

The New Normal:

The Blurring of Natural Relationships:



(Photos Courtesy of Wikipedia)

Worshiping God in

Spirit and Truth

A Magazine for Understanding God's Truth

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from the desk of the pastor:

As a minister for over 45 years, I have struggled with a scriptural mandate that is expressed very plainly and straightforwardly several times: “You shall neither add to the word I command you, neither shall you diminish anything from it...” (Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:5, 6). If that mandate is taken at face value, how am I to teach concepts from the Bible that are unpopular with various religious, social, and political groups who do not share my concern with such a mandate (Colossians 3:23-25)? Why should I risk being “politically incorrect” and at variance with the common perceptions of what supposedly represents God’s *love*? Did the God who set forth that mandate not have enough savvy to understand that people will have different ideas and attitudes about what His love should be? Concepts that contradict one another? It is, after all, my business to “...correctly interpret the word of truth” and deliver it to mankind (2 Timothy 2:25). Whom, in the long run, do I *really* represent?

Three Factors to Consider

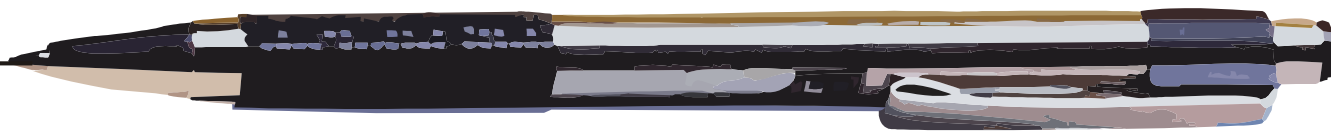
Society always seems to be on the cusp of accepting or rejecting a “new normal.” Old heresies become more acceptable. Old taboos become merely matters of personal choice. Old evils become things that really do not offend God. Dr. R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, once said this: “Americans are growing increasingly comfortable with a cafeteria-line-style spirituality in which they pick and choose whatever doctrines seem pleasing and comfortable and leave those that seem distasteful.” This kind of attitude has some very serious implications when one attempts to use the Bible as a source of authority in a world where “God” is constantly being made in the image of man (Romans 1:25).

There are three factors that I keep in mind when I study through holy writ and try to interpret God’s mind-set in terms of today’s behaviors: (1) the warning in Proverbs 14:12 about the “...way that seems right, but the ends thereof are the way of death...”; (2) Paul’s admonition in 2 Timothy 2:15 to “...rightly divide the word of truth...”; and (3) Jesus Christ’s warning in

Matthew 24:4, 5 that many will appropriate the name of Jesus Christ and *deceive* many about who He is and what He expects of us (see also Matthew 7:21-23; 2 Corinthians 11:4, 13-15, and Galatians 1:6, 7).

Somewhere among the 32,000+ modern-day “Christian” denominations are many who ignore the two warnings and the apostolic admonition. But...there must exist somewhere on earth a band of spiritual siblings who teach “...the faith which was once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). And...they, no doubt, are worshiping the True God in spirit and in truth (John 4:23, 24) – the God who declares that He does not change... that He is not duplicitous or fickle (see Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8, and James 1:17). It is inconceivable that God would have allowed His true people to be swallowed up and to disappear (read Matthew 16:13-19).

Those who want to throw out the Old Testament scriptures apparently do not consider that all of the writers of the New Testament had only the Old Testament scriptures for verifying the things that they taught as God’s truth. When Paul wrote 2 Timothy 3:16, 17, he was referring to the Old Testament. When Jesus Christ cited Deuteronomy 8:3 as He resisted Satan’s tempta-



tion (Matthew 4:4), He cited the Old Testament because that was the only scriptures He had available. Yet, many outwardly religious people think that the death of Jesus Christ made that scripture inadmissible for modern practice because it violates what they think the New Testament “new normal” represents. We need to be better informed about God’s word and what it teaches – rather than getting on an emotional bandwagon that greatly contradicts what God Himself has revealed.

Whom do God’s True Ministers Represent?

Pastor Rick Warren of the Saddleback Church caused a stir when he equated same-sex marriage with incest and sexual abuse. The Gay Community wanted him excluded from the Presidential Inaugural Program as punishment for his views. That seems to contradict several factors bound up in the First Amendment about freedom of speech and freedom of religion. What such a problem actually does is this: It brings national attention to the questions *ministers* face in the throes of social and religious upheavals: *Whom do I represent when I speak as a minister of God? Do I represent the progressives who believe that all things religious, social, and political should conform to the changes being hammered out day after day by those who want their approach to be considered “normal”? Dare I offend with straight talk and plain truth – or, must I force God’s truth to support men in their erroneous concepts of biblical interpretation by adding to or diminishing from His word? These are very real, very basic concerns.*

Martin Luther was foolish to believe that giving every individual believer the right to read and interpret scripture for himself – supposedly under the leadership of the Holy Spirit – would not have some unintended consequences. With the presence of 32,000+ competing, contradicting “Christian” denominations today, it would seem that there is a schizophrenic Holy Spirit

loose in the world. If each individual, so-called “believer” among them actually represents God, then God is, indeed, duplicitous, and we are left with no remedy for the religious chaos and confusion with which we are confronted. The “Politically Correct Police” will run roughshod over those who do not buckle under to the demands of the “new normal.”

It seems that we are constantly faced with the question about what Jesus would do in our present situation. Let’s take a brief survey to get a handle on the answer. When the tempter tried to get Him to turn some stones into bread so He could satisfy His hunger, He said that man is not to live by bread alone, but by *every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God* (Matthew 4:4; read also Deuteronomy 8:3). When He gave His Sermon on the Mount, He said: “Do not think that I came to annul the Law and the Prophets: I did not come to annul them, but to accomplish the things proclaimed in them” (Matthew 5:17; Isaiah 55:10, 11). When He prayed in Gethsemane before His crucifixion, He asked the Father to sanctify His disciples through His truth – and added: “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). This *word* – the Law and the Prophets – of which He spoke is the Old Testament, the only scripture He had at the time. When Paul said that scripture was “...given by inspiration of God...” (2 Timothy 3:16), he also was speaking of the Old Testament. I repeat the question: *What would Jesus do?*

In Deuteronomy 18:18, the Lord God told Moses: “I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like you, and *I will put my words into his mouth; and he will speak unto them all that I command him.*” Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of this prophecy (Hebrews 1:1, 2). What did He do? He did not seek His own will; He sought the will of the Father (John 5:17-31; 6:38-40; Hebrews 10:7). He taught the doctrine given to Him by the Father (John 7:16-18, 28, 29; 14:10, 24; 17:6-8, 14, 17). He did not speak His own words, but those given to Him by the Father (John 12:49; 14:24). He said that those who do not similarly yield to the Father’s will are His enemies – even though they might use His name to heal, preach, prophesy, and do other

great works (Matthew 7:21-23). But...if it is not done *according to the Father's will*, then it is **unacceptable**.

This is where I, as a minister and ambassador of Jesus Christ, face two great challenges: (1) *Whom do I represent*, and (2) *shall I speak my own words?* When I read Leviticus 18:1 and see that the Lord God is requiring Moses to put into effect a set of laws regarding sexual behavior, shall I ignore those requirements and teach that you can pursue whatever sexual practices you want to pursue? If the context of the scripture deals with sexual practices that are an *abomination* to God, can I reasonably and logically compare homosexuality to incest, sexual abuse, and bestiality? They seem to be, in God's mind, part of the same sexual fabric. Dare I say that those who accept such practices as the "new normal" are *enemies* of God because they do that which God concludes is *abominable*?

If Paul lists the types of people who will not inherit the Kingdom of God – and it includes male prostitutes, boys kept for sexual purposes, adulterers, and homosexuals (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; also see Revelation 22:14, 15) – dare I gainsay the word of God and teach otherwise? Not if I am to follow the example of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:21) and adhere to the will of God the Father.

Consider two noteworthy examples out of many in Scripture that have to do with God's servants being told to be quiet about God's truth. In each case, the problem was that those who resisted the servants' messages did not believe that the servants had a legitimate right or duty to say what they were saying. Amos 7:10-17 shows the priest of Bethel in the territory of the House of Israel telling Amos, a shepherd and fig picker from the hill country of the House of Judah, to get out of Israel's territory and never again come preaching his prophecies. If he wanted to preach, he should stay in Jewish territory and do it (read 1 Kings 12 to understand the background of this divided nation of Israel). Amos did not wither and run home under this abuse. In Acts 4, the disciples of Jesus Christ were threatened for teaching about Him (Acts 4:15-18). The disciples' an-

swer came in vv. 19, 20: "You can decide among yourselves whether or not it is right in the sight of God for us to obey you. [That decision will not be the deciding factor] because we can do nothing other than speak the things we have seen and heard." Because of that threat, the disciples tested God's mind about what was right in His sight (vv. 23-33). God's answer gave the disciples even greater resolve and power to teach God's truth as it has been revealed in His word (vv. 31-33).

I know that others have different points of view about these issues. They can suggest that there are special problems in scripture that allow them the leeway to be "Christian" and pursue these abhorrent sexual practices. They can call me ugly names and ask who gives me the right to judge others (read 1 Corinthians 6) – even use that magical question about whether or not I eat pork. They can even threaten me with physical harm, economic sanctions, and imprisonment. All of that notwithstanding, I am not allowed to disregard God's straight talk and plain truth. *I am not. And neither are you...if you are to live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.*

The Apostle John declares in 1 John 4:1-3 that there are different religious, social, and political spirits afoot in the world against which we must test the truth of God's word. Timidity on the part of God's true people will set into place a reluctance to be bold and faithful to the calling we have. John says this in v. 4: "**Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world.**" That is a truth that must be emblazoned upon our lives and tested in our minds and hearts as we serve the True and Living God.

In the Service of Jesus Christ,

Larry E. Ford, Pastor

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The Unchanging God

The Benefit of Immutability

(Hebrews 6:13-20)

How comforting is it to you that from age to age God is the same? One of the great hymns of the ages, “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken” (John Newton and Franz Joseph Hayden), makes several points that are well worth our attention in this regard: (a) God’s word cannot be broken (John 10:35 – that is, changed to fit only personal preferences); (b) nothing can shake God’s sure *repose* (Isaiah 55:10, 11 – that is, God’s placement of things like *trust* and *power* into someone/something...like His word), and (c) grace, which like the God who gives it, *never fails from age to age*. Why is it so important to you that God should have such an *unchanging* nature?

The answer to that question will make it very plain that mankind must not be found making “God” in his own image (see Exodus 20:1-7 and Romans 1:18-32). God’s will is to make mankind in *His* image (Genesis 1:26-28; Ephesians 1:4-14). A God who *changes* from age to age is not a dependable God. According to Scripture, it is not in the nature of God to change or to be duplicitous. Learn this lesson well because it can mean the difference between whether or not God finds you acceptable in His sight (see Matthew 7:21-23).

A Basic Scriptural Premise

The theme of this issue of *Spirit and Truth* has to do with the blurring of *natural* relationships through “new normals”. So, if I want to demonstrate that something is *natural*, then I must look for that which is *innate* and not *acquired* – that is, free from affectation. In scriptural applications, I must look for what God designed His creation to be in its *natural* state, not affected by perversions or unnatural applications *outside of His will*. Such affectations can and do include things that are the result of *sin* – in other words, if *sin* causes a change in the *nature* of something, it is not necessarily justifiable in God’s sight to allow the *change in nature* to be a replacement for the nature that He desires.

Let me illustrate this so you can better understand the point. Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:20 demonstrate that God’s *will* was that males and females would exist for the purpose of the perpetuation of the human species. Males cannot couple to accomplish that. Females cannot couple to accomplish that. In both cases, it is not in their *natures* to be able to do so. The union of the male and female was made possible by creating them to have the appropriate genitalia and body construction necessary for that *natural* relationship.

Jesus discusses in Matthew 19:3-12 the *nature* of what is called the “marriage” relationship. There are two important statements made in this part of scripture. Verse 6 says that mankind is not permitted by *God* to put *asunder* what He has joined together. The two Gen-

esis accounts cited above show God to have joined together the male/female relationship called “marriage.” It is that *natural* relationship that He desired. The second statement is found in v. 12 regarding three types of *eunuchs*: (1) some who are born that way, (2) some who are made to be that way by castration or other means, and (3) some who choose to be that way for religious reasons.

God allows men and women to be celibate if they choose to be. They are not *required* to get “married,” but *sexual relationships* are not acceptable to God outside of the man/woman “marriage” relationship. Those who cannot have male/female sexual relationships because of birth defects or accidents or other *unnatural* means have no choice. However, some of these situations are *affectations* that have come upon mankind because of *sin*. *Sin* most assuredly has consequences. Let me illustrate.

Ezekiel 18:4, 20 and Romans 6:23 (notice how both Testaments agree on this) declare that “...the wages of sin is *death*...” John declares that *sin* is the transgression of God’s Law (1 John 3:4). So, it is the *nature* of the relationship that God expects to have with mankind that they obey a clearly defined set of behavioral expectations (see Ephesians 1:4). *Death* is the ultimate judgment levied against the violation of those expectations. However, until that ultimate judgment is executed, the *sinner* is outside of the relationship that God desires and expects. Continuing to live in that *sinful* way of life also results in an array of consequences until the ultimate judgment is rendered (see Romans 8:1-8).

Let’s look at Romans 1:18-32. I’ll compress this a bit. Paul’s point in vv. 18-23 is that the *sinner* has committed some serious *sins*: (1) He has *suppressed* God’s truth (v. 18), and (2) he has changed the *power* and *glory* (Greek = *doxa* – majesty; grandeur) of God into something more like that of man and/or animals (vv. 21-23). For that, there are *consequences* until the ultimate *death* sentence is carried out (see Revelation 20:14,15 and Hebrews 9:27). Verse 25 adds an additional infraction: The sinner has changed the *truth* of God into a *lie*.

This is the problem of those described in Matthew 7:21-23; 24:4, 5; 2 Corinthians 11:4, 13-15; Galatians 1:6-9; 2 Peter 2; and Jude 4. Then, Paul discusses God’s reaction to this.

Verses 24, 26, and 28 show a *cascade effect* imposed by God because of the continued violation of God’s *natural law*: He withdraws His influence and intervention in the lives of those who choose to pursue the lifestyle that is at variance with His expectations. The expressions “gave them up to” and “gave them over to” are very instructive. In these expressions, we should understand the “offspring” and punishment of *sin*. God simply steps aside to allow the “offspring” of sin to be manifested: social, sexual, and religious degeneration.

It is an object lesson that the wages of sin also include its *consequences* prior to the execution of the death sentence. It begins with a trickle and ends with a flood that will eventually consume and overwhelm a *sinful* world. Each step makes the sinner more vulnerable to the next. Those who abandon God and His holy expectations lack the power to check the spread of the complete and utter degeneration of the social, sexual, and religious aspects of life. Paul’s comments here are *prophetic* (read Leviticus 18 – especially vv. 24-28).

It does no one any good to produce a *Queen James Bible* in which all references to homosexuality are expunged. It does no one any good to accuse Moses or the Jews of being homophobic and call them “dinosaurs.” It does governments no good to legitimize sexual practices abhorred by God and enforce their “normalcy” among the citizens.

Read all of the places where the Scripture says: “And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying...” This *Lord God* is the one who became Jesus Christ – thus, you cannot pit Jesus Christ against the “God of the Old Testament” (read also John 10:30-38). You cannot legitimately assume a “New Testament” religious attitude and divorce yourself from God’s historical attitude about what He has called *sin*. It is the *nature* of God to be *unchanging* (see Hebrews 13:8). ***That is a basic scriptural premise.***

Individual men and governments might win social, religious, and political battles as they legitimize among themselves those *unnatural relationships* opposed by God, but they do not have the power to win any battles of that nature beyond the grave (see 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; and Matthew 10:28)...and their victories might very well prevent them from having any kind of life beyond the grave.

What Hebrews 6:13-20; 13:8; Malachi 3:6, and James 1:17 Reveal

The Apostle Paul gives us an eye-opening look at the unchangeable nature of God in Hebrews 6:13-20 when he discusses the covenant that the Lord God made with Abraham. This discussion is based on Genesis 15. Paul points out that the Lord God undergirded His covenant with Abraham in two ways: (a) His solemn *promise* and (b) His solemn *oath*. Why did He do such a thing? Verses 17 and 18 say that God was "...willing more abundantly to show to the heirs of promise [see Galatians 3:8-29] the *immutability* of His counsel ...that by two *immutable* things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, ***we might have strong consolation....***" In this discussion, Paul was addressing the newly organized *New Testament Christian Church* with *God's* thoughts and ways based on *Old Testament* concepts of faith and practice.

The term *immutable* means that it *cannot* and *will not* change. Since that is the case, then we must go back to Genesis 15 to understand what the Lord God promised Abraham. We find that it is an expanse of land between the Nile and Euphrates Rivers. Because of the *unchanging nature* of God, Abraham was convinced that He intends to build a permanent city in that very territory (see Hebrews 11:8-10). Yet, few in traditional Christianity pay any attention to this and look forward to going to *heaven* when they die. A secondary point being made by Paul is that it makes a difference to God that you have faith in the *correct promise* – other-

wise, you are not acting according to the will of God and might find yourself greatly disappointed. Paul's comment in Hebrews 6:18, 19 is that the Genesis 15 account is that upon which the *Christian* should focus his faith and confidence as a sure and steadfast anchor of his hope and faith (see also Romans 4:13-25).

Malachi 3:6 says: "I am the Lord; I do not change." In order to get the sense of this statement, you need to read chapters 1 and 2. You will find that He is not speaking of changing His mind about something... because there is evidence that He can and does change His mind (read Exodus 31 as one example). For instance, He had decided before He created the orderly universe that the sinner would die (read Ephesians 1:4-14 and 1 Peter 1:18-21). Choosing "us" in Christ and choosing Christ as the sacrifice *before the creation of the orderly universe* shows that He allowed a *caveat* by which that death could be avoided. It shows that He allows Himself room to allow a given situation to be remedied through Christ instead of a summary execution of the death penalty when the first sin is committed.

His point in Malachi is that He has warned about the impending punishment of those who continue in sin without remorse or repentance, and...He will not change His mind about the punishment He has in mind. In this, He is declaring that He is not *duplicitous* – that is, saying one thing but meaning another.

What follows Malachi 3:6? A catalog of *sins* (transgressions of His laws and the covenant relationship) that must be repented of and remedied by changed behavior in the future. Upon proper repentance by the sinner, He will change His mind about executing him forever. If that is not forthcoming, then He will execute the punishment that He has determined. Read carefully Amos 9 and Jonah 3. In the same way, it should not be assumed that He has been *duplicitous* with regard to His declarations in Leviticus 18:22, 23 and 20:13, 15.

If you understand that the Lord God of the Old Testament is the one who became Jesus Christ, then Hebrews 13:8 should be very easily understood. Jesus Christ and God the Father are in complete agreement

(see John 10:24-38). Notice the span of time that demonstrates the unchanging nature of God: "...*Yesterday, today, and forever.*" More simply stated, He is what He is *forever without change*.

Think of the ramifications – that is, all of the branches of thought – to which this can be applied. The one, overriding, trunk-of-the-tree kind of thought strongly suggests that He has judged all generations of mankind *by the same standard*. Why? Because whatever *sin* is to Him, it has been the same from the first man and woman until this day. It will be the same long after our generation is dead and turned to dust. God is not interested in judging different ages/generations by different standards – as is suggested in Dispensational Theology. It would be inconsistent with His holy nature. It is strongly suggested in the favorite scripture of many: John 3:16-21. Note especially vv. 18, 19.

James uses an analogy from *nature* to explain God's unchanging nature. He writes in James 1:17, 19: "[With God] there is none of that changeableness which comes from changing shadows" (William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of James and Peter*; p. 62). James's point is that *nature* undergoes a change when even a shadow of any degree occurs... but God has no such characteristic. The *KJV* translates James's comment to read that there is "...no *variableness, neither shadow of turning*" (emphasis added). Plainly, then, we should have great comfort that God is not duplicitous and given to *chameleon* characteristics.

The Lesson of Philippians 2:6, 7

Paul certainly chose his words well in Philippians 2:6, 7 when he used three words to describe the One who became Jesus Christ: *being, form, and likeness* (*KJV*). *Being* is the Greek word *huparchein*, which means "innate, unchangeable, unalterable characteristics and abilities." So, whether He was in spirit or in flesh, He was still *God* (see Matthew 1:20-23 and John 1:1-3, 14). The word *form* is from the Greek word *morphe*,

which means "the essential nature that never alters." He will always be God and servant. *Likeness* is from the Greek word *schema*, which means "the essential form that continually alters."

Here is where God did change something about His nature. According to John 1:1-3, 14, Jesus was God, and He became a human being – which made Him subject to the continually changing nature of the human body as it moves from conception to old age and death. Despite His becoming a flesh-and-blood being, you can still apply Hebrews 13:8 to Jesus Christ. Although He changed His natural composition in order to be the sacrifice for our sins (see Hebrews 10:1-13), He did not change His holy, righteous character. Even in the flesh, He maintained the holy, righteous character that sets Him apart from the human condition (see Isaiah 55:6-11 and Hebrews 4:15). Let's see how this works.

Matthew 5:17-19

In Matthew 5:17-19, we have the word of Jesus Christ Himself that He did not come to *change* the Law and the Prophets. Not the slightest part of either of them would be abolished in favor of something else. As a matter of fact, heaven and earth would pass away before any suchlike thing would occur. He assures us that He came to *fulfill* the divine purposes for which the Law and the Prophets were intended. *Fulfill* means exactly that. Read also Luke 16:13-17.

For instance, the divine purpose of the New Covenant has not yet been fulfilled. You can see the fulfillment in scriptures like Jeremiah 31:31-34: All of mankind will have God's laws in their hearts and minds to the degree that there will be no sin among them and no need to try to get sinful man to repent because *there will be no sinful man*. You can see this in Isaiah 65:17-25. You can see this in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 where Paul describes the victory of Jesus Christ over *death* (read Romans 6:23). That presupposes His victory over *sin*. You can see the prophetic Revelation given to John

showing that Christ's ultimate victory will be over *death and the grave* (Revelation 20:14, 15). That accomplished, God will then execute the next prophetic event by creating a better quality heaven and earth in which sin and death do not exist (Revelation 21, 22).

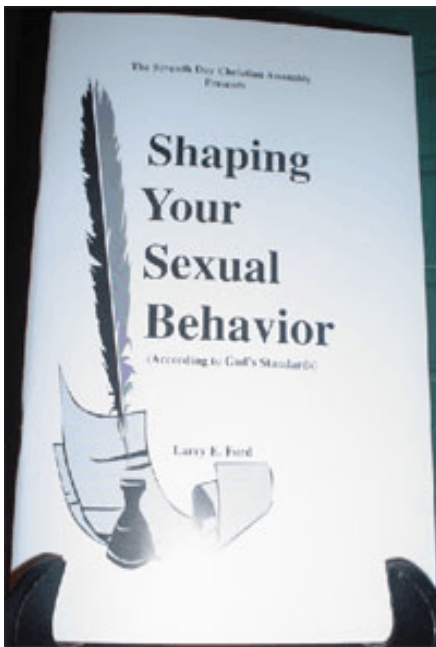
Also notice that Jesus inserts a *caveat* in these verses concerning those who faithfully teach these things and those who do not. A *caveat* is a warning that one should be careful about buying into something. You want to be sure that you are getting that for which you bargain. The warning is that the ones who choose to ignore and break the concepts bound up in the Law and the Prophets suffer a great disadvantage as compared to those who obey and teach them properly.

If you change or pervert God's revealed will, then it becomes increasingly difficult to test the truth of God's word or His promises or His faithfulness to either of them. If God is constantly changing from age

to age, the same result prevails. Chaos and confusion prevail. God cannot be trusted. Faith is precarious.

Our present age is a veritable petri dish in which various social, religious, and political "bacteria" and "virus" cultures are swabbed and tested against God's design and desired outcome. It is not overly difficult to prophesy what lies in the future for those who pursue a path that *perverts* the true gospel and changes God's truth into a lie. That judgment was determined long before God created the orderly universe. And...He has not changed His mind about it.

Our mission in this work is to explain to you the plain truth of God's holy word and to increase your faith in it. God's challenge to you is that you live by every word of truth that He has revealed to mankind. Please contact us if we can assist you.



Shaping Your Sexual Behavior (According to God's Standards)

There is an intense movement afoot in the world today to "normalize" profane sexual behavior, including fornication, adultery, homosexuality, man-boy relationships, sexual relationships between adults and children, same-sex marriages, and other sexual abnormalities. How prepared are you to deal with this great threat to the God-ordained institution of man-woman marriage and the family? How far can society go before the God of the Universe decides to spew it out in destruction? You need to know! Download this free booklet under "Publications" to get more information about this insidious problem.

Gaining Wisdom

(1 Corinthians 1:18-31)

Garland Croft

I have invited others to contribute articles to *Spirit and Truth* in an effort to help the readers get an idea about how the truth of God has affected their thinking and faith. There are two guest articles in this issue that address areas of concern involving the theme of the “new normals” that Christians have to confront relative to their faith and practice. “Gaining Wisdom” is Garland Croft’s (whom I recently ordained into the ministry) contribution. It is followed by an article written by Ryan McClure (a member of the Church of the Great God) titled “The New Normal.” The topics are well-reasoned and sincere efforts by these two Christian men to sort out social, religious, and political problems with which Christians of all ages have had to contend as they have endured persecutions and hardships for living by every word of God’s truth. We hope that you will benefit spiritually from these thoughts shared by these two men who trust God to lead them into His truth.

Larry E. Ford, Pastor

Hellenism: Its Influence on Christianity

It would be beneficial for everyone who is searching for God’s truth to learn the definition of the term *Hellenism*. No doubt, if the average church-going person of today was asked about Greek culture or philosophy, most of them would say that they know nothing about the subject. Yet, most of traditional Christianity’s belief system is wrapped around the concept of the immortal soul. Not knowing that this concept is credited to the famous Greek philosopher Plato, people think that existing forever as an immortal soul is something that comes from the pages of the Bible.

I can understand how people can believe this way because I once thought the same thing. I was taught this growing up in a Baptist church. I also remember the occasions when I would listen to the Televangelist Billy

Graham say things like: (a) God knew you long before you were born and (b) after you die, you will live on either in heaven or hell.

So, it’s easy to see why people think that this concept comes from the Bible. They accept it because it is something that they have always heard – or, it is something that they have been taught since early childhood. Many parents tell their children that all good people go to heaven when they die. [Some even tell their children that a dead pet has gone to heaven.] When you are taught something at a very early age, it is instilled in you – *instilled* meaning gradually placed into your mind drop by drop over a period of time.

I remember my 9th Grade History teacher telling our class how the Russian dictators instructed Russian teachers to give candy suckers to elementary children to indoctrinate them with the idea that God does not exist.

As they presented the suckers to the children, they would say: “Look who gives you candy suckers. The Premier; not Jesus Christ.” This, no doubt, has influenced the belief systems of many in Russia to this very day.

My wife and I often watch the game show “Jeopardy.” From time to time, the show will have some answers concerning the great mind and knowledge of this Greek philosopher, Plato. It seems to be a gesture of great respect when great minds such as his are acknowledged. Their great minds notwithstanding, who they are as people can be questionable.

My very successful brother-in-law proudly displays in his home a reproduction of Raphael’s famous painting, “The School of Athens,” which he painted on a palace wall in the Vatican in A.D. 1510. In the center of the painting are Plato and Aristotle – surrounded by over 30 other famous Greeks like Socrates, Pythagoras, Michelangelo, Da Vinci, and Raphael himself. All of these men are considered to have been the great thinkers of all time. Since all of these men did not live during the same time in history, you understand that it is just an imaginary idea from the mind of the famous artist Raphael. One might consider this to be a depiction of “a meeting of the [great] minds.”

Let’s examine this a bit further as we consider the entire painting as an expression of the Renaissance society for whom it was produced – the *Renaissance* being the name given to a time in human history to represent the great revival of art and learning in Europe in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. It represents a brand of *philosophy* that prevailed at the time – a “new normal.”

Because of what the entire picture displays, *Garner’s Art Through the Ages* (Kleiner and Mamlya; 12th edition) describes this as a *congregation* of the great philosophers, mathematicians, and scientists of the ancient world. They are depicted as though they are discussing and explaining to one another their various theories and ideas. Here’s where the overriding idea gets interesting: Overseeing their interactions with one another are giant statues of the Greek gods and goddesses

like Apollo and Athena...as though *they* are the champions and driving forces behind the Greek wisdom and arts.

Plato is holding one of his books, *Timaeus*, while pointing upward to heaven, the source of his so-called inspiration, while Aristotle carries one of his books, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and gestures toward the earth, from which his observations of reality sprang. The ancient philosophers who are concerned with the ultimate mysteries that transcend this world stand at Plato’s side. Those who are concerned with nature and human affairs stand at Aristotle’s side.

While I am not a Catholic by faith, it would be nice to visit the Vatican and the Sistine Chapel to see the great works of art, like “The School of Athens,” displayed there. I have more understanding of Michelangelo’s “Creation” on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel [even though its depiction of God stretching out His mighty hand to give life to Adam might violate the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4)] than I do of Raphael’s painting. There are two points I can make about this: (a) Most or all of the men pictured in “The School of Athens” are basically men who were *pagans*, not men of the God of the Bible; and (b) such art demonstrates how the Catholic Church [and, by extension, the majority of traditional Christianity] has entwined itself with Greek pagan philosophy and religion (see Deuteronomy 12:29-32).

What I Would Paint

If I had the talent to paint a picture of “the meeting of the [great] minds,” I would put Solomon in the picture along with David. Noah would have to be there... as would Adam and Methuselah. I would have to include Job and Moses. Paul and the disciples would definitely have to be there. Although we don’t know what He [or any of the others] looked like, I would have to put Jesus Christ in the center of the painting as the supreme authority on wisdom.

The Bible states that “...if any lacks wisdom, then let him ask of God...who gives it freely...and it will be given to him” (James 1:5). When I was a teenager, I learned that Solomon prayed for wisdom. In return, God gave him both wisdom and riches (1 Kings 3). So, I decided to pray for wisdom – and if God wanted to throw in the riches, that would also be alright with me. I am not presently a rich man compared to many in the United States, but I ask: What kind of price could be put on knowing God’s truth? How many of the great thinking minds of the world would give anything they possess to know what God’s people know (see 1 Peter 1:10-12)?

An Example of Man’s Wisdom

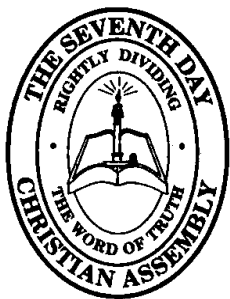
For those who understand God’s truth, it is easy to understand that the concept of the immortal soul is a false concept. Some might reason that it does no one any harm to believe in the concept. Even if that were true *in fact*, it still makes God a liar because He has revealed to us that man is innately mortal and has no such an attribute of immortality.

Even though Plato is generally credited with the concept of the immortal soul, he was not the first to hold this view. Some say that the Egyptians were the first to embrace the idea of the immortality of the soul while others say that the belief originated earlier in Babylon – which appears to be the case. I believe, however, that the author of the immortal soul concept came from the same individual who whispered to Eve: “You shall not surely die...” (Genesis 3:4, 5).

Romans 6:23 states that the *gift* of God is eternal life; so, immortality is not something that a person already possesses. According to traditional Christianity, however, a person already has immortality, and it is just a question of whether they go to heaven or hell when they die. By holding such a concept as a doctrinal belief supposedly embraced by Scripture, all of the inspired men who wrote the Scriptures also become liars because they taught against such a concept (see 2 Timothy 3:16, 17 and Romans 1:25). The Apostle Paul tells Timothy that *only God* has immortality (1 Timothy 6:16). In the great *resurrection* chapter of Scripture (1 Corinthians 15:50-54), Paul says that certain mortals will *put on immortality when Jesus Christ returns*. [If you have to “put on” immortality, then you do not presently have it.]

We know that the Romans adopted ideas and customs from the Greeks, just as the Greeks had adopted ideas from Persia and Babylon. If people would learn more about how nations have adopted religious, educational, and political ideas from those whom they conquered and/or with whom they associated, they could understand how such falsehoods were also adopted and passed along. Rome *Hellenized* their empire by spreading the Greek culture they adopted throughout the nations they conquered. The concept of the immortal soul was also there to be broadly spread among those nations. [At some point in time, that concept was the “new normal.”]

I challenge the readers to search out the history of this concept. The experience might prove to be most enlightening.



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The New Normal

The Changing Landscape of Morality

Ryan McClure

A few months ago, my wife and I were relaxing at home when a commercial advertising a new sitcom popped up on the screen. I don't think we had the volume up too loud, but it really didn't matter. Based on what I saw, I could tell it wasn't a show that we would tune in to watch. I'm not sure if you are like us, but as we see clips or advertisements of movies and shows, we almost always say either: (a) "I would like to see that," or (b) "No, we aren't going to watch that." At the end of the advertisement, the title of the new sitcom, "The New Normal," was displayed. Before the screen could fade to black, we both said: "We're *definitely* not going to watch that!"

The "New Normal" Premise

"The New Normal" is a sitcom added in September of 2012 to NBC's line-up of mindless shows aimed at entertaining the masses. When I did a search for information on the show, one of the results was NBC's home page. The tagline was this: "Two gay dads and a baby mama create a totally new kind of family comedy." The storyline of "The New Normal" centers around a gay couple that is financially stable, have great jobs, and are in a "loving relationship." They seem to have it all...except for one thing: a baby.

Enter the surrogate mom who is already a mother of one daughter and who brings along her mom into the equation. It is interesting to note that the mom's mother isn't just a mom – that would be boring. According to Wikipedia.org, she is: "...a staunchly Republican real estate agent prone to make outrageously racist and homophobic statements." The only thing they missed in this

description was her religious affiliation.

This show is another representation of the changing moral landscape of our country: It attempts to promote homosexuality and families made up of several adult figures as not only normal but socially, legally, and even morally acceptable.

After watching the advertisement for the show, my wife and I reflected on how life in society was when we were young. We almost grimaced when we thought of what life will be like when our children are grown...or even what it is going to be like as they grow up. We talked about the importance of being good parents, of establishing God's way as our way, and teaching our children that path of life that has an eternal purpose.

Some Necessary Questions

As we try to come to grips with God's thoughts and ways (see Isaiah 55:8, 9), we face a world that is grow-

ing more and more evil. It is increasingly difficult for us to get away from the daily grind and the degrading morality of this world. Being a Christian is becoming more and more difficult. Christianity and the spiritual convictions held by the believers of God's word, *The Holy Bible*, are under more and more scrutiny given the "progressive" and "inclusive" society that is being fostered in this 21st Century. As time marches on, it will become increasingly challenging to hold on to the truth and not accept the "new normals" in life. So, what are some of these "new normals" that we are encountering in society today?

Question #1: Are single-parent families a "new normal"?

According to singlemotherguide.com, single motherhood is very common. About half of today's mothers will spend at least some time as the sole custodial parent. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2011, 11.7 million families in the U.S. were headed by a single parent, 85.2% of which were headed by a female. Approximately 45% of single mothers have never married, and approximately 55% are divorced.

Question #2: Is the removal of God from our daily lives a "new normal"?

In 1963, the atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair won a lawsuit against the Baltimore School System. The decision was 8-1 in her favor to ban school prayer and label it "unconstitutional." Although not all prayer was *immediately* banned from schools, almost all public school prayer has been banned as the years have passed toward 2013. This is just one example of many, but the movement to remove prayer from schools, sporting events, and public gatherings is only a small part of how our society is squeezing God out of its life and making it "normal" to not involve Him in anything.

Question #3: Is same-sex marriage a "new normal"?

According to Wikipedia, same-sex marriage in the United States is recognized in several jurisdictions. As of January 2013, nine states (Iowa, Connecticut, Maryland, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, and Washington) and the District of Columbia and two Native American tribes have legalized same-sex marriage. [As of November 21, 2013, Illinois made the 16th state to do so – joining New Jersey, California, Hawaii, Delaware, Rhode Island, and Minnesota.] The Washington Cathedral – the seat of the Episcopal Church and one of the largest cathedrals in the United States and host of the official prayer service for the Presidential Inauguration in January 2013 – has decided to start hosting same-sex weddings (*The Washington Post*).

Question #4: Is *legalizing* what was at one time *outlawed* a "new normal"?

Colorado and Washington have become the first two states in the nation to legalize the recreational use of marijuana. This new law is not completely solidified as the states have to reconcile it with the fact that the Federal Government still considers it a crime to use and sell marijuana. It is interesting that these states are taking something considered *illegal* and *legalizing* it for the sake of money. Let's face it: *This is all about tax money!*

It is ironic that the Federal Government and the President are slow to rebuff these states for passing a law that contradicts federal law – especially since they were quick and precise in dealing negatively with states [like Texas and Arizona] that attempted to enforce existing, legal immigration laws.

Oh, I think that it is safe to say that things are changing. Activities and lifestyles that we once considered to be "normal" are changing into a "new" ver-

sion of “normal.” Many of these changes do not appear to be for the better of society – they are worse. But...let’s see what the Bible says in its *wisdom* literature.

“Nothing New Under the Sun”

We are told in 2 Timothy 3:1 that perilous and difficult times are coming. Yet, Ecclesiastes 1:9, 10 says that *there is nothing new under the sun*:

That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, “See, this is new”? It has already been in ancient times before us.

It is not that what is going on in our lives has not happened before. We can’t say: “Hey! This is a new one.” So, let’s take a look at two examples of this very thing ...and see the consequences involved (read 1 Corinthians 10:1-22).

In Genesis 6:5, we find this:

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that *every intent of his heart was only evil continually*.

We find the following in Genesis 18:20, 21:

And the Lord said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know.”

Luke 17:26-30 gives this prophecy, which includes our day and time:

And as it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the last days of the Son of Man: They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise as it was also in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

So, we see that this “new normal” – that is, the societal breakdown of the family, the removal of God from daily life, and the collective focus on the physical and the self – isn’t really *new* at all. It is another iteration of mankind’s cyclical folly.

The Path Forward

Let’s end on a positive note by reading 2 Peter 2:4-10 because it outlines how God saved His chosen people from times much like the one in which we are living... and how He will continue to save His chosen people in the times to come:

For God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell [*Tartaroo* - a place of confinement] and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until judgment; if He did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes He condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if He rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that

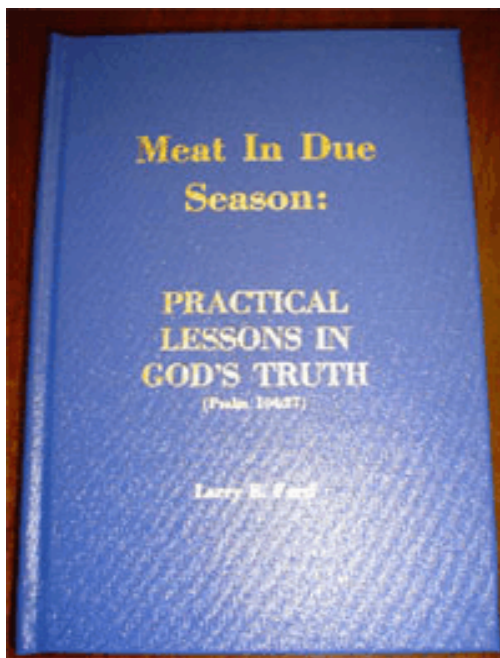
righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over the lawless deeds that he saw and heard); then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.

As we celebrate the marvelous things that God has planned for us, we must stay close to the “trunk of the tree” and the Rock of our salvation, Jesus Christ.

Like Noah and Lot, we too will have to persevere through evil times. We should not lose heart because God is able and willing to help us through them. We,

however, do need to do our part to strengthen our relationship with God so that His spirit will be strong in us and so that we will not give place in our hearts and minds to this world. Laodicean lukewarmness is always knocking on our doors (see Revelation 3:14-19).

It is times like these that will wear on us. We must be vigilant with our calling and love God’s truth. If we stray too far from God and His truth, we can easily accept the “new normal” as a way of life. The further we get from God, the more risk we run of gradually accepting evil as good, confusing the light with darkness, and drinking what is bitter while thinking that it is sweet (Isaiah 5:20).



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God’s truth, this book can show you what that means and how it can be accomplished. Are you ready for the freedom that *God’s truth* can bring to your life (John 8:31, 32)? This book is free under “Publications.” Download now. It’s a step in the right direction.

What Jesus Christ Says About Homosexuality

The “Squawker” challenged the readers of the *Albany* [Ga.] *Herald* to find any reference to Jesus Christ using the term *homosexuality* in the red-letter edition of the Bible. I willingly accepted the challenge...with the caveat that the larger question is whether or not you will *believe* and *practice* what God reveals in His word. The following is a paid advertisement that I put in the *Albany Herald* to answer the squawker’s challenge. I’m not sure that the squawker was fair to himself in the challenge – or, sufficiently knowledgeable about Jesus Christ to make such a challenge. Please read the following for some interesting insight into the matter.

Initial considerations

Jesus *did not use* the specific term *homosexuality*; however, He also did not use the following terms: *paraphilia, exhibitionism, fetishism, frotteurism, pedophilia, sexual masochism, sexual sadism, transvestite fetishism, voyeurism, or gender identity disorders* – and many others. So, what does this actually *prove*? Nothing. But ...does that mean that Jesus had *nothing* to say about them and *homosexuality* – and how God feels about them? Is it a *tacit endorsement* of homosexuality by Jesus Christ? No. John 21:25 says that it is possible that Jesus had addressed the issue in some form or another that is not recorded. Luke 16:19-31 is a statement by Jesus Christ that we have Moses and the prophets to instruct us (see especially vv. 29, 31). Read Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:17-19 to get another idea about His regard for Moses and the prophets.

Your problem is going to be whether or not you can

really surrender to *God’s will*. John 6:44-69 and Matthew 7:21-23 make two things very clear: (1) Some people will call themselves *disciples* of Christ up to the point that He demands something too difficult for them to accept; and (2) some so-called *disciples* will practice a type of “Christianity” they think is *God’s will* when, in fact, it is not. Both are deluded into thinking that God will accept whatever *they* want to believe and practice in His name (see Matthew 15:1-9 and John 4:23, 24).

Jesus is Quoted *Outside* the Four Gospels

Revelation 22:12-16 is red-lettered in my *New International Version* of the Bible. This is *Jesus Christ* delivering a prophecy from God the Father to the Apostle John (see Revelation 1:1, 2) about those who will be *excluded* from the Kingdom of God in the New Earth. In v. 15, two different types of sexual activity are cited that

God calls *abominable*: (1) the *dogs* and (2) the *sexually immoral*. What do they mean?

Deuteronomy 23:17, 18 is the specific law of God to which Revelation 22:15 refers. Deuteronomy 1:6 shows that Moses is reciting to all of Israel the words the *Lord God* spoke to him on Mt. Sinai. So, these are not the words of the mere human Moses. They are not ancient *human prejudices*. Read 2 Timothy 3:16 and understand that the *New Testament* had not yet been completed or canonized. Paul's reference is to the scriptures he used (the *Old Testament*)...and probably more specifically to the first five books (but, generally to Moses and the prophets). What is the context?

The *King James Version* uses the terms *whore*, *sodomite*, and *dog*. The *NIV* and others translate the term *dog* as being a *male prostitute*. The *male prostitute* is a *sodomite*. *Sodomy* is "carnal copulation with a member of the same sex or with an animal [bestiality] or unnatural carnal copulation with a member of the opposite sex...the penetration of the male organ into the mouth or anus of another." One specific synonym is *homosexuality*. Genesis 19:1-29 is an account of the Lord God's judgment of an entire society that was *socially* and *religiously* based on that practice. That's where the term originated.

In the Revelation account, it should be plain what Jesus Christ thinks about the various forms *homosexuality*. Lest you misunderstand totally, the *Lord God* of the Old Testament who gave this Law to Moses is, in fact, the *Word* who became flesh and lived among mankind as *Jesus Christ* (see John 1:1-3, 14). Can you handle this truth, or will you try to find a way to twist and pervert scripture so that it suits *your* ideas instead of *God's* truth?

Living by Every Word of God

Matthew 4:1-4 helps us understand Jesus' attitude. Satan was attempting to get Him to use His power to turn stones into bread. In v. 4, we find an important

statement: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by *every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God*" (emphasis added).

Here, Jesus cited Deuteronomy 8:1-6 in the Old Testament. It is a reference to the manna that the Lord God provided Israel between Egypt and the Promised Land (read Exodus 16). The Lord God used this experience for three basic reasons: (1) Exodus 16:4 says that He wanted to see if the Israelites *would be obedient to His laws*; (2) v. 12 says that He wanted them to learn that *He* is the Lord God – not any other so-called "gods"; and (3) He also showed them how to correctly define and keep holy the seventh-day Sabbath.

If you *are living by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God* because He wants you to obey His laws, recognize Him as the owner and controller of everything, and correctly observe His seventh-day Sabbath, does that mean that you can, *without penalty*, pick and choose what you wish to accept and reject – or walk away because it does not suit you? If Leviticus 18:1 says that the **Lord God** commanded Moses to reveal His attitude about unlawful sexual relations, can you be obedient to the *will of God* by choosing to ignore them? These laws cover *incest*, *adultery*, *homosexuality*, and *bestiality*. If you are willing to throw away the prohibition of *homosexuality*, are you also willing to throw away the prohibition of *bestiality*? How about *incest*? How about Deuteronomy 22:5 (*transvestite fetishism*)?

What about the *sexually immoral*? Read Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 of those who will be excluded from the Kingdom of God. This includes *homosexuals* and *heterosexuals*. Also read Romans 1:18-32 to understand what happens when God decides to allow mankind to suffer the natural results of his sins – with no intervention by God to cause those judgments to be avoided. Notice the social and sexual *degenerations* that occur. If this was inspired by God's Holy Spirit, how can we cast it aside as though it never occurred to God to confront it?

Too many professing, *heterosexual* "Christians" are guilty of *sexual immorality*. So, they cannot really

claim the moral high ground! *Living by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God* certainly includes being obedient to Leviticus 18 – including vv. 22, 23. Stop to read verses 24-30 and contemplate what the Lord God threatens when He says that these practices *defile the land* and cause the land to *vomit out its inhabitants* – just as He had done to the former inhabitants of Canaan to make room for the Israelites. He can do the same thing to us.

If you claim that God has *changed His mind* about these things and that they are now *acceptable in Christ*, then you make God a *liar* (see Romans 1:25). Read Numbers 23:16-19, Malachi 3:6, and James 1:16-18 and ask yourself if you can *really* handle God's truth. If you cannot or will not, then you have no real voice in this. If you still think that God's Law is done away through Jesus Christ, read 1 John 1:6-10; 2:3-6; 3:4; and 5:1-4.

No Personal *Judgment* Made Here

I am not your ultimate judge. I am a *messenger* commissioned by Jesus Christ to teach *God's truth* to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18-20). I follow the example of Jesus Christ as He put it in John 12:44-50: I didn't come to *judge* but to proclaim *salvation*. I'm not speaking my own words; I'm speaking those provided by God Himself. It is important to recognize who inspired the scriptures that show us the way to eternal life. It is important to live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. If we think that it is not worthwhile to retain God in our knowledge, then we should be prepared to be turned over to the consequences of a reprobate mind (Romans 1:28, 32). Those are God's words, not mine.

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Of Pork, Legalism, Phobias, and God's Love

After I posted the above advertisement in the *Albany Herald*, there was a bit of an outburst of opposition to it. One squawker asked if I eat *pork*. It is not difficult to figure out his reasoning: "You depend on the Old Testament for your beliefs about *homosexuality*. So, if you eat *pork*, then you are not very consistent in your beliefs." Another accused me of *legalism* because of my Old Testament quotes – that is, too strict of a dependence on *law* in preference to *faith*. One of the paper's editors – who usually uses some line from a rock-and-roll song as a theme for his commentary – took me to task as if I was not progressive enough socially or religiously. In a faintly veiled way, he accused me of being homophobic, smug, judgmental, a stone thrower, and afraid to change with the times in which we live. He finished off his fine piece of editorializing with the question that sounds more like a school yard taunt than a reasoned argument: "What are you afraid of?"

Below is the answer I wrote and was prepared to pay for as an advertisement. Then I remembered the admonition about giving that which is holy unto the dogs and casting one's pearls before swine (Matthew 7:6). It is an admonishment not to waste your time with people who will only trivialize valuable lessons in obedience and wisdom and then use the trivialization to: (a) denigrate the lesson material and its sources and (b) try to tear you apart in the process. I decided not to buy the ad space. I am making that advertisement available to you now because I believe it to be valuable information in this discussion for those who are concerned about being obedient to God and living by His thoughts and ways (see Isaiah 55:8, 9 and John 4:23, 24). Please study Proverbs 18:13.

God's Legal System

It is an interesting spiritual irony that God's *law requires* us to *love*. Jesus said so in Matthew 22:35-40 when He cited two great *commandments*: You must *love* God supremely and *love* your neighbor as yourself. Who in his right mind would have called Jesus *legalistic* for citing these *laws* from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18? Read the entire contexts of both citations. Who in his right mind would have expressed a veiled contempt for *Old Testament* scriptures when they are used by *Jesus Christ* – especially when that was the only scripture to which He could refer at the time?

It is further ironic that the Lord God revealed four specific *laws* that define what it means to *love God supremely* and six specific *laws* that define what it means to *love our neighbors as ourselves* (see Exodus 20:1-17). How many people in the 32,000+ so-called "Christian" denominations scattered all over the earth – that teach different, opposing doctrines from one another – would be called *legalistic* for advocating the posting of those same *Ten Commandments* in public buildings – many even putting them in their yards for the world to see? Could it represent *faith*? Let's explore this matter further and more thoroughly.

Whether or not one wishes to admit it, God has a

legal system that distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. In Genesis 2:17, there is a *commandment* given by the Lord God to the first human. There is a serious consequence given for disobedience: a *death sentence*. That is God's *law*.

Genesis 3 is the account of how the first man and his wife chose to ignore, relative to the intrusion of an adversarial spirit, both the commandment and the consequence in preference to doing things *their* way. Such a thing is called *self-righteousness*, which means that they decided to construct their own *legal system* about what *they* thought the acceptable and unacceptable behaviors should be in relationship to God. In order for mankind to be retrieved from the resulting death sentence, he would have to give up the *primacy of self* in favor of *God's primacy*. Why? Read Isaiah 55:8, 9.

Ephesians 1 is a frank discussion about how God decided, even before He had created the orderly universe, that His accepted standard of behavior would be based on *holiness, blamelessness, and love* (v. 4). Because He intended to give man an *independent mind*, He obviously understood that man might choose to go his own way. So, He made a choice between: (a) destroying the transgressor or (b) providing a means by which He could remediate him and subsequently "save" him. He chose to accomplish (b) through Jesus Christ. So, God's *legal system* hinges on two things: justice and mercy. Justice for insisting on your own righteousness and mercy for conforming to *God's* revealed righteousness (see Psalm 119:172 and Ezekiel 18:4-32).

Romans 1:18-32 is Paul's discussion of how angry God has become relative to those who *suppress* His truth by their *unrighteousness* – that is, by choosing their own moral standards rather than God's. There have been serious penalties for doing so. Verses 24, 26, and 28 show God's reaction: He has turned them over to the built-in consequences for violating His legal system. It is as if He said: "O.K. Let's see the results of doing things *your* way instead of my way." Read this passage and note the *social* and *sexual* consequences that have taken place in a cascading effect.

Read Galatians 5:14-21 to see another list. Then read 2 Timothy 3 to see what Paul understood will be the situation as this condition persists in the future. Please note the last part of v. 4 and vv. 5, 7. This is *self-righteousness* run amuck. So, as Dr. Phil would ask, "How is that working for you?"

Also, note vv. 14-17 where Paul recommends that Timothy continue his study of scripture (the Old Testament) in order to gain wisdom about salvation and faith in Jesus Christ. Verses 16 and 17 explain the benefits of such understanding: (1) acquiring doctrinal certainty, (2) expressing disapproval of unacceptable practices and thoughts, (3) pointing out where errors in practices and thoughts occur, and (4) receiving instruction in God's thoughts and ways. Are you willing to call into question Jesus, Paul, Peter, and John for making *legalistic quotes* from the Old Testament?

Phobias and Smugness

"What are you afraid of?" is a question that dates back to the Garden of Eden. Accusing someone of being a "...self-appointed arbiter of good and evil..." also does this. Read Genesis 3:1-6 with that in mind. The serpent heavily tinged his seduction of Eve with the idea that she was *afraid* of God and that God had lied to her because *He* was a self-appointed arbiter of good and evil. Any opinion commentator is subject to that question and label. It goes with the territory.

I find little common ground with those who advocate legalizing pot, unmarried co-habitation, and same-sex marriage, but I respect their First Amendment rights to express their opinions about them. I could label them as *heterophobic* and ask those "self-appointed arbiters of good and evil" what it is about *heterosexuality*, traditional marriage, and banning marijuana that *frightens* them. It is easy to paste a label on something.

In psychological terms, a *phobia* is an exaggerated, inexplicable, and disabling fear that can be both logical and illogical. It is used to protect one's ego against the

anxiety produced by that which is feared. It can also be called a type of *hatred*. I do not fear or hate the homosexual. Nor do I hate or fear the adulterer, thief, liar, whore, drug addict, or child molester. I am not disabled or trying to protect my ego. Because I *respect* God's sovereign right to define *sin*, I hate the *sin* that will bring about the destruction of the unrepentant sinner. I love the *sinner*s enough to desire their freedom from the sin and their salvation from the finiteness and earthly limitations of our present electro-chemical existence.

Smugness is being “annoyingly self-satisfied; complacent (willing to please; obliging).” I am neither. It is possible to explain what God has defined as *sin* and not be *phobic* or *smug*. That editor made a *smug* judgment (annoyingly self-satisfied) without having sufficient knowledge or grounds for doing so.

God's Definition of Love

John 14:15 equates loving Jesus Christ with keeping His *commandments*. That's a New Testament *legalistic quote* in the minds of some. He presses the point by telling us of the *necessity* of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit – what Paul says in Romans 8 is the driving force that enables Christians to “...fulfill the righteousness of the *law*...” (v. 4). Paul connects this to the New Covenant established by Jesus Christ and prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31-34 (see also Hebrews 8:6-13).

John sets up the instruction about the quandary faced by those who say they love God, yet live in *sin*. Our only recourse is to confess our sins and repent – seeking God's mercy through Jesus Christ (1 John 1:5-10). He pursues this train of thought in chapter 2:3-5 by pointing out that those who truly know God will keep His *commandments* – to do otherwise is to be a liar in whom the truth of God has no place. In 1 John 3:4, he makes clear what constitutes *sin*: transgressing the *law* of God. Now, read Romans 13:10.

In 1 John 3:18-24, John shows what separates God's people from the world: We love in deed and in truth –

and “...keep His commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (see also 1 John 4:6, 7). Yes, loving even the adulterer, drug addict, homosexual, thief, liar, and child molester enough to want them to repent and come to salvation is possible without *hating* them to the point of desiring their eternal destruction. I believe that God calls their actions *sin*. I believe that they will die the ultimate death if they do not repent and obey God (see Revelation 20:12-15 and 21:7, 8).

I do not think that the homosexual is a greater sinner than the others – but he is a transgressor of God's legal system just as we all are or have been (Romans 3; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). The sinner who professes faith in Jesus Christ is not allowed to *continue* his sinful lifestyle without consequence – no more than the adulterer or thief or liar, et cetera is allowed to do so (Romans 6; Hebrews 6:1-6; 10:26, 27). Sooner or later, we all must confront Peter's call in Acts 2:38 to repent, be baptized for the *remission* of our sins, and receive the Holy Spirit (see also Ephesians 4:21-32).

God is not Duplicitous

Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8, and James 1:17 make one point very clear: ***God does not say one thing and then do another***. He is not *duplicitous*. He does not change His mind about His values to suit the whims and fashions of man or society (see Romans 12:2 and 1 Corinthians 1:19 through 2:16). He is not a *liar*.

It is unrealistic to think that the worldly mind, under the influence of Satan the Devil, will understand or acknowledge God's divine right to legislate human behavior (2 Corinthians 4:1-7) – even when they cloak their own values in a religious garment (see 2 Corinthians 11:4, 13-15). Matthew 15:1-9 and 7:21-23 make the case that it is possible to pursue religious practices *in God's name* and yet be counted as His enemies – because those pursuits are not what God has willed. You can pursue them at your own risk. It's up to you. But know this: God does not accept your *self-righteousness*

in place of His will – nor does He support you in your error.

That same adversarial spirit that infested the Garden of Eden still whispers in our ears that we are sufficient in our own wisdom and understanding to make decisions about our behavior, and nobody has the right to say anything about it – even God. It whispers that we will not *really* die for choosing our own way. After all, it still says that God is just another *duplicious liar* and *self-appointed arbiter of good and evil* who is hiding something from us (read again Genesis 3:1-6). Grasping that fruit of good and evil has blinded our eyes and deafened our ears to God’s thoughts and ways. We all have the fruit of our decisions to witness against us (Romans 3:23 – cited from Isaiah 53:6).

Jesus Christ is the Lord God of the Old Testament who created all that is and set the legal standard that is supposed to regulate the human society (see John 1:1-3, 14; Colossians 1:16; and James 4:10-12). Hebrews 13:8 says that He is “...the same yesterday, today, and forever...” It is essential, therefore, that He should not be *duplicious* because, otherwise, you would never have any stable values upon which you can stake your quest for eternal life (see Hebrews 6:13-20). They could change often and without notice.

Conclusion

What makes the stones you throw any better than the stones that you say that I am throwing? What makes you any less of a “...self-appointed arbiter of good versus evil...” than I am? What makes your *smug* any better than mine? What makes you think that a sprinkling of a few scriptures about throwing stones and loving one another can cancel any other scripture inspired by God (see John 10:35)?

Shall we break out into a chorus of Dylan’s “They’ll *stone* you when you’re riding in your car...” or solemnly chant the lyrics of “One Tin Soldier”? Even better, let’s sing in four-part harmony that rock-and-roll hymn “Ima-

gine” by John Lennon! But, I digress. Thankfully, the gospel according to Dylan, Lennon, or Lady Gaga does not carry the same weight as God’s word – or bring eternal life. You must try to understand the whole of scripture, or you will have an incomplete picture and incomplete understanding.

We also have to be aware of Jesus’ warnings in Matthew 7:1-6. I am comfortable with the idea that judgment has been given to Jesus Christ (John 5:27); so, I do not have to concern myself with determining the ultimate fate of the unrepentant sinner (see John 3:16-21). I also do not have to concern myself with removing the beam from my brother’s eye – but that does not preclude my *explaining* God’s concern with his beam and my mote. However...I do have to be concerned with “giv[ing] that which is holy unto the dogs” and “cast[ing my] pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet and turn and rend [me].” Trust me: I am being neither *phobic* nor *smug* about this. Causing God’s holiness to be trampled underfoot is dangerous for the trampers. My being rended...well, “God grant me the serenity to...” Read John 15:18-27.

One final word: I do not eat pork, shellfish, catfish, octopus, or any other unclean meat listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. I also do not observe the religious rites that were adopted from the pagans and “Christianized” centuries ago (see Jeremiah 10). I observe the Lord God’s holy days in Leviticus 23 because they are an outline of God’s plan of salvation. I am not ashamed of this. I have not spoken anonymously, and I have put my money where my mouth is. I do not apologize for the faith I have learned from God’s word.

If you would like to have a bigger picture of what I represent, instead of the small snapshot you have seen in these ads, please take time to peruse our website at: www.theseventhdaychristainassembly.org. There are free downloadable books and a 12-lesson Bible Study Course of which you can make good use. Don’t make me pull out the “What are you afraid of?” card. I’m just saying....



How Traditions Can Nullify God's Commandments

A tradition is loosely defined as a belief or custom that is handed down by word of mouth or by example *without written instruction*. It is also defined as an inherited pattern of thought or action – that is, passed from one generation of a group to another. It is accepted as though it has always been that way. There are numerous types of traditions – anything from religious to political, from social to medical, from literary to scientific. Some traditions are meaningful, right, and helpful in maintaining one's focus on history, honor, suffering, overcoming, and the like. Others are essentially worthless because they represent deceit, wrong actions or attitudes, and perversions of truth. Traditions! They often have a powerful effect upon those who adhere to them...some can even nullify God's commandments.

The Challenge Presented by Traditions

Tevye, in the musical "Fiddler on the Roof," sang a song about traditions. He wrestled with the traditions with which he had grown up. In succession, three of his oldest daughters made it necessary for him to re-think traditions about marriage held to be sacred among the Jews of his time just prior to the Russian Revolution. His eldest daughter, Tzeitel, challenged the tradition of arranged marriages when she accepted a marriage proposal from Motel, the tailor, rather than marrying Laser Wolf, the butcher, as had been arranged by Yente, the matchmaker.

The second daughter, Hodel, cast off tradition even further when she *told* her father...rather than *ask* him... that she was going to marry Perchik, the teacher. To

each of these two breaches of tradition, Tevye took a philosophical approach. The main question was whether or not the couples were *in love*. Satisfied that they were, he was grudgingly willing to ignore tradition and accept these breaches in tradition.

However, when his third daughter, Chava, fell in love with a non-Jew, that was the final straw. He did not care about love; he cared about the mixed marriage (both ethnic and religious) and the dissipation of a treasured belief that barred Jews from marrying non-Jews. He felt that this breach would spit in the face of God Himself. When Chava did not relent and ran away to be married by a Russian Orthodox priest, Tevye treated her as though she were dead – giving in only slightly when the Russians executed a pogrom against the Russian Jews and the boy went with Chava as the Jews fled

Russia.

C. S. Lewis wrote in an essay the essence of the challenge one encounters with some traditions. The article was titled: “Religion: Reality or Substitute?” (*World Dominion*; vol. XIX; September-October 1941). In this essay – which, by the way, was not about traditions per se – Lewis discussed the importance of understanding the truth of religion and that which people so often **add** as a **substitute** for it. It is in this vein that I associate the article with the challenge of traditions.

Lewis focused on his musical *miseducation* by discussing his custom as a boy of listening to orchestral music on gramophone records. At a later age, when he began listening to live orchestral music, he regarded the live music as a **substitute** for the real thing. He said: “...Owing to my musical miseducation the reality appeared to be a substitute and the substitute a reality.” Here Lewis put his finger on the carotid artery of the danger presented by some traditions: ***They become substitutes for the truth or reality.***

This is especially problematic when, in the hearts and minds of the general public, certain traditions meet the vain criteria of being “the way it has always been.” Lewis did not start his music education with the **reality**; he started it with the **substitute**. The gramophone experience was all he had known of orchestras until he actually attended a live performance. Faced with the **reality**, he preferred the **substitute**.

Acting upon a tradition that has been passed down from one generation to the next is precisely the same pattern because one does not start with the **reality**; he starts with the **substitute** and blithely says: “That’s the way it is and the way it has always been.” Very few ask why; few are concerned about the truth or reality. It is as Lewis describes it: a **miseducation**. In some situations more important than music, miseducation about truth and reality can lead people down a long, futile road to personal destruction (see Proverbs 14:12). If you are interested in God’s **truth** (John 4:23, 24), then you need to understand this more fully. Let’s consider an incident in which Jesus explained the problem.

Religious Traditions That Can Nullify God’s Commandments

Mark 7:1-20 describes a meeting between Jesus and some Pharisees and teachers of the Law. Apparently, these men had come from Jerusalem to Galilee to make an inquiry of Jesus about something that puzzled them: “Why do your disciples break the **tradition of the elders**? They don’t wash their hands before they eat” (emphases added). The ensuing discussion and the solution given by Jesus is a perfect example of how some traditions, after having been passed from one generation to another for centuries, take on the nature of **reality** when they are, in fact, merely a **substitute**.

As a footnote in *The New International Version Study Bible* puts it:

After the Babylonian captivity [that is, after B.C. 515], the Jewish rabbis began to make meticulous rules and regulations governing the daily lives of the people. These were interpretations and applications of the law of Moses, handed down from generation to generation. In Jesus’ day this “tradition of the elders” was in oral form. It was not until c. A.D. 200 that it was put into writing in the Mishna.

This set the stage for what is considered a pivotal point in the ministry and message of Jesus Christ – especially when you consider His statement in Matthew 5:17-19 and note the “one jot or one tittle” reference...which is a reference to the *written* law as opposed to the *oral* law. Jesus fought against the *traditions of the elders*.

Jesus’ reply astonished these men. He said: “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the *traditions of men*.... You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions.” Ponder the gravity of this statement because it is a stark contrast to which we must pay attention: “...**setting aside the commands of God...to ob-**

serve your own traditions.” Here is an accusation that comes like throwing cold water into someone’s face. These people were under the assumption that the *oral* law was as old as the *written* law and that it had God’s personal stamp of approval upon it. Whatever they were doing, they were doing it in God’s name and for His sake. How could anyone challenge a handwashing ceremony that makes one clean in the presence of God, as opposed to unclean and unfit to be in His presence? How could anyone who calls Himself the Christ challenge such a thing? How could He call them hypocrites and say that they are worshiping God in vain? How could He say that their teachings are merely rules made by men? In fact, Jesus is saying that their religious traditions – revered and practiced for about 500 years – are the *substitute* rather than the *reality*. He is totally disregarding centuries of *man-made religious traditions!*

By citing Isaiah 29:13, Jesus refers to a recognized prophet of God’s *writings* (Mark 7:6). He makes the point that the commandments of God are *written* in scripture and are binding; the traditions of the elders are not written in scripture and are not binding. In citing this scripture, Jesus makes the point that reduces to *nothing* the traditions of the elders. His reason for taking this drastic position is that their traditions were actually causing their teachers to *nullify the commandments of God*. In Mark 7:8, He adds that they do many things like that – so...His attention is not focused merely on a simple handwashing ceremony.

To illustrate His point, Jesus uses two specific examples: (1) Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16 in which God forbids the dishonoring of one’s father and mother and (2) Exodus 21:17 and Leviticus 20:9 in which God forbids the cursing of one’s father and mother (v. 10). Yet, one of their many offending traditions – the declaration of *corban* (v.11) – allowed both of these commandments to be broken. This, in effect, nullified *God’s authority* in favor of the beloved, man-made tradition!

The elders thought they were on good footing when they appealed to Numbers 30:1, 2 as the basis for their

corban ruling. They could see no reason why a man would be guilty of breaking God’s commandments if he was being true to a vow that he had made to God.

Consider this explanation by another *NIV* footnote:

The teachers of the law appealed to Nu[mbers] 30:1-2 in support of the corban vow, but Jesus categorically rejects the practice of *using one Biblical teaching to nullify another*. The scribal interpretation of Nu[mbers] 30:1-2 satisfied the *letter* of the passage but missed the meaning of the law as a whole. *God never intended obedience to one command to nullify another.* (emphases added)

In other words, how could Numbers 30:1, 2 be used to *nullify* God’s commands about honoring one’s father and mother and cursing one’s father and mother? The idea of doing away with God’s commands in such a fashion bothered Jesus.

These people preferred their own system of invasive, bothersome rules and regulations and traditional teachings to the simplicity of God’s written laws. They preferred worshiping a God made in their own image to worshiping the God who had originally revealed Himself to mankind (see Romans 1:18-25). And Jesus struck right at the heart of the problem when He began to take them to task for *nullifying* God’s commands through their traditions. Not only did they break God’s Law, they taught others to do the same (v. 7). Could Jesus help but be incensed at this religious outrage?

The “Ripple Effect”

There is a “ripple effect” that presents itself as a result of this meeting: Some theologians, commentators, and ministers misconstrue the action of Jesus in this clash of theological ideas – primarily because of the same problem we face with centuries of traditional, religious teachings. The following quote by a well-known

Christian theologian and commentator, regarding Matthew's account of this situation (15:1-9), demonstrates my point very well:

[Jesus] does not only condemn Scribal and Pharisaic ritual and ceremonial religion; ***He actually wipes out large sections of the book of Leviticus***. This is not a contradiction of the tradition of the elders alone. ***This is a contradiction of scripture itself***. This saying of Jesus cancels all the food laws of the Old Testament [see Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14]...Once and for all Jesus lays it down that what matters is not the state of a man's ritual observance, but the state of a man's heart. (William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*; vol. II, 1965; p. 131; emphases added)

Because of centuries of Christian *tradition* that Jesus, in fact, *did do away with the Law*, the word of God has been corrupted and perverted to say things that it was never intended to say! Was Jesus' objective in this discussion to use this opportunity to wipe out large sections of the book of Leviticus regarding clean and unclean meat? That is essentially the mind-set of traditional Christianity...and it *nullifies* His commands.

The problem with Barclay's statement is that it assumes fact that is not true, and it is the product of centuries of the same practice being passed from one generation to another. I have covered many of these "traditions" in mainstream Christian beliefs that are not derived directly from the Bible: the observance of Christmas and Easter (along with other pagan religious practices), going to heaven or hell as your eternal reward, belief in the immortal soul, et cetera.

This, for centuries, has been the "ripple effect" of settling for the *substitute* rather than the *reality*. It is the by-product of religious and scriptural *miseducation*. Many have come *in the name of Jesus Christ* and taught deceptive doctrines that have no basis in scripture (Matthew 7:21-23; 24:4, 5; 2 Corinthians 11:4, 13-15).

There is a similar problem that presents itself to those in the churches like The Seventh Day Christian Assembly who observe the holy days discussed in Leviticus 23. I discuss part of the problem on our website on the "Holy Day Calendar" page. Here is how that discussion goes:

While The Seventh Day Christian Assembly observes God's revealed Holy Days found in Leviticus 23, there are some differences from other groups that originated in the Worldwide Church of God [that was] pastored by the late Herbert W. Armstrong. What follows is a brief discussion of those differences and the rationale behind them. For an explanation of each of these Holy Days and what they mean in God's plan for the salvation of mankind, see pages 30-41 in our book, *A Statement of Beliefs*.

First, the Holy Day calendar given in Leviticus 23 nowhere allows for *postponements* of any kind. It very simply says that on a given day of a given month a certain observation will take place. If the concept of *postponements* is taken in the context of Christ's discussion with the Pharisees and teachers of the Law in Matthew 15:1-9 [see also Mark 7:1-20], then God does not accept changes in His law based on *traditions of men* (vv. 3, 6, 9). Yet, in the traditional Hebrew calendar, there have been *postponements* made because of *human traditions*: (a) one guarding against Rosh Hoshana [Feast of Trumpets] falling on Wednesday or Friday because it will cause Yom Kippur to fall on Friday or Sunday and require two days of prohibition against food preparation and (b) another guarding against the celebration of Hoshanah Rabbah (a traditional Jewish observance – like Purim and Chanukkah – during Sukkoth) falling on the weekly Sabbath during the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkoth) because it would require work to be done in gathering the willow twigs needed for

beating on the ground during the ceremony (*A Book of Jewish Concepts*, Philip Birnbaum; New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1964). These *postponements* can move back the normal observance of God's Holy Days by as much as two days. In the years when there are no *postponements*, the TSDCA calendar coincides with the traditional Hebrew calendar and former WCG churches' [calendars]. In the years when there are *postponements*, TSDCA observes God's Holy Days 1-2 days earlier than others.

Second, if Passover is observed on the weekly Sabbath, TSDCA does not begin its count of 50 days toward Pentecost on the Sunday that immediately follows [that is, on the first day of Unleavened Bread]. We begin the count just like we do in all other years: From the Sabbath *within* the Feast of Unleavened Bread – even if it is the last day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. During those years, TSDCA will observe Pentecost a week later than the others. Mr. Armstrong admitted in his writings that such a determination depended on who controlled the Temple – Sadducees or Pharisees. TSDCA reasons that Passover might be *a day* of unleavened bread, but it is a separate observance from the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Therefore, we follow the instructions as given in Leviticus 23:6-16.

Because there is no precise, specific instruction in scripture about how to determine God's Holy Days (for example: how one determines the new moon), TSDCA does not claim to have the exact formula required by God. We do not rail against those who do not comply with our method. We simply live by the light that we believe to be correct. Part of that light makes no room for human traditions.

As you should be able to understand, TSDCA uses Jesus' discussion in Matthew 15:1-9 and Mark 7:1-20 to

make a very serious decision about the Holy Day Calendar. ***God did not command the observance of Hoshanah Rabbah, Purim, or Channukah.*** They are *traditions* of the Jews. That's okay...in and of itself.

While we understand Paul's comment in Romans 3:1, 2 about the *Jews* having committed to them the oracles of God, we also know that they were heavily denominationalized and did not agree with one another about God's revelations. Does that sound familiar to you when you realize that there are over 32,000 "Christian" denominations in the world today? It is one thing to have the written record of God's "oracles"; it is quite another to "rightly divide the word of truth" that we have been given. Paul's comment in v. 3 should be understood in that vein. Go back and read Romans 2 so you can get the context in which that comment is made. You should also read Isaiah 1:1-9; 6:8-13 to get a good idea about how dependable the *Jews* were at keeping God's ***truth*** solidly fixed in their hearts and minds.

Even in our own tradition there has been a "ripple effect" based on traditional views of scriptures. The source of the problem lies in adding to and diminishing from God's word and the people who are afraid to step out of the rut of *tradition* long enough to get a better view of the true horizon.

The Lesson Jesus Taught in This Incident

The problem that the Pharisees and teachers of the Law presented to Jesus concerned itself with *defilement* that supposedly enters the body because of ***unwashed hands***. Once Jesus made His point about setting aside God's commandments and authority in favor of the traditions of men and human authority, He returned to the question about *personal defilement* through ***unwashed hands***. It is here that we should pay attention to the real focus of His remarks so that we can learn the real lesson He taught.

Notice v. 15: "...Nothing that enters a man from the *outside* can 'defile' him...." The Greek word rendered

as *defiled* is *koinos*. In this context, it has to do with something that is profane and unworthy of association with God – that is, it is ceremonially unclean. Jesus’ point is that such a *defilement* comes from an *impure heart*, not from violating any one of numerous *man-made laws*...especially one about *washing one’s hands*.

Paul’s discussion in Romans 14:14-23 is in the same vein. When he speaks of *meat* in vv. 15, 17, and 20, he is not speaking of *flesh* (see the distinction in v. 21). He is addressing the differences between *foods* that are considered *by man* to be *profane* and those *man* considers to be acceptable to God. He pursues the same discussion with the Colossians in 2:16-23. In Colossians, His discussion is more about the dietary restrictions and legal demands laid down by the Colossian heretics, but many have *mistakenly* assumed that Paul was teaching against Leviticus 11, 23, and Deuteronomy 14 – and... the whole of God’s Law. He was not.

The Interpreter’s Bible (vol. 11, p. 200) has this to say about this section of scripture:

There are clear indications here of a strain of Jewish influence in the Colossian syncretism; but these prohibitions and ritual observances are not harnessed to a Pharisaic legalism or even to the worship of the one God, *but to the propitiation of “the elemental spirits”* [see vv. 8, 20, and 23]. The prohibitions go beyond anything in the Jewish law in touching drink as well as food; and it is probable that these requirements were not based upon distinction of “clean” and “unclean” foods, but on *principles of asceticism*. No such principles enter into the Jewish food laws. (emphases added)

So, Paul sums up Colossians 2 by attributing such practices to “...a show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting the body; not in any honor to satisfying the flesh” (v. 23). Paul’s concern was with those who devise religious and other practices that: (a) are not the will of God, (b) are willful self-abasement, and (c)

fail to give the body the honor due to it as sanctified in the presence of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 6:15-20). This is in keeping with Jesus’ attitude about *man-made laws* like the *traditions of the elders*. In fact, the appellation “Jewish law” is more correctly applied to the traditions of the elders than to the laws given by the Lord God to Moses. Moses was a *Levite*, not a Jew.

Jesus makes the point in vv. 18, 19 that what enters the *mouth* is a problem of *ingestion*, *digestion*, and *defecation*. *Fellowship with God* is a *spiritual* matter that is interrupted by *sin* – which Jesus rightly defines as a *spiritual defilement of the heart*. In the context of *man-made laws about diets and holiness*, no one will enter the Kingdom of God merely by observing such things (Romans 14:14-23). As is pointed out by numerous scriptures (John 3:3-8; 1 Corinthians 15:50-54; Luke 17:33; 2 Corinthians 4:7-5:10; et cetera), the human body is *temporary*. Efforts to prolong your present body of flesh through religious and dietary means will be futile. For better or worse, the *King James* translators end v. 19 this way: “[Whatever enters man’s mouth]...goes out into the draught [feces], purging all meats.” In other words, all foods – and any incidental “trash” – that enter one’s digestive tract will be subsequently evacuated in defecation after the body has separated out the nutrients it needs.

Other translations (for examples: *NIV*, *RSV*, *Barclay*, *Moffatt*, *ASV*, *The Jerusalem Bible*) put in a parenthetical statement at the end that reads like this: “(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean’).” From this statement, many theologians have made the big jump in logic to conclude that Jesus did away with major portions of scripture and declared that God’s law about clean and unclean meats is now nullified. That conclusion means that you can now eat fox and camel and skunk and buzzard – oh, yeah, and pork, shrimp, clams, oysters, crawfish, alligator, catfish, crabs, and lobsters. In effect, they claim that Jesus actually *contradicted* and *wiped out* numerous Old Testament scriptures! What they fail to notice is that they are accusing Jesus of doing exactly what He was accusing the Pha-

risees and teachers of the law of doing: nullifying God's Law!

The Interpreter's Bible (vol. 7; p. 753) addresses the issue raised by this parenthetical statement:

Many interpretations have been given to this clause, which may be a **gloss** [that is, an explanatory note written by a copyist in the margin or in a footnote of an original text]. The meaning of the phrase, even in some of the cruder translations, is clear. (Cf. Acts 10:15; Rom. 14:14, 20). ***But it is much more likely to be an early Christian interpretation than part of a saying of Jesus.*** (emphases added)

An interpretation is not the same thing as a translation. They had earlier stated on p. 752 that Jesus "...certainly would not have encouraged his followers to eat oysters, for example, or other foods forbidden in the law." These points should be factored in when coming to a decision about the meaning of Jesus' statements. Was He intent on nullifying God's Law – as men and their traditions teach – or, was He intent on fulfilling God's Law as He Himself taught (read again Matthew 5:17-19 and Isaiah 55:10, 11). By what standard of logic can you justify the duplicity involved in man's tradition?

Peter's Experience in Acts 10

"*Christian*" tradition would have it that Peter's experience in Acts 10 was God's way of sealing the deal of doing away with large portions of Old Testament scriptures about clean and unclean flesh. In vv. 9-16, Peter has a vision about a "great vessel" lowering a great sheet full of unclean animals...accompanied by "a voice" that commanded him to kill them and eat them. If Peter was familiar with the same principle that his fellow Apostle (John) taught in 1 John 4:1 ("Do not believe every spirit, but test them to determine whether or not they are from God"), then it is not a strange thing to

see him resisting the command. I know that he says: "Not so, Lord..." as if that shows him speaking to Jesus Christ or to God Himself. Did he think that?

I have no *commentary* support for what I am proposing here, but I think that such an expression is a natural reaction to what is perceived as a superior power. It is similar to Saul's response to a bright light and a voice on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:1-5). He did not automatically realize that the light and voice was *Jesus Christ*. In v. 5, he asks: "***Who are you, Lord?***" With that question, Jesus Christ reveals that He is responsible for what is happening. Daniel does the same thing with an angel in Daniel 10:16-19. So, I am not quick to assume that Peter thought he was dealing with either Jesus Christ or God the Father...but he was quick to test the spirit to determine if it was of God.

This event appears to have taken place at least 10 years after Jesus had ascended to heaven to the right hand of the Father. If Jesus had earlier abrogated the laws of unclean meat, why was Peter still observing them to the point that he would resist the command of a superior power – or even the voice of the Lord Himself? Traditional Christianity believes that God corrected Peter's bad attitude during this vision when He said: "Do not call anything unclean that God has made clean." The larger question is whether or not we should jump on the bandwagon and accept such a conclusion. One of the Bible study skills we teach has to do with taking into consideration the *context* in which an action or statement occurs. How does that work here?

Read Acts 10:1-8 and understand what is about to happen. The day after the Gentile Cornelius sends two servants and a soldier to Joppa, Peter has the vision and these three men appear at the home where Peter is staying (vv. 9-18). After Peter's experience with the vision is over – and he has steadfastly refused three times to kill and eat the unclean animals – he is trying to figure out why he should have had such a vision (v. 17). Then, an angel from God appears and delivers a brief message about the three men (vv. 19, 20). What unfolds next gives us the purpose for the vision. Unfortunately, too

many have focused on the *unclean meat* issue and missed the great revelation given to Peter.

Note Peter's comment in v. 28: "You are well aware that *it is against our law* for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him." You can search in vain to find such a law given by the *Lord God* to Moses or anyone else in the Old Testament. However, Peter was correct that it was part of "...*our law*..." This was a law that was part of the *traditions of the elders* that were put into effect after the Babylonian captivity. What was the net effect of that *man-made law*?

The Gentiles were treated as being *unclean*. Not only that, anything touched by a Gentile was unclean. When the Jew returned home from the market place where he had incidentally bumped into and rubbed against Gentiles, he washed his clothes and immersed himself in clean water to remove the taint of the uncleanness he had contracted from the Gentiles. This was taught through the oral law; it was a code of law that was not written in the laws of the Old Testament.

Haggai 2:11-14 is a witness that there is a law of God that says that uncleanness can be contracted through the casual and/or accidental touch. However, there is no such association made in the Law of God that touching a Gentile *automatically* makes a Jew or any other Israelite unclean. God's charge of uncleanness *against the Israelite nation* – and...specifically the Jews – in Haggai's prophecy is in keeping with what Jesus told the Pharisees and teachers of the law: *Theirs was an uncleanness of the heart and mind because of their association with false religious practices*. They were neglecting God's work and pursuing their own personal interests (read chapter 1).

Now notice the rest of Acts 10:28: "**God has shown me that I should not call any man profane or unclean.**" Focus your attention here on Peter's statement. Was God showing Peter that He wanted him to start eating unclean animals, or was He showing him that *traditional Jewish attitudes* about Gentiles were to be disregarded because God was opening up to them access to the Holy Spirit and salvation? If **God** called the Gen-

tiles clean, what authority would *man-made laws and traditions* have over the authority of God? How effective could the *Jewish* apostles have been in preaching the gospel to the world if they had maintained such an attitude against the majority of the world?

Read Deuteronomy 4:1-13. Does this appear to be the Lord God's statement of purpose whereby Israel would be *a guiding light to the nations of the world* to bring them to the knowledge and understanding of God? Read Isaiah 2:1-5. What seems to be the purpose of this prophecy about the Kingdom of God ruled by Jesus Christ and the saints? Read Galatians 3:1-14. Does Paul say that salvation is impossible through the law? Does Paul say that God included the *Gentiles* in the covenant He made with Abraham? Such was Peter's conclusion in Acts 10:34, 35: "Of a truth, I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in *every nation* he that fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (emphasis added). Enough said?

Conclusion

This has been a lesson about how *traditions can nullify the commandments of God*. When we are confronted with the so-called "new normals" of life, we have to make choices about what we will accept as **God's will** (see Matthew 7:21-23 and John 4:23, 24). We have to know and deeply understand that God does not change just to satisfy the whims of popular culture. We are able to test God's truth and His faithfulness to His word because of His unchanging nature. Otherwise, we are left to the whimsical nature of the human mind and its propensity to create "God" in its own image and attribute to that "God" the very nature of man himself.

I shudder to think how grossly undependable the human heart and mind are (see Jeremiah 17:9). I urge you to be more vigilant about distinguishing between the *substitute* and the *reality*. If you begin with the *substitute* as your truth, it will be very difficult to change. Get out of the rut of man-made traditions.