government,⁴⁴⁴ or one another,⁴⁴⁵ or Jesus.⁴⁴⁶ The New Testament never tells those in leadership position to subjugate their respective followers. The subjection relationships in the New Testament are entered into voluntarily and with eagerness, not because of power or authority. Subjection in the church, simply put, is to let someone else lead because to do so achieves the objective better than retaining independence. The one submitting chooses to follow; those in leadership positions have no authority to compel it.

This is the crux of the problem with the worldly concept of male-dominated marriages. Comparing to the leadership role of Jesus, His bride has made numerous horrendous errors since its institution. Yet, He has continued to serve, build up, and nurture the church. Jesus does not insist that every decision originate with Him, but rather has provided a guidebook for staying between the ditches. Jesus, apparently, has confidence that His bride will come to good decisions without further direct input. Such is the illustration that Christian couples are to portray to the natural man; the church operates on mutual trust and selfless concern. Authority is not an issue as it is in the world.

⁴⁴¹ Ephesians 5:25

⁴⁴² 1 Peter 2:18

⁴⁴³ Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:5

⁴⁴⁴ Romans 13:1

⁴⁴⁵ Ephesians 5:21, 1 Peter 5:5

⁴⁴⁶ Ephesians 5:24

Responsibilities of the Husband in a Christian Couple

“Having cleansed her by the washing of water in the Word.”⁴⁴⁷

Since this section concerns Christian couples, the meaning of “washing of water” does not mean that the husband’s job is to immerse his wife, but that he must be certain that she is fully aware of the nine symbols inherent in baptism.⁴⁴⁸ Of course, first the husband would necessarily learn them himself. Much incomplete teaching has occurred in the church in the past, including in the first century, resulting in an inability to withstand the expected and unavoidable fires of life.⁴⁴⁹ The Christian couple model assumes that the husband and wife will both be well versed in the Scriptures and can teach this elementary concept either together or separately. The illustration to the natural man is that Jesus teaches His bride comprehensively. In many cultures, women were left ignorant of scholarly pursuits; husbands were assumed to have that responsibility. Instead, in the church, everyone is fully responsible, and therefore must be fully educated and able to educate.

Paul used the “holy and blameless” descriptor twice, once concerning all Christians⁴⁵⁰ and once concerning the task of the Christian husband.⁴⁵¹ The method by which all faithful people become such is through the work of the Spirit who dwells in them.⁴⁵² In the first part of Ephesians, Paul expressed this transformation as a promise, a blessing, a scheduled adoption. Such a picture is difficult for the natural man to comprehend, so it is illustrated by Christian couples. The husband immerses himself in the task of exposing his wife to the parade of God’s character traits (glory), the collection of those traits being generalized as grace. The husband’s success is not in his own character development, but in that of his wife. He focuses his efforts of increasing her faith such that the Spirit in her produces fruit that all can see.

Paul further illustrates this transformation as being made alive from the dead, to sit where Jesus is⁴⁵³ – and this seating was presented to the Christians of Ephesus as something that had already happened to them because it is in the past tense. That transformation is further described as a renewing of the mind.⁴⁵⁴ Again, such a scene can be appreciated only by those who think of themselves as spirits, which the natural man cannot do. So, Christian couples illustrate the concept as the husband, taking the Jesus role, becomes a gracious model for the development of his Christian wife whom he considers fully capable of being seated in the same realm as Jesus. The Christian husband does not take on an authoritarian role of carrying his wife to the goal, but of laboring to renew her.

A Christian husband has the responsibility to sanctify his wife, to reserve her for godly purposes.⁴⁵⁵ As an example, the things of the Temple were sanctified, reserved to a specific purpose; no other purpose was acceptable. Gold plates and cups were made for the Temple service and were sanctified to the same. The High Priest could not take them home to use at a family dinner. The problem was not that family dinners or fancy dinnerware were wrong, but

⁴⁴⁷ Ephesians 5:26

⁴⁴⁸ See Chapter 7: Baptism

⁴⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:10 – 17

⁴⁵⁰ Ephesians 1:4

⁴⁵¹ Ephesians 5:27

⁴⁵² See volume 1, *Think as a Spirit*. Chapter 6: The Work of the Spirit

⁴⁵³ Ephesians 2:5 – 6

⁴⁵⁴ Ephesians 4:23

⁴⁵⁵ Ephesians 5:26

those particular dishes and cups were sanctified to Temple service, so no other usage was permitted.

Jesus sanctified the church; He gave the church purpose – to spread the gospel, to build up the earth-bound Christians, and to instruct the spirits in heaven. Jesus does not personally accomplish any of those functions; He does it though the faithful. All actions of the church must point to those goals. Can the church own a business? There is nothing wrong with owning a business; there is nothing wrong with making a profit. But those activities are not the sanctified activity of the church. Should the church run a school? If the purpose is to impart a superior education so the graduates can make a good living, no. If the purpose is to develop godly character so the graduates can be good citizens of the kingdom of God, certainly yes. Can the church play basketball? If the point is to win the game, probably not. If the point is to develop character and teamwork and good health and to encounter people with whom to share the gospel, certainly yes. Sanctification is all about purpose.

A Christian husband sanctifies his Christian wife. But the question arises as to what her godly purposes might be. From the paragraph in Ephesians 5, her reserved purposes have to do with character development, holiness, and the Word. Like the church, her tasks revolve around spreading the gospel, building up fellow Christians, and instructing angels.

A Christian wife needs the means and opportunity to avail herself of development. Husbands are not the best instructors because men and women think differently. Rather, the husband plans for his wife to attend quality educational experiences in the church that are designed for women. Too often, wives must see to the house and the children first, and maybe squeeze in a nearby ladies' event. The reality should be that the husband rearranges his schedule to pick up the mundane tasks of the household so his wife will be free to grow. Christian husbands pave the way, and reap the benefits.

Wives of unbelievers will want to know how this relationship works, how to get it for themselves. Unbelieving husbands will be mystified by the relationship, but, when their own marriages are going through a rough patch, will want to know how this works. Not only does a Christian marriage illustrate the relationship of Jesus and His church, but also the character and virtue of Jesus being played out by the Christian couple, which is a draw, a calling, to the unbeliever.⁴⁵⁶

A Christian husband also nourishes his wife as the Lord does the church.⁴⁵⁷ In the same letter, nourishing the church was described as putting on the full armor of God,⁴⁵⁸ growing into the Temple of God,⁴⁵⁹ being rooted and grounded in love,⁴⁶⁰ and being renewed.⁴⁶¹ Each of those passages emphasized different skills needed by the faithful, which the Christian husband has the responsibility of providing for his Christian wife. In addition to the aforementioned holiness skills, the husband must provide a preparation for spreading the gospel, for building faith, for becoming adept at argumentation from the Word of God. Few husbands are highly skilled at those tasks, and, even if they are, may not be the best instructors for their own wives. So, Christian husbands seek training opportunities for their wives, which includes taking over her daily tasks so she can spend time on it.

⁴⁵⁶ 2 Peter 1:3

⁴⁵⁷ Ephesians 5:29

⁴⁵⁸ Ephesians 6:10 – 17

⁴⁵⁹ Ephesians 2:21 – 22

⁴⁶⁰ Ephesians 3:17 – 19

⁴⁶¹ Ephesians 4:23 – 24

In summary, the task of the Christian husband is to love his wife,⁴⁶² doing what is best for her regardless of the effect on himself. This is the leadership model used by Jesus which is illustrated by Christian marriage. However, authority is easier. A truism of this world is that leaders do not trust followers. Yet, Jesus trusts the church to conduct its affairs without direct intervention. Unfortunately, many church leaders throughout history have fallen into the cultural trap of failing to trust Jesus' leadership style and falling back into the worldly habit of authority. The distrust of leaders for followers, when carried over into marriage, results in today's pitiable divorce rate. But the authoritarian model allows the husband to deceive himself into feeling justified rather than inadequate. Feelings of inadequacy are a common problem in the church, resulting in disastrous cultural infestations. Paul addressed that problem in Ephesians, recommending boldness and confidence based on building up to Jesus level of faith.⁴⁶³ Authority is a sign of a lack of faith. Leading through serving illustrates confidence in the followers.

Responsibilities of the Wife in a Christian Couple

Angels have tremendous power and responsibility. Some of them have chosen to stay with God. Some were on the wrong side in the war in heaven⁴⁶⁴ and were exiled to earth for a short time,⁴⁶⁵ after which they were imprisoned in darkness until Judgment.⁴⁶⁶ Those who stayed with God chose to be subject to Him voluntarily, even though they did not yet understand faith⁴⁶⁷ and had no clue about when Judgment would happen.⁴⁶⁸ Wives are subject to their Christian husbands in the same way, having tremendous power, yet choosing to follow, not by force or subjugation, but voluntarily acting out the attitude of how the church follows Jesus.

Paul included some details of how this should play out.⁴⁶⁹ Unfortunately, cultural bias has influenced many translators and commentators, so those details need to be re-examined.

The males of a congregation are to lead the public prayers,⁴⁷⁰ not due to any deficiency in the women, but as an illustration of the way that Jesus intercedes for the church.⁴⁷¹ Interestingly, those men are cautioned not to think too highly of themselves, but to play their own roles well, as those who represent Jesus in this role-playing exercise, illustrating to the outsider the way that Jesus guides and helps the church. The women accede to this arrangement for the good of the illustration.

Further, the women are to dress modestly and to engage in good works⁴⁷² as a representation of the humility and good works of the church. Since the task of the men is to promote this behavior by providing appropriate experience and training, the women will be those who execute the actions of the church. Placing a man at the head of every committee violates the illustration; Jesus does not make every decision for every good work, but rather leaves the

⁴⁶² Ephesians 5:33

⁴⁶³ Ephesians 3:12

⁴⁶⁴ Revelation 12:7 – 8

⁴⁶⁵ Revelation 12:9 – 12

⁴⁶⁶ Jude 6, 2 Peter 2:4

⁴⁶⁷ Ephesians 3:10

⁴⁶⁸ Matthew 24:36, Revelation 5:3

⁴⁶⁹ 1 Timothy 2:8 – 12

⁴⁷⁰ 1 Timothy 2:8

⁴⁷¹ 1 John 2:1

⁴⁷² 1 Timothy 2:9 – 10

thinking and planning and operations to the church. So, the men provide the opportunities; the women pull it off without further interference.

The women are to learn uncontentiously.⁴⁷³ In the KJV, women are told to learn “in silence,” which is a travesty of translation, probably injected by the male-dominated society from which it sprang. The same word translated “in silence” also appears in 1 Timothy 2:2 and is translated “peaceable.” In the later context, the focus is on learning situations, so a better translation would be “uncontentious.” As explained above, the husbands are responsible for providing educational opportunities for their wives. However, the attitude of the student is important to the success of the instruction. Further, the attitude of the wives in this situation illustrates the way that the church listens to Jesus: uncontentiously. Certainly, every student must question everything. Just absorbing what the teacher says only solidifies misconceptions. The church must constantly question its own understandings and weed out the encroachments of culture. Women demonstrate this to outsiders, transmitting the concept that we do not park our brains at the door and simply accept the explanations offered. We question everything for the purpose of avoiding self-deception. But, we do this uncontentiously. We discuss; we do not argue. We examine everything carefully and keep the good stuff.⁴⁷⁴ 1 Timothy 2:12 should have been translated, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to act independently of a man, but to be peaceable.” The church turns to the instructions of Jesus for building a life of growth and good works. The church does not invent its own. The church does not act independently of Jesus. A man or woman who is unprepared to play out this illustration should not enter into the relationship in the first place. Between Christians, marriage has a specific and essential purpose that is of greater impact than intimacy.

Many have asked why women got stuck with the follower role. Many defective explanations have been offered. Simply put, women got that role because of Eve;⁴⁷⁵ part of Eve’s curse was to suffer under male leadership.⁴⁷⁶ Also, Adam got the leadership role because he was created first. As a side note, Paul addressed the other half of that curse by assuring women that the pain of childbirth will not be enough to separate them from their faith if they stick with the program.⁴⁷⁷

A final note concerning Christian wives: our romance-laced culture would like to read that the husband and wife “love” each other. Certainly, Christian husbands are enjoined to love their wives – to do what is best for them regardless of the effect on themselves. But the reverse is not mentioned. Rather, wives are to “fear” their husbands.⁴⁷⁸ The word unsupportably translated “respect” actually is from *phobos*, from which we get the English word, phobia. Rather than arbitrarily changing the word because it does not fit what may be expected, we must instead determine what Paul meant. The same wording is used earlier in the context, “Submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.” Various parts of speech of the same word are used 108 times in the New Testament. Inventing definitions for the same word allows translators to impose the meaning that fits their preconceptions.

⁴⁷³ 1 Timothy 2:11 – 12

⁴⁷⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5:21

⁴⁷⁵ 1 Timothy 2:13 – 14

⁴⁷⁶ Genesis 3:16

⁴⁷⁷ 1 Timothy 2:15

⁴⁷⁸ Ephesians 5:33

Certainly, the New Testament comforts the faithful with “Perfect love casts out fear.”⁴⁷⁹ Believers did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear.⁴⁸⁰ So, the fear recommended for wives is fear of the impact on outsiders if this role-play is not done well.

Mixed Marriages

Marriages between believers and unbelievers can happen for a number of reasons. A couple already may have been married in their culture, but only one later became a Christian. In many cultures, in times past and today, women have no choice as to whom they will marry. In some cultures, the men also may be pledged in marriage by the family without their consent. Of course, in modern Western culture, a believer may marry an unbeliever despite recommendations against it. Although a prohibition against forming such a union with an unbeliever is not specifically prohibited, widows are cautioned to remarry “in the Lord.”⁴⁸¹ Further, the general caution against mixing the table of the Lord with the table of demons⁴⁸² is worthy of contemplation. However, unlike under Ezra when the faithful of Israel were enjoined to put away pagan wives and the offspring of those unions,⁴⁸³ the New Testament enjoins the believer to stay in the relationship for the sake of converting the unbelieving spouse.⁴⁸⁴ Under Ezra, the purpose was to separate Israel from the outside world. Further, the Israelites were contractors, some faithful, mostly not. As a nation, they agreed to abstain from marrying outside the nation, so the marriages were illegal. Under the New Covenant, believers do not stay physically isolated, making the best of the situations in which they find themselves. Outsiders are not like the unbelieving Israelites who were under contractual obligation. Imagine the hindrance to the gospel if the church insisted that everyone divorce before becoming Christians.

Although the New Testament recognizes cultural marriage as legitimate, mixed marriages are not suitable for modeling the behavior of Jesus and His bride. In a mixed marriage, the focus is on the conversion of the unbeliever. In a Christian marriage, the focus is on acting out the illustration.

Among congregations which subjugate women, a woman married to an unbeliever creates difficulties for their doctrines. Obviously, such women cannot be a part of the role play for lack of a leading man. Submission to an unbeliever is problematic, particularly in regions of the world in which Islam has a significant presence. The unbelieving husband will command her to forsake Christ and become a Muslim. Peter’s prescription is to convert by exemplary conduct, not by submitting.⁴⁸⁵

The Role of the Unmarried

The last two decades before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Roman army were the worst times in all of history.⁴⁸⁶ So, Paul understandably counseled against getting

⁴⁷⁹ 1 John 4:18

⁴⁸⁰ Romans 8:15

⁴⁸¹ 1 Corinthians 7:39

⁴⁸² 1 Corinthians 10:21

⁴⁸³ Ezra 10

⁴⁸⁴ 1 Peter 3:1 – 2, 1 Corinthians 7:10 – 16

⁴⁸⁵ 1 Peter 3:1 – 2

⁴⁸⁶ Matthew 24:21

married in that period.⁴⁸⁷ Further, Paul advanced the truism that a married person, of necessity, had divided loyalties.⁴⁸⁸ But, although remaining single may be advantageous in terms of focus on the gospel, marriage was an appropriate option if sexual desires were strong⁴⁸⁹ or if cultural norms could not be overcome.⁴⁹⁰

Remaining unmarried was not a higher calling or a requirement for service, but a “gift from God” that should be considered.⁴⁹¹ Obviously, an unmarried woman could not play out a role in the Christ-and-His-church illustration. Congregations which subjugate women have great difficulty knowing what to do with single women. Many groups arbitrarily assign oversight of them to a male church leader, or require that they answer to their biological fathers, neither position being mentioned in the New Testament. Instead, the church must put single women into service. Of course, teaching in a mixed group and acting independently of men are off the table for other reasons,⁴⁹² but certainly she may organize, counsel, comfort, build up, and labor within the group with whatever skills she has.

Common Distractions

“Let women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the Law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church. Or did the word of God come to you only? Or was it you only that it reached?” (1 Corinthians 14:34 – 36)

The passage above has been cited by many to require women to be silent in church gatherings. This failure to consider the context has led to many ridiculous doctrines. For example, since women would have a very difficult time supervising children or singing or greeting one another if they could not speak in the presence of other Christians (some say in a group of mixed genders), an arbitrary start and end time has been advocated, generally between the first and last prayers of an assembly. The New Testament makes no mention of such a practice.

The context addresses the conduct of tongue-speakers and prophets in the assembly of the saints. Apparently, some tongue-speakers in Corinth had come to the conclusion that displaying their powers in the assembly was important. Paul corrected the idea by noting that tongues were a sign for outsiders, not believers. Further, some tongue-speakers and prophets had the idea that the Spirit overtook them and they had no control over their ecstatic utterances, so they should interrupt and take center-stage whenever they felt so moved. Paul corrected the misconception. Finally, some tongue-speakers and prophets thought highly of their messages, so assumed that everyone should be heard regardless of time or number of speakers. Paul corrected the misconception.⁴⁹³

The admonition in verse 34 is in that context. Female prophets were not to speak in the mixed-gender assembly. The conclusion that Paul meant mixed-gender arises from the fact that

⁴⁸⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:26

⁴⁸⁸ 1 Corinthians 7:32 – 35

⁴⁸⁹ 1 Corinthians 7:2 – 9

⁴⁹⁰ 1 Corinthians 7:36 – 38

⁴⁹¹ 1 Corinthians 7:7

⁴⁹² 1 Timothy 2:12

⁴⁹³ 1 Corinthians 14:22 – 33

female prophets existed,⁴⁹⁴ therefore they must be able to speak somewhere. Verse 36 is key. Paul asks a rhetorical question, “Do you think God was so shortsighted that He gave a message to you, a woman, but failed to give it to a male prophet for the mixed-gender meeting?”

“Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...” (1 Corinthians 11:4 – 16)

The passage above has led to the requirement that women in the assembly covering their heads. Certainly, the women noted in this passage are in a group, or prophecy would not make sense. When the setting of 1 Corinthians 14:22 – 40 is included, the passage must relate to a gathering of women in which a woman prophesies. She needed to demonstrate that she was not acting independently of men, but rather in concert.⁴⁹⁵ The head-covering, by virtue of the Greek word used to describe it, is a full covering, not unlike the Islamic hijab. As related above (The Church Illustrates the Many-Faceted Wisdom of God), this covering was unique to that period. Fortunately, prophets were predicted to stop around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD,⁴⁹⁶ so this cultural reference did not have a chance to cause problems in other centuries, climates, and cultures. God has not empowered female prophets since the close of the first century, so the practice or head coverings expired naturally.

Homosexuality and Homosexual Marriage

Homosexual marriage has become a political issue in the last several decades. But, homosexuality is not new. In the New Testament era, in many cultures, the practice was considered normal. Obviously, the Bible lists homosexuality as bad behavior along with many other acts.⁴⁹⁷

“Marriage” is not a concept reserved for the Kingdom of God. The marriages of unbelievers and mixed marriages were considered legitimate. The difference is that the New Testament function of marriage is to illustrate the relationship between Christ and His church. Obviously, cultural marriage is not.

Unfortunately, forcing homosexual marriage into the actuarial tables of insurance companies and then prohibiting them from charging defensible rates for that group has resulted in an increase in both health and life insurance premiums for traditional couples.

Of course, if given the opportunity to vote on the matter, Christians would opt for restricting the descriptor, marriage, to relationships of one man and one woman. But, the political decision to enlarge the definition to include homosexual marriage is not catastrophic to the church. In fact, this gives the faithful one more way to show a contrast between what ordinary people call marriage and what Christians call marriage. For example, many outsiders believe that couples get married if they want to have children. The Bible never mentions that as a motivation. In short, if a couple wants to have sex, get married. And, once married, the couple has as its objective the role-play of Christ and His church.

⁴⁹⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:5, Acts 21:9

⁴⁹⁵ 1 Timothy 2:12

⁴⁹⁶ Zechariah 13:1 – 2, Daniel 9:24 – 27

⁴⁹⁷ Romans 1:26 – 27, 1 Corinthians 6:9 – 10, 1 Timothy 1:9 – 10, Leviticus 18:22, 20:13

Christians are brought out of the behavior system into the faith system by the sacrifice of Jesus. Obviously, based on the many admonitions in the New Testament, early Christians had a difficult time accepting this. For outsiders, the believability of transformation is even harder. Only when outsiders see the transformation of believers through the power of the indwelling Spirit do the outsiders have evidence that this might just work.

Homosexuality is not the only bad behavior listed in the New Testament. Determining which bad behavior is worse would be the fuel for endless and pointless debate. The point is not to condemn the bad behavior of others, but to convince ourselves and outsiders that transformation is promised. Accepting bad behavior as inevitable is called self-deception. Our motive for good behavior is not fear of Judgment but to please God and enable the progress of the gospel.

So, present the good news to homosexuals. Let the Spirit do its thing. The problem will go away.