

# AGGRAVATING ESSAYS

ON

Con  troversial  
Issues

ROY KEY

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## FOREWORD

“That was an aggravating sermon,” he said as he left the service. I don’t remember the message, but I do remember the missile fired that Sunday by Frank Clark, creator of “The Country Parson.” Aimed daily, via a syndicated newspaper feature, the parson’s wit regularly poked holes in our pomposity.

I remember quite well another message entitled “Christians with Scarred Hands,” summoning disciples of Christ to follow their Lord out into the public arena, where society’s outcasts are systematically sacrificed on the altars of “the profit motive” and “the white race.” “Where are your scars?” was the critical question. This time Frank commented, “I’m a rather casual Christian.” Adding a few words about human dropouts, he concluded, “I’m violently apathetic.”

That’s the last adjective one could glue on this man. In his gruff way he was saying, “Keep it up. The world needs something more than cotton candy and pink Kool-Aid. Jesus calls us to the dangerous task of loving and serving those whom in our self-righteousness we despise, whom we consider racially, socially, and religiously inferior.”

It is not my intent to be merely aggravating, but to be a pin prick in our unconscious, but sometimes sanctimonious, sectarianism. I would focus at least one light beam on a few of those issues that too long have blinded us. I speak to those who are anything but “casual” or “apathetic,” but rather to those open souls who “hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

If at times I paint with what seems to you too broad a brush, describe people more sectarian than you ever knew, I confess now that I am sketching my own portrait. I have been down this path. I know its rocks and crevices. I've lived and breathed, preached and debated these issues. I relished the sound of the hammer as I nailed to the barn door the hide of some Methodist or Baptist. I liked to sing our siren songs.

Those days are now gone. I am blessed with "Good News" as never before. I long to share it. Yet, I fear that my "aggravating" style may turn you away before you hear. I pray that it will not be so. But I must try to show you what we look like, and sound like, to others whom we would reach with the Gospel.

Bear with me if you can. Tolerate me if you must. Forgive me if you will. But, brush away the husks and take the living grain that can feed your hungering soul.

For Jesus' sake.

\* \* \* \* \*

Much of the material here first appeared in *Ensign*, published by R. L. Kilpatrick (710 Day Rd., Huntsville, AL 35801). His ministry heralds the good news of "Justification by grace through faith in Christ."

He should not, however, be charged with everything that appears in his paper. Certainly, not this. He knows, however, that our need is to keep studying, growing and challenging one another. Consequently, his charity overflows the banks of partisan editorial policy.

Another such spirit is Robert H. Rowland, who, also, (through the LIGHTHOUSE PUB. CO, 3619 Larchwood Dr., Carona, CA 91719, makes available challenging material at cost. Chapt. 4 and 5 professionally printed are available from LIGHTHOUSE at \$1.50 postpaid.

Then there is the living legend, Leroy Garrett, from whose *Restoration Review* comes the nucleus of the final chapter. The selfless efforts of these men bless us outrageously.



*“I have complete confidence in the gospel; it is God’s power to save all who believe, first the Jews and then the Gentiles. For the gospel reveals how God puts people right with himself. It is through faith from beginning to end. As the scripture says, ‘The person who is put right with God through faith shall live.’”*

*(Rom. 1:16-17  
Good News Bible, TEV)*

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*“Accept one another, then, for the glory of God, as Christ has accepted you.”*

*Rom. 15:7 (TEV)*



# AGGRAVATING ESSAYS ON CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

## 1

### “ARE WE SAVED BY FAITH ALONE?”

#### The Controversy

They said, “Yes.”

We said, “No.”

Then we showed how ridiculous was their claim. Lining up our heaviest Scriptural artillery, we fired away.

Surely, only one totally ignorant of *James* 2:24 could ever even ask such a question! The Bible could not be plainer. “So faith alone, if it has no works, is dead” (*Jas.* 2:17). “You see that one is justified by works, and not by faith alone” (*Jas.* 2:24). “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead” (*Jas.* 2:26).

Anyone “who can see through a ladder and read plain English can in the wink of an eye see this truth.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Brother Foy E. “Wallopum,” one of our greatest pugilists, for such pitiless, pulverizing grenades.

Not only must one contradict Scripture, but ignore simple logic to affirm the historic Protestant affirmation of *sola gratia sola fide* (“grace only faith only”). The “faith only” claim is wedded to the “grace only” doctrine, spelled out by Luther, Calvin, Wesley and others: “By grace only through faith only” are we saved.

How contradictory to affirm that we are saved by *one* “only,” then in the same breath insist that we are surely saved by a *second* “only!” We are seriously urged to believe the equivalent of  $1 + 1 = 1$ .

For heaven sake, why can't they make up their minds? What does “only” (or “alone”) mean, if not what it says? Are we happily to lock faith and reason in logic-tight compartments and toss the key?

The Bible says we are saved by our words (*Matt.* 12:37), endurance (*Matt.* 24:13), calling on the name of the Lord (*Acts* 2:21; 4:12), baptism (*Acts* 22:16; *1 Pet.* 3:21), Christ's life (*Rom.* 5:10), hope (*Rom.* 8:24), firmness in the faith (*1 Cor.* 15:2), some even by child-bearing (*1 Tim.* 2:15), as well as a host of other things.

How can we single out any one of these items to which God has linked salvation and declare that by it, and it “alone,” we are saved? Every honest soul can, and should, do as we have done: love the truth, come to Scripture with an open mind and simply accept what the Bible says.

### **Whose Ignorance Is Showing?**

Are these whom we have derided, castigated, portrayed as dim-witted, superficial and closed-minded, in fact the people we have described? Are they the

“stupid sectarians” and we the wise lovers and champions of “the truth?”

No religious group has a corner either on ignorance or wisdom, prejudice or honesty, error or truth. We’re all “sick” in “need of a Physician.” That’s one truth we surely better recognize. There is another which to our shame we fail to see: how outlandish is our own ignorance as we erect straw men and then smash them to smithereens. That’s precisely what we have done with the affirmation, “We are saved by grace alone through faith alone.”

If the confession were ambiguous, excessively erudite, spun out of scholastic cloth, we might be excused for misunderstanding it. But that is hardly the case. We have done what every partisan debater does when s/he meets an unanswerable, but unacceptable, argument. The argument is recast and then the one s/he *claims* was made is obliterated.

Stooping to that level is not due to a “love of the truth,” but the love of a position, a cherished dogma that we identify with “the truth.” In preparation for debates with their champions we turned more to our champion, “Brother Wallopum,” than to the Bible. When dubbed “‘Give-’em-Hell’ Wallopum,” he wowed the faithful and rallied the ranks with the modest reply, “I don’t give ‘em hell. I just give ‘em the truth and they think it’s hell.”

To urge honesty, open-mindedness and love of the truth, all the while resorting to sophistry, ridicule and deception in dealing with another’s faith is a sad, sad sight.

## What Is Really Meant?

*Sola gratia sola fide* is not at all hard to understand. Let its message be stated as plainly and unprejudicially as possible:

1. The only *cause* of salvation is grace.
2. The only *means* of salvation is faith.

There is no other *cause*, whether in us, in heaven or on earth, than the sheer grace of God, the unmerited mercy of the All-Holy who in Jesus Christ shows Himself to be the All-Loving.

There is no other *means* of accepting that mercy, no matter what we or anyone else in heaven or on earth can be or do, than by faith in the God who in Christ Jesus stooped to make Himself available to us all.

One can disagree with these premises, can argue with them and seek to dislodge them. What s/he must not do is misrepresent, distort and ridicule, while pretending to reply to them.

It is we who misunderstood and misrepresented the affirmation, "We are saved by grace alone through faith alone." We assumed that its proponents held the same legalistic view of salvation as we and were merely dealing with two parts of the "plan" equally, but judicially, related to salvation.

Down deep, though, we knew we had no quarrel about what we called "God's Part." Since "it is God who works in us both to *will* and to *do*," we mistakenly dubbed "obedience" as "our Part." Yet, this is what the war was all about. Is God's Gift of Himself a reward for our "obedience?" Or is it truly an act of "grace?" that is, is

it “for nothing?” We simply failed to see that though trust is never alone, it *alone* is the way we accept the Gift.

The distinction between cause and means we clouded, failing to make clear the fact that the ground of salvation is one thing, while the means is quite another. The ground (or cause) rests solely in God, not in us. Not what we are now, what we may some day become, or what we shall eventually do.

“God proved his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (*Rom. 5:8*).

The father who rescues his drowning child does it *because of* his merciful love. The *means* by which he does it is something else. It involves his work in performing the saving act. If the child is old enough to resist, rescue involves its cessation from struggle and its trustful surrender to the father’s grasp of grace.

It is far from stupid, then, to say, that the rescue was (on the father’s part) solely an act of grace by means of nothing (on the child’s part) but surrender in trust.

*Sola gratia sola fide.*

Unless God knows that we are incapable of understanding this clear distinction, our ridicule and misrepresentation become inexcusable.

### **Look At the Ammunition Fired**

We are saved by the “name” of Christ, the “life” of Christ, “hope” in Christ, “endurance” and “firmness in faith.” These are separately piled in a heap as if they had no organic relation to one another or to our shared life.

The “name” and “life” of Christ are not some-  
*things* abstracted from Christ. They mean nothing less  
than *Christ!* “Endurance” and “firmness in the faith”  
flow from “hope” and are oriented toward ultimate  
salvation, not our initial justification.

The word “hope” in the Old Testament and at  
times in the New means “trust” (*Matt.* 12:21; *John*  
5:45). In Paul’s epistles it is grounded on the  
Resurrection of Jesus Christ and came to mean hope for  
a salvation waiting to be revealed. When the Apostle  
says we are saved by hope, he means that our  
“expectation” is grounded in the Resurrection.  
Ultimately it is “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (*Col.*  
1:27). Our trust is in “God our Savior and Christ Jesus  
our hope” (*I Tim.* 1:1).

To say with Peter, “Baptism does now also save  
you,” is not to affirm baptism as something in addition  
to Christ, or distinct from faith. It is the visual, visceral  
means of self-identification with Christ in His Death,  
Burial and Resurrection. It is God’s gracious assurance,  
an outward picture of an inward reality. It is faith’s  
focus on the Rescuer, the child’s cessation from struggle  
and trusting surrender to its Father.

When Jesus says, “By your words you shall be  
justified, and by your words you shall be condemned,”  
He made reference not to our initial, but to our ultimate,  
justification. Not to faith’s germination, but its vali-  
dation. Our words reveal *ourselves*, as the fruit of a tree  
reveals the tree to be “good” or “bad.” They show who  
we are. Our likeness or unlikeness to God. Our readi-  
ness or unreadiness to share eternal fellowship with  
Christ and the saints of the ages.

Christ made the point that James makes. Jesus said, “By their fruit you will know them.” James said, “Show me your faith without your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.” His point is that “sound doctrine” must not be substituted for living faith. It won’t do simply to make the right confession.<sup>2</sup> Every good Jew and Jewish Christian did that daily.

The “works” of James are Christian fruitage, whose absence reveals the absence of a living “faith.” Every scripture forged into shrapnel to shoot down the affirmation that we are saved “by grace alone through faith alone” is twisted to say something never intended. Used to prooftext an untenable position.

Since James is appealed to most, let’s turn more fully to his insistence that “faith without works is dead.”

### *Do James and Paul Contradict One Another?*

Most of us quickly cry, “No.” I join in the cry. There is, however, a verbal contradiction, if we read the writers carelessly. Paul says emphatically, “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works of law” (*Rom.* 3:28). We cannot negate Paul’s statement by adding the definite article and making him say “*the* Law” so we can cry, “He means ‘the Law of *Moses*.’”

There is no “the” in the text, and the argument made by Paul is that no one can be justified by *any* legal code. “For if a law was given which could make alive,

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. 2:19. The *Shema* (*Deut.* 6:4,5) was the heart of Israel’s faith. They nailed it on the door, bound it on their foreheads, on their hands and the fringes of their garments. But without the “walk” it was only “talk.” The devils affirm as much.

righteousness would have been by law” (*Gal 3:21*). “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through law, Christ died for nothing” (*Gal. 2:21*). Christ or Code! Take your choice. It can’t be both.

No “works,” whether legal or moral, set one right with God. “But now, apart from law the righteousness of God has been revealed... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (*Rom. 3:21-22*). “Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one without works who trusts him who justifies the ungodly, that faith is reckoned as righteousness” (*Rom. 4:4-5*).

Is that statement true or false? Is the “justified” “One *without works* who trusts him who justifies *the ungodly...!*?” Is it *this* one whom God counts righteous? Paul says “Yes.” We have said “No!”

Why have we battled so fiercely against what Paul plainly says? Is it because we are such ardent apologists for the “works” advocated by James?

*Read him:*

If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled;’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works is dead, being by itself  
(*James 2:15-16, NAS*).

Is it feeding the hungry and clothing the naked for which we are so passionately concerned? Would we add these two additional “steps” to “the plan?” We well know that these “works” are faith’s fruitage, that orthodoxy’s confession is hollow, if it stops at the front teeth.

“Brother Wallopum” is not arguing for a soup kitchen and clothes closet on the church grounds where apprentices can prepare for confession and baptism. He and his cheerleaders are the contemporary equivalents of the early Church’s Circumcision Party. They believe “baptism” is an essential “work” and will fight to the death to preserve it as such.

The fact is that James is not talking about “conditions” to be met in coming *to* Christ, but the evidence of whether or not one *has* come. Is the claim to faith validated by a life that obviously flows from being *in* Christ? Jesus, Paul and James all agree that living faith is made visible in “works.” “By their fruit you will know them.”

But what Paul is eager to say is that such are not preconditions for the Father’s embrace of the returning prodigal. No works, legal or ethical, are the ground of salvation. Nothing but God’s grace.

Where, then, do “good works” come in?

“**BY** grace are you saved

**THROUGH** faith...

**FOR** good works.” (*Eph. 2:8-10*)

The silent assumption should be laid to rest: that dead faith in order to become living faith must work. That is precisely what it *will* never, *can* never, do.

*The corpse cannot work itself alive!*

And, there is more than a subtle difference between stillbirth and live birth, though neither infant has yet gone to work. It is the difference between *has not* and *cannot*.

Christian faith is not self-created; it is elicited. “This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one can boast” (*Eph. 2:9-10*). “Then

what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith” (Rom. 3:27). Wherever ability plus opportunity come together living faith responds... thankfully, joyfully living out the life God has given.

“Salvation” in Scripture comes in three tenses: past, present, future. We *have been* saved. We *are being* saved. We *shall be* saved. When Paul points to salvation apart from works, he means past salvation. When James points to salvation related to work, he means future salvation. There is no contradiction. We are not saved by works. We are not saved by faith *and* works. We are saved by faith *that* works, and even that faith is only instrumental, not causative. We need to remember *Epesians* 2:8-10:

“**BY** grace you have been saved  
**THROUGH** faith...  
**FOR** good works.”

### Let’s Get It Straight

We do not appear highly intelligent when we confuse cause with means. We do not appear biblically literate when we confuse past salvation with future. We do not appear impeccably honest when we add up everything in any way related to salvation to prove that it can’t be by “faith alone” and then misrepresent the meaning of both “faith” and “alone.” Or, when we make additions to the biblical text to prove a point. Or, refuse to let Paul say what he said, because it shows us to be blind leaders of the blind.

Luther was not exactly a dumbbell when he crafted the slogan: *Sola gratia, sola Christo, sola fide,*

*sola Scriptura* (Solely by grace, solely by Christ, solely by faith, solely by Scripture).

He was not so obtuse as to think that  $1 + 1 + 1 + 1 = 1$ . Each factor in the equation is unique and has its own unique function. Nothing else can perform its task. Having no legitimate rival, in its office it truly stands “alone.” *Grace* is the sole **cause** (of our salvation). *Faith* is the sole **means** (of accepting that grace). *Christ* is the sole **Medium** (through which we meet God and are granted faith). *Scripture* is the sole **guardian-carrier** (of Christ). This is not to denigrate the Church. Luther could speak of Christians as “little Christs.” But, they (we) are measured by the Christ of the Gospel, the Love Story, and the Bible is the Book that brings us the Love Story. To it we are inexorably tethered.

Edward Fudge has put it like this: “Justification, the reformers insisted, was by grace alone, through the work of Christ alone, established by Scripture alone, and received on the principle of faith alone.”<sup>3</sup>

That’s it, and “anyone who can see through a ladder and read plain English...” No, strike that. But, that’s what we sound like, even look like<sup>4</sup>... sometimes, when we don’t know what we’re talking about and are so dogmatically certain that we do.

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<sup>3</sup> *Four Gospel Slogans*, Online, [www.EdwardFudge.Com](http://www.EdwardFudge.Com).

<sup>4</sup> I was witness to one debate where Brother Foy E. “Wallopum” artfully, and noisily, aroused his cheering section. Of his adversary he bellowed, “As he talked about ‘heartfelt religion,’ he patted his chest, and the longer he talked, the lower he patted,” all the while illustrating with his own hands the anatomical descent.

## My Hope

My purpose is not merely to change your mind about a controversial issue. We can all believe the right things and be just as lost as the prodigal in the pig pen or the older brother back home. We can believe a lot of rubbish and still love and be loved, trust and be accepted, by God. God is much closer to the loving heart with the muddled head than to the steely heart with the brilliant head. James is right. We simply can't be saved by our orthodoxy.

I know that we can't argue each other into faith. "Faith comes by hearing the word of God" (*Rom.* 10:17). It is possible, though, for argument to blast away some roadblocks to faith, so that we actually hear the word of *God*, rather than the echo of our *own* voice... or that of some revered "Brother Wallopum."

My hope down deep is that you can catch a glimpse of the grace of God streaming from the Love Story of Jesus and trust Him to take you and do with you what He wants most to do:

Take away your fears...  
Assure you of His love...  
Let you know you are safe...  
Flood you with His Holy Spirit...  
Open your heart to the rest of His children...  
Use you fully in that splendid mission of making  
all people one and all things new...

May God so open you up that He can truly come in and bathe you head to feet in His "Amazing Grace!"✠

## 2

### WHOSE “RIGHTEOUSNESS” OR “JUSTIFICATION?”

#### **What Is Meant By The Term “Justify?”**

Words are often used in different senses, and the word “justify” is no exception. That is one reason we need to know what the term means when in the Bible we read that some people are “justified” before God and others are not.

What does it mean to say, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Rom. 5:1*)? Or, “You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (*1 Cor. 6:11*)? Or, “So that being justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (*Titus 3:7*)?

#### *A Clue From Jesus*

In Luke 18:9-14 Jesus contrasts the self-righteousness of the Pharisee with the self-abasement of the Publican. The one extolled his virtues. The other confessed his sin. The Pharisee boasted of his faithfulness. The Publican pled God’s mercy. What happened? Of the Publican Jesus said, “I tell you,” “this man went down to his house justified rather than the other, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 14).

Whatever “justification” is, it is a response to the prayer, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Whatever the receptive spirit is, it contrasts with that of those “who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else” (NIV) or “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (NRSV). It comes not from boasting how “faithful” or “sound” one is, but by the very confession that I have been neither. It is a gift to the humble, rather than the due of a “contemptuous boaster.”

In Greek the words “justification” and “righteousness” are the same word, *dikaiosisune* (*δικαιοσυνη*). Reading the Apostle Paul, it becomes clear that the term applies both to God and to us. God is Himself “just” and demands that His people be “just.” It is imperative, then, to learn what it is to be “righteous” or “just.”

### *First Meaning*

The most ancient meaning of “right” seems to have been “straight.” The oldest religious meaning was to put beside God and show to be straight. “To justify,” therefore, was to bring to judgment, to set down beside the norm (God) and demonstrate that the person or deed judged was “straight” or “in line.” Consequently, the word came to mean “vindication.” A demonstration that one was “righteous” or “just,” despite all contrary claims.

In Hebrew thought, then, the first meaning is that “righteousness” (“justice”) is that which conforms to the norm, the norm being the character of God. God

is by nature “just” or “righteous.” It is the quality of the divine character and definitely ethical in nature.

It is this meaning employed in passages such as *Job* 11:2; 13:18; *Matt.* 11:9; *Luke* 7:29, 35; 10:29; 16:15. “Vindicate” is the word for “justify” often used in modern speech translations, and usually means “demonstrate [or prove] to be right.” It is Milton’s usage in *Paradise Lost* when he prays that,

I may assert eternal Providence  
and justify the ways of God to men.

### *Incredible Contrast*

After a long history another meaning of “righteousness” or “justification” arises that is incredibly different. No longer is it a demonstration that the person brought before God’s judgment is “straight,” “in line” or “shown to be in the right.” Rather, the one judged is *shown to be in the wrong, yet accepted and put right*. In *Romans* 3:22b-25a it is clear that the “justified” are precisely those who have *sinned* and are *guilty*, not those who have *not* sinned and are *innocent*.

For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (RSV)

“All have sinned,” so the Scripture says, and all who are justified “are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift.” The Apostle is joyously redundant. To be justified “by grace” is to receive justification “as a gift,” but he wants no one to misunderstand.

The Publican would never misunderstand. He would be “amazed,” but he would not misunderstand. The Pharisee would. He would understand “justification” (or “righteousness”) in its original sense, certain that by his faithful obedience he would be *shown to be “right.”* He would rejoice in his supposed “vindication.” Nevertheless, set down beside God, he is not “shown to be straight,” or “right.” He is shown to be dreadfully wrong. The irony of the tragedy is that he does not know. Nor will he ever know unless the spotlight thrown by Jesus on his situation allows him to see the awful truth.

The Publican needs firm assurance that he really is “justified.” Receiving such assurance, he knows that justification in his case cannot possibly mean “show one to *be* right.” It can only mean a gracious acceptance of him despite his being wrong. A refusal to judge him by his past. If in any way he saw God’s action as a judicial verdict, it would of necessity be, “Innocent!” A truly incredible verdict!

Judged by the Norm (God), both Pharisee and Publican were guilty. One did not know. The other did. One thought he was justified... and was not. The other could not image himself justified... and was.

The Gospel inevitably turns our carnal judgments upside down, and grace is ever shown to be “amazing grace.”

### *“Amazing” Truth*

The “Good News” is that the humble will be exalted. The guilty will be received as “righteous.” Not just any guilty soul, but whoever flings himself or her-

self on God's mercy -- that limitless, gracious care streaming to us in Jesus Christ.

To use the metaphor of dress, we are dressed in *His* "righteousness." To use the metaphor of court, we are acquitted, judged as if *He* were in the box instead of us and the verdict was about *Him*. To use the metaphor of commerce, *His* "righteousness" (or "justice") is set down to our account.

To speak realistically, rather than metaphorically, we are forgiven and made friends anew (reconciled). We have deserved none of it... yet the free Gift given is nothing less than *Godself*. If we remember that the Gift is ultimately *God*, and not *something*, whether place or pardon, it will help us answer the tough questions.

### **Does It Really Matter?**

For the thoughtful a host of questions leap up: Are there any practical consequences flowing from these truths? Does it make any difference how we understand what has happened to us *through* Christ? *In* Christ? Does it affect my attitude toward God or you? Does it alter my relationship to God? To you? To those with whom I live... and work... and worship?

The questions are "When I am pronounced 'righteous,' does it matter what I think has happened and *whose* 'righteousness' I consider it to be? If so, what discernible differences appear?"

*Let's See*

In a leading magazine an article of mine received this criticism: "In a lapse of charity and in a manifestation of unfair judgment, Key accuses us of being

self-righteous, like the Pharisees.” It was further characterized as “a blanket accusation” and “a wholesale charge.”

A part of the criticism was valid. However, the article was in no sense “a wholesale accusation” or “blanket charge.” Neither did it issue from a lapse of charity. Nor do I believe it was an “unfair judgment.”

What I did point to was: 1) the narrow, sectarian background in which I was born and reared, 2) over forty years of observation in Churches of Christ all over the country, twenty of them from the pulpit, and 3) the careful reading of innumerable publications.

In the early paragraphs of this essay, as I attempted to raise the question of *whose* “righteousness” is it on which we depend, I pointed to two contrasting views of “righteousness” or “justification”: 1) Persons judged are shown to *be* righteous. 2) Persons judged are shown to be *wrong*, and yet by God are *accepted* and “*put right*.”

In the first instance the *persons are* “right.” Set down before God they are “straight,” conforming to the Norm. In the second instance the persons are *not* “right,” do not conform to the Norm. These are those who have no plea in *themselves*. Their only plea is in God... “Be merciful to me, a sinner!” Their only hope is in the grace glimpsed in the face of Jesus.

The God of mercy responds to the penitent, trusting soul and accepts it as “right” or “just.” The *unright* is, thus, “set right” as God graciously gives to all who will have it the open, or “right” relation.

My point was that many of us use the words of “grace” and “forgiveness.” Yet, our trust is not in Him who accepts the “unfaithful” or the “unsound,” and

treats them as both “faithful” and “sound.” Our hope is in the *fact* that we have been “obedient,” and are both “faithful” *and* “sound.” It scares us to death to think that somewhere on something we may be wrong.

Our security is not grounded in *His* mercy, but in *our* obedience. It is not in *His* “righteousness,” but in *our* “rightness.” If you doubt this, ask yourself, “What if I were *not* ‘right?’ Would I not be in grave danger of being lost?” I *must* subscribe to the “right” doctrines, wear the “right” name, belong to the “right” church, which has the “right” organization and employs the “right” items of worship. I *must* support the “right” schools, study the “right” literature, listen faithfully to the “right” preachers, and on... and on... and on.

In what “rightness” do we trust? 1) It is in having become a member of the “right” church, and 2) in having done all the “right” things. It is not “one who without works trusts Him who justifies the ungodly,” whose “faith is reckoned as righteousness” (*Rom.* 4:5).

### **A Care-Full Response**

Here is my response to the criticism:

“Let my comments about ‘self-righteousness’ be read in the light of a single question: ‘What is the ground of our hope?’ On what ultimately does our security rest? You will see that my contention is that our people by and large have rested their confidence on their right understanding of and obedience to a select number of doctrinal commands. “Ultimately our confidence was in our ‘rightness’ about these things.

As pride is our cardinal sin, so self-justification is our prime temptation. Note how subtly it can rear its head at the very moment we are discussing salvation through *Christ*, security not in our *knowledge*, but in *Him* on whom we with perpetual penitence trust. [My critic] says, ‘An attitude which I have long heard preached, and which needs to be stressed, is that none of us are (sic) right within ourselves, but the Bible is right, and we should study and measure ourselves in the light of the Bible.’

“The assumption, unstated but plain, is that when I have conformed myself to the Bible, then I am right. Here is my hope. This, however, is not the Gospel. The ‘righteousness’ of the Gospel is a ‘rightness’ God *gives* us (imputes, accounts, reckons, assigns, declares) when we are clearly in the *wrong* as measured by the Bible. This ‘Good News’ is for us who have failed, who are not ‘right’ according to God’s will. It is the ‘scandal’ of affirming, ‘But if without any works to his credit [one] simply puts his faith in him who acquits the guilty, then his faith is indeed ‘counted as righteousness’ (*Rom. 4:5* TEV).

“Paul left himself wide-open to misunderstanding. So did Jesus. So will everyone who preaches the same Gospel. We shall not, dare not, disparage the Bible. We must know *about* our Lord in order to know *Him*. But, somewhere, sometime we must face this fact: *so long as my trust rests in my measurement of myself by the Bible well enough to fulfill its requirements for salvation, it is grounded in SELF and not in CHRIST!*

“Unless my confidence is in the ‘rightness’ of Christ, not in my fulfillment of God’s requirements, however ‘right’ they are and however ‘right’ the Bible

that details them, *I have fallen away from grace!* Therefore, I conclude unequivocally that any view that rests on *my* ‘rightness’ -- intellectually, ethically, legally -- is destructive of the Gospel and is a view of *self-righteousness.*’

“When I quit pleading my ‘rightness’ about anything as the ground of my standing before God, then I turn away from self-justification, justification by works, to salvation through faith. I simply hurl myself on the mercy of God in Christ. Until then I have not given up every ground of boasting and every occasion for pride.

“My attempt here is to clarify my usage of the term ‘self-righteousness.’ I employ it with care and precision, not as a sanctified curse-word to hurl at others. Nor do I limit the sin to a few, exempting myself. Brother \_\_\_\_\_ does well to warn against it, for when we feel most free from it, we may be most ensnared. There is never a moment when we do not stand before God through sheer mercy.”

That was, and is, my response.

### **More to Come**

I move now to present two additional views of “righteousness” (or “justification”) and, divergent as they are, point to a way of dealing appreciatively with both. While in my judgment the third view is gravely flawed, it seeks to preserve a truth we need to recognize and embrace. The fourth and last view is one generally overlooked in the study of both Old Covenant and New Covenant Scriptures. Yet, it sums up the truth contained in the 2nd and 3rd usages.

It does make a world of difference as we ask, “What really happens to us when we rejoice in the blessed fact that we are ‘justified *by grace through faith for good works?*’”

### **A Gigantic Ethical Problem**

The two views of “righteousness” noted to this point are: 1) Judged by the Norm (God) the person is shown to be in the right. 2) Judged by the Norm the person is shown to be in the wrong, yet accepted as (and put) right.

No. 1) is the legal, ethical view. There is no problem with the law and its legal decree. The problem is with us. We don’t measure up and are, therefore, lost. Our only hope is with No. 2). But it is here a giant problem arises. In legal terms it is an acquittal of the guilty, a travesty on justice that makes God out to be a liar. He does what no responsible judge could conceivably do. The *guilty*, God pronounces “*Innocent!*”

Yet, there is no doubt that Paul, in opposition to No. 1), affirms No. 2). The question, as we note later, is whether he uses a legal metaphor to describe a legal transaction between the Father and the Son, as well as, the Son and those who come to Him. Many who believe in salvation by grace through faith hold this legal view. I am convinced that they are terribly wrong about it, that Paul’s legal language is as metaphorical as his commercial language, which it is all meant to point to the personal relations of penitent faith, free forgiveness and full reconciliation.

Paul’s use of the words “imputes,” “reckons,” “credits,” “accounts,” indicate that the “righteousness of

God” is not our own. It does not come from within, but is a gift from Beyond. When literalized, however, and regarded as a legal edict of the Heavenly Court, it raises all kinds of moral problems, prompting such scholars, as Sanday and Headlam in their classic work on *Romans*, to label Paul’s view a legal “fiction.”<sup>5</sup>

To vindicate God against charges of arbitrariness and tyranny, juggling the celestial accounts and making “justification” immoral, the view of “infused righteousness” arose. Impetus was given it by Augustine, whose writings contained views paradoxically seized by Protestants and Catholics alike to proclaim both “imputed” and “infused” righteousness. Arguing that the Latin *justification* unambiguously means *justum facere* (“to make righteous”), Roman Catholics became champions of the doctrine of “infused righteousness.”

In the act of “justification,” it held, one steadily *becomes* righteous. God “infuses” “goodness” into the baptized. The person is not only forgiven, but by the work of the Holy Spirit ethically and morally transformed. Augustine contended that by grace “charity” is infused into the soul. Thomas Aquinas added the teaching that by justification God conveys to the soul sanctifying grace.

The Reformers championed the doctrine of “imputed righteousness.” *Sola fide* (“by faith alone”) the

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<sup>5</sup>*The International Critical Commentary*, 12th Ed., (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), p.36. Marcus Barth (*Justification*, Erdmans, 1971, p. 12) cites this statement in arguing that Paul presents a juridical process. The metaphor of “crediting” righteousness (“setting down to one’s account”), though, is commercial.

merits of Christ are imputed. I believe that Reformation theology erred in making the judicial metaphor carry the full content of “justification.” Paul, however, clearly teaches what is meant by “imputed,” rather than “infused,” righteousness.

Yet, after 55 years of studying this question, I conclude that we ought not blithely to ignore the charge of “legal fiction.” Once we are sure that it is “*God’s* righteousness,” and not our own, we are compelled to ask, “Is it actually “*God’s righteousness*,” rather than some sort of sacred magic? Or arbitrary decree? We cannot cavalierly dismiss the concern that “justification” should be something more than the unjustifiable act of an almighty despot.

Paul didn’t. That’s why in *Romans* 4:21-31 he, like Milton, seeks “to justify the ways of God...” The Sacrifice of Jesus, he contends, demonstrates both God’s righteous character and His justice in justifying “the one who has faith in Jesus” (vv. 25-26). Both first and second meanings occur in this passage. God is *proven* right, and the believer is *put* right.

### **Interlude (Attempt at Reconciliation)**

Just now on my computer I singled out from a list of commands one that reads “justified.” The act of justification aligned the writing on this page. Lines fill out the allotted space, beginning and ending at the proper edges. Before “justification” the margins were broken. Now they are whole. Here “justify” is to “put right” according to print norms. Ragged as it was, this page was clearly not “right” till an outside act “put [it] right.”

This is not to say that the words were made sacrosanct and the lines beatified. The action did not turn pagan paragraphs into sacred sonnets and transform “the language of Ashdod” into “the language of Judah” (*Neh.*13:24). Nor turn common talk into Bible speak. The print was not “*made* right” by moral, ethical or sectarian standards. It was “*put* right” according to print standards.<sup>6</sup>

After “justification” the writing, though formally right, may not be ethically so. To say that is it “justified” is not necessarily to say what is false. When it means to “put right”<sup>7</sup> it declares that the justified is now actually in a new relationship, the *right* relation.

Trust in God *is* the “right” response of any human, and through that openness of spirit God can and does relate affirmatively to the trusting soul. Whether or not God is morally justified in initiating that relation cannot be judged in a vacuum, but must be viewed in light of the larger context, including the ethical consequences of the relation.

Early in *Romans* Paul contends that God’s judgment is “according to truth” (2:2). In 3:21-26 he shows that the All-Holy does not take sin lightly. Its cost is nothing less than Calvary. The Apostle proceeds to establish both kinds of “righteousness:”

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<sup>6</sup> Since writing the above, I see that the mechanical metaphor is scant improvement over the legal. Like a parable, it illustrates only a single aspect of the whole. There simply are no impersonal metaphors that convey the fullness of the personal relationship.

<sup>7</sup> *Rom.* 1:15; 3:21-26; 4:1-4; 5:1,9,19; *Gal.* 2:16-37.21; 3:8,11; 5:5; (TEV); “right standing” (Williams).

- 1) “the righteousness of God” (inherent in His character and evident in His justifying work),
2. “the righteousness of faith” (justification as the free gift of divine friendship).

The Apostle, however, is not finished. He proceeds to relate the Atonement ethically to the Christian’s new nature and walk. Note especially chapters 5 - 8 and 12--15:13. We dare not stop with chapter 4, concluding that we have a full understanding of the nature of “justification through faith.”

From chapt. 6 on he points to the ethical consequence of the Crucified Christ accepted by faith, where it becomes plain as the summer sun at high noon in Kansas that the new relation means a new being. Not license, but liberty. Not lust, but love.

### **Golden Harvest**

There are, indeed, practical consequences flowing from God’s acceptance -- some inward, others outward.

#### *Inward*

First comes grateful love. “Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift!” (2 Cor. 9:15). Of the creditor who forgave two debtors Jesus asked, “Which will love him more?” The obvious reply was, “The one whom he forgave more” (Lk. 7:43). Of that grateful soul at His feet, hastily wiping away the tears with her hair, Jesus says, “I tell you, then, the great love she has shown proves that her many sins have been forgiven” (v. 47, TEV, NEB, cf. NRSV). *We love in direct proportion to our experience of forgiveness.*

The immediate consequence is peace. “And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you, go in peace’” (v. 50). “Therefore, being justified by faith, we have [or let us have] peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Rom. 5:1*).

The list could run on and on. There is *joy*. There is *hope*. There is also the *willingness to work* beyond all normal endurance. Work is not the coin with which we buy justification. It is tribute to a debt we gladly pay *on*, but can never pay *off*, the “Gift” of which no recipient can boast (*Rom. 3:27*). Rather, boasting is the posture of those Pharisees, “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated all others with contempt” (*Lk. 18:9*).

### *Outward*

The outward consequences are legion, but first look long at the primary one... *unity* (*Eph. 1:9-10*). “Justification” is by faith alone, but the faith by means of which we are justified is not alone. Nor are we. We’re not saved to be holy hermits. The Church is not a crowd, but a congregation. The Covenant Community does not exist for itself, but for the Kingdom. For the healing of Humanity’s broken body (*Eph. 2:115b-16*), till the Father’s children are all at Home and God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

We must be careful not to teach a bogus, one-dimensional righteousness that flows from the bench, but not from the Cross. That leaves us where it found us. Not “straight.” Not “aligned” with God and God’s People. Only divinely *said* to be.

We are not children of the Kingdom till, like our Lord, we're stretched across the barriers that separate us.<sup>8</sup> Identifying with Him, we identify with those whom He embraced: the rich and poor, well and sick, weak and strong, good and bad. We identify with those whom others despise, exploit and persecute -- the down-and-outers, the oppressed.

The "justice" of God is a gift, a *real* gift. It is not given, though, merely to be praised inside the church, but to be practiced outside in the world. A "righteousness" that does not issue in "right" dealings on earth can be of no value in heaven.

The rest of this essay will seek to show that "justification" should be understood as "*put right*," rather than "*prove to be righteous*," "*make righteous*,"<sup>9</sup> or even "*legally judge to be righteous*."<sup>10</sup> It is: 1) a sheer gift, 2) ethical in nature, 3) that forever cuts the ground from under the charge of "legal fiction."

Rather than the capricious and immoral deed of a cosmic tyrant, it is the gracious deed of a Heavenly Father that rights a wrong relationship and opens the door to a new and transformed life at Home.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. not only *Eph.* 2, but *Rom.* 14.

<sup>9</sup> This usage never occurs in Scripture. Some scholars argue that it never occurs even in classical Greek literature.

<sup>10</sup> Writing to residents of the Empire's capital city, Paul readily seized on the juridical metaphor. Not only that, he had himself tried most of his life to be justified by law. What I would like us to recognize, though, is that he now has a broader and more personal understanding of "justification" ("righteousness") than any legal or commercial metaphor can carry, that of Jesus in *Lk.* 7:47-50; 18:14; 19:9-10.

## Third Way

The original meaning of “justify” (prove to be right) belongs to God alone. On that fundamental fact Catholics and Protestants agree. Disagreement surfaces over whether “righteousness” is “infused” (Catholics) or “imputed” (Protestants ). Here I undertake a dangerous voyage, rowing against the popular theology of both. I affirm that neither the Roman view of “infused” righteousness, nor the traditional Protestant view of “imputed” righteousness (interpreted as a legal verdict)<sup>11</sup> adequately expresses the rich concept of Jesus or the Apostle Paul.

To the question, “*How* can God *give* ‘righteousness’ so that in no sense is it ‘self-righteousness?’” the biblical response is neither of the two answers traditionally offered, but a third. Let’s look carefully at the distinction...

- 1) God *infuses* it into the soul.  
(A spiritual transformation occurs **interiorly**.)
- 2) God *credits* it to the believer’s account.  
(A formal transaction occurs **exteriorly**.)
- 3) God *forgives and accepts* the believer into a new dynamic relationship.  
(A creative re-alignment occurs **intra-personally**.)

Each view seeks to honor God. Each focuses on a specific problem, and each points to a specific solution. There must be change. “Infusion” stresses

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<sup>11</sup> Though the term is Paul’s, the content is not.

what happens *within* (God's down-to-earth intervention). "Imputation" stresses what happens *without* (God's celestial decree). The "third way" holds that at the moment the emphasis is not on the "self" (legally or ethically), but on the new relationship. The focus shifts from what happens *within* or *without* to the "healthful" reality of the *between*. Forgiveness brings reconciliation, and the wrong relation is put "right."

This is the view expressed by Jesus. Most Christians agree that it was, also, taught by Paul. Many Protestants, though, steeped in Reformation theology, have read Paul solely in the light of his forensic and commercial metaphors. Consequently, "righteousness" has suffered conversion into a formal transaction of the finance office ("accounts credited") or the law court (a verdict of "Not Guilty!"). They overlooked the richer, fuller Biblical concept of "righteousness" as "salvation," and "salvation" experienced initially as forgiveness and an open (or "right") relationship. To that view we now turn.

### **Growing Concepts**

#### *Salvation*

Originally in Scripture "salvation" meant "broad" or "spacious" and came to mean power to live in a broad or spacious place. Consequently, it was deliverance from all that constricted, oppressed and prevented a full life. Our English word comes from *salvus*, meaning "health" or "wholeness." It is to be *delivered* from the sickness of sin, the prison of self, the bondage of addiction, the burden of guilt and the threat of death, that we "may have life and have it abundantly."

When “righteousness” is by Paul seen as “salvation,”<sup>12</sup> he refers not to the gift of a “righteous” character, but rather the gift of a “right” relationship. In the openness of trust the relationship can now be “healthy” and the trusting ones delivered from the bondages that constrict and threaten to destroy.

### *Righteousness and Salvation*

How, though did “righteousness” and “salvation” become linked? Or, how did the Hebrew *tsedeq* and the Greek *dikaiousune*<sup>13</sup> change in meaning, or grow to have multiple meanings? Specifically, how did they come to mean “salvation” in the sense of “the gift of right relationship?”

From the 8th century B.C. on there was a steady inclination toward “justification” and “righteousness” as “salvation.” Amos and Micah in particular make severe charges of injustice, bribery in the courts and the substitution of ritual worship for honest dealing. The poor and powerless have no vindicator. It becomes clear that if righteousness is ever established in the land, God Himself must “deliver the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper” (*Ps.* 72:12). The understanding of God as “Vindicator” or “Helper” began to emerge.

Later the concept of God’s vindication of the helpless came to be associated with “showing mercy to the poor” (cf. *Ps.* 112:9; *Dan.* 4:27). It was this understanding of “righteousness” that Jesus employed as

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<sup>12</sup> As in *Rom.* 1:16-17.

<sup>13</sup> Both words are translated “righteousness” and “justification.”

He said, "Take heed that you do not your righteousness before men to be seen of them..." (*Mt. 6:1, ASV*). The King James Version reads, "Take heed that you do not your alms..." and v. 2 shows that this, indeed, is its meaning. The word has moved toward "benevolence" as a form of "salvation."

In Isaiah "righteousness" and "salvation" come to be used as equivalents. By means of Hebrew parallelism the prophet speaks for God:

I bring near my righteousness...  
and my salvation shall not tarry.  
(46:13)

My righteousness is near;  
My salvation is gone forth...  
(51:5)

...He has clothed me with the garment of salvation,  
He has covered me with the robes of  
righteousness... (61:10)

These doublets present "righteousness" or "salvation" not as qualities of character, but as the divine activity. Not what God *is*, but what God in mercy *does*. While the Apostle Paul is heir of Jewish legalism, he is also heir of prophetic faith and can employ the same kind of parallelism:

For with the heart one believes  
unto righteousness;  
And with the mouth confession is made  
unto salvation. (*Rom. 10:10*)

The Apostle has no intention of separating righteousness from salvation, conditioning the former on faith and the latter on confession. His all-embracing word is "salvation" and has been so from the beginning of his letter (1:16). To do His "salvation"-deed God has

offered *by means of faith* His *dikaiosune* (“justification” or “righteousness”).

In *2 Cor. 5:16-21* Paul calls the Gospel “the message of reconciliation.”<sup>14</sup> He affirms that God is reconciling the world by “not counting their trespasses against them” (v.19) and that “For our sakes he made (Christ) to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (v.21). The result of “reconciliation” is that *we* become God’s “salvation”-act. Standing us before angelic, demonic and human hosts, God can point to us and cry, “There is my ‘salvation!’-- my loved and rescued Family.”

Here is the full development of the term, carrying all the treasures of the past. It is God’s “vindication” in our “deliverance.” Not the impartation of holiness, but opening up to every trusting soul the “Transforming Friendship.” It is “reconciliation.” Though not a literal legal acquittal, it does involve forgiveness of sin and is what both Jesus and Paul call “salvation.”

Realizing that the commercial and legal images of Paul are not literal, but metaphorical, language, we are delivered from tortured penal theories of atonement. The reality behind the figures is the sheer “forgiveness” of God. The unconditional Gift of His Friendship. His “Amazing Grace.” There is nothing commercial or legal about it. It is eminently and totally *personal*.

The metaphors are wineskins holding the content of the Gospel of “turning enemies into friends.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In the American Bible Society’s TEV (“Good News Bible”) “reconciliation” (*katallage*) is translated “make friends.”

<sup>15</sup> “All this is done by God who through Christ changed us from enemies into friends, and gave us the task of making others his friends also. Our message is that God was making friends of all

The moral difficulty is not gone, but it does shift. No more is it that of God laboring under an abstract “Law of Justice” that demands punishment of the innocent to let the guilty go free. Rather, it becomes the question, “How can ‘forgiveness’ be ethical?” Is it not in reality an expression of “cheap grace?”

To this thorny question we now turn.

### **Critic’s Charge**

“Forgiveness is a beggar’s refuge. A man should pay his debts!” So quipped one with no concept of either the nature or enormity of his sin. He is well described by Jesus in “The Parable of the two Debtors.”<sup>16</sup>

Still, “forgiveness” is open to the same moral objection as a “legal acquittal” of the guilty. At a glance it appears to be “the condoning of sin.” Offenders do not pay in full for the offense. Evil is taken lightly and justice trampled by care-less feet. Utterly inexcusable!

Is this charge true? If not, why not? How is “forgiveness” morally justified?

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mankind through Christ. God did not keep an account of their sins against them, and he has given us his message of how he makes them his friends.

“Here we are then speaking for Christ... we beg you, let God change you from enemies into friends” (2 *Cor.* 5:18-20, TEV).

<sup>16</sup> *Lk.* 7:41-50.

## Care-Full Response

It's not by the quip of some shallow soul crying, "Let God forgive! It's his business to forgive!" So surfaces the ground of that callous query in *Rom.* 3:8 and 6:1, "Shall we pile up sin to see how far we can exploit God's grace?" Nor is it the charge, "Your logic is all wrong." Rather, it is, "Your heart is all wrong." "You are dead *in* sin, not dead *to* sin. You have not made the faith-identification with Christ in his death, or you could never ask that foolish question."

Jesus' response to the charge, "This man receives sinners!" is to tell of a loving father and two lost sons.<sup>17</sup> At the end of the story one son is no longer lost, but home in the father's embrace, enjoying the feast of reconciliation. The other pouts outside in the dark.

Christ's final response, though, is Himself outside in the dark, beyond the City gates, hanging on a Roman Cross. Not pouting, but crying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Whoever dares, let him look at that and chirp, "Cheap, cheap... cheap."

## More Than a Quick Glance

"Where is the Cross," snapped one questioner, "in the Parable of the Prodigal Son?" The perceptive reply was, "in the father's heart." And that's where "The Old Rugged Cross" was before it was ever "on a hill far away." And that's where it *is* long after the hill is burned bare and the Cross is but dust.

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<sup>17</sup> *Lk.* 15:11-32.

Forgiveness is a personal act in which one who has been wronged refuses to take vengeance or require retributive justice, but willingly bears the wrong so that the relationship may be preserved and full fellowship restored. Consequently, it is neither an impersonal judicial decree nor a decision to be blind to the injury. It is the only action possible that can mend the broken bond and prevent permanent damage to the relationship.

Forgiveness cannot be seized, bought or borrowed. The one inflicting the wrong is now powerless to undo the deed or restore the relation. S/he can only stand before the betrayed helpless, except for the power to receive or reject the free offer of forgiveness.

The ground of forgiveness rests solely in the one with the wounded heart. The offended one's sacrificial love. His or her passion for covenant-community. The indomitable will to uninterrupted fellowship.

### **How It Actually Works**

We have already seen it in Scripture: in the penitent Publican, that grateful soul washing Jesus' feet with penitential tears and the prodigal son come home. Consider now a more contemporary case.

A prominent official, away from home long stretches at a time, succumbed to temptation and was unfaithful to his wife. Burdened with guilt, he confessed to her the sordid affair. As his wife heard the story, she turned white, clutched at her breast and fell against the wall. When at last she could speak, her words were, "I love you, and we will live this down together." In awe the shaken soul declared, "Till then I did not begin to understand the meaning of the Cross."

We do not understand until we see the wound not only in the hands and feet and head of Jesus, but in the heart of God. We do not understand so long as we see the satisfaction of some impersonal “Law of Justice,” but only as we glimpse an Eternal Calvary raised by our sin and hear its anguished cry, “I love you, and we will live this down together. †”

### Forgiving Versus Condoning

To condone costs nothing, and it heals as much as it costs. “Forget it,” one twitters, adding, “it really doesn’t matter.” That may be the way of pseudo-therapy, but it is not the way of love. We may then go on to say, “It accomplishes nothing,” and we’re dead wrong about that; for now the gulf is fixed.

For King Arthur to say to Guinevere after her adulterous affair with Lancelot, “Tut, tut, my dear, it’s nothing to me,” would be but a sword-thrust in her soul. A refusal to deal with the sin.<sup>18</sup> It would in no wise “set right” a broken relationship. It would reveal that the relation was *never* “right.” Nothing present in Arthur

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<sup>18</sup> Discovered in the nunnery where she hid, Guinevere confessed to no less than “the ruin of my lord the King.” But Arthur replied:

I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere,  
I, whose vast pity almost makes me die  
To see thee, laying there thy golden head,  
My pride in happier summers, at my feet.  
My wrath which forced my thoughts on that fierce law,  
The doom of treason and the flaming death,--  
When first I heard thee hidden here,--is past,  
And all is past, the sin is sinn’d and I,  
Lo, I forgive thee, as Eternal God forgives.

could heal the wound in Guinevere's conscience.<sup>19</sup> Nothing in Guinevere could draw from the king anything more than a perfunctory "pardon." She could accept pardon, for pardon is the negative side of forgiveness, a refusal to exact the penalty. Forgiveness, however, moves past pardon to open the arms and the heart.

The difference between condoning and forgiving is illustrated by two different sets of parents. One condones anything a lawless child can do... thinking up excuses that the violator could never imagine. The other excuses nothing, disapproves of every evil deed, follows him all the way to the electric chair and forgives, though it breaks their hearts and turns their hair gray. Their grace is free, but hardly "cheap."

Any view of forgiveness that does not carry in its breast the immeasurable price paid by the forgiver is "cheap grace." The Cross gives the lie to every charge that sin does not matter and that God feels neither disappointment nor pain. I am aware that the Church branded "patripassionism" as "heresy," but any view excluding the Father's pain is morally reprehensible. Forgiveness is unspeakably costly -- a Cross stabbed deep in the soul, breaking the heart of both forgiver and forgiven,

All the metaphors are true. The forgiver *does*, in fact, bear the shame and pain of the sin. *Is*, indeed, the sacrifice... the scapegoat... the ransom... the penalty. *Does* suffer vicariously. Wherever the offer of forgiveness and reconciliation is accepted, there a new, open,

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<sup>19</sup> That was the fatal flaw in the old Jewish sacrifices. They did not actually deal with *sin* and so could never clear the "conscience of the worshiper" (*Heb.* 9:9; cf. 9:14 and 10:1-4).

creative relationship is born, and the fruits of forgiveness become evidence of its morality.

### **Does It Really Matter... How We See It?**

It mattered to the little girl who said, “I love Jesus, but I hate God.”<sup>20</sup> It matters to those who see themselves as sons- and daughters-in-law. “Who trust in themselves that they are righteous and look on others with contempt.” Even those who repudiate legalism until they come at length to the Cross only to embrace it in the end, viewing Jesus’ ultimate relation to His Father as legal in character.<sup>21</sup>

There was no need of a new portrait in Jesus, unless our image of God vitally affects the nature of our relationship to God. Our need of a new covenant-relation, therefore, is answered in God’s mighty “Yes!” in Jesus Christ. It matters. It matters... infinitely!

It matters to simple souls with no skills in dissecting “justice” so as to be able clearly to identify and distinguish “retributive,” “distributive” and “corrective” or “creative” kinds of justice, relating them accurately to the doctrine of “Atonement.” Surely, it mattered to one named “Paul,” who wanted God’s long lost children to hear, see and surrender to Jesus that He might whisper, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

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<sup>20</sup> Didn’t young George Eliot beg Jesus to protect her from God?

<sup>21</sup> To posit here a legal transaction between Father and Son is to descend from the personal to the legal and subpersonal, to compromise the Father’s action *in* the Son and to surrender their relationship as the true model of our own. It is an enormous price to pay for a theory, however cherished.

### ... Or, How We Say It?

It might not matter how to speak to one another, if we all understand not what is said, but what is meant? But often we misunderstand, and how we say the words can add to the misunderstanding. While the letter is never an infallible carrier of the spirit, it is necessary, or “Christ” would never have been heralded as “the Word.”

It matters whether we declare that salvation is by “faith *and* works” or by “faith *that* works.” It matters whether we affirm that we are “righteous” (“made holy,” since God alone is truly “holy”) or “righteous” (“set right,” since God alone can rightly “align” us).

It matters whether we talk as if “faith” were our own creation traded to God for justification, or if it is but the openness of soul that allows God freely to give God-self to us as Father/Friend. Justification “because of,”<sup>22</sup> rather than “by means of,” faith is more easily interpreted as the substitution of faith for works as the coin of the Kingdom.

When we speak of “righteousness” and/or “justification” only in judicial or legal language we tend to divide the work of “God *in* Christ” into the work of “God *and* Christ,” leading to the response of the little girl mentioned above.

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<sup>22</sup> We can use this expression denoting faith as the *instrumental*, rather than *generative*, “cause.” The ground remains God’s “grace.” Paul’s usage is at times rendered “because of,” but many translators select the words “through” or “by means of.”

## Overarching Hope

The chief purpose of this essay is to encourage us to throw ourselves on the outstretched mercy of God in Jesus Christ. To give up on anything in *ourselves* as the ground of grace.

Unquestionably, our understanding of the terms “righteousness” and “justification” helps determine our sense of security, how we regard the standing of others and, consequently, how we treat them and one another. I am truly convinced that our image of God and of Christ, climaxed in their relation at Calvary, has a similar impact.

I hoped that it would be helpful to see that the terms for “righteousness” and “justification” have over the centuries grown to mean God’s “salvation-deed,” God’s “benevolence” to the helpless in working the “deliverance” of His people. Stripped of legal and commercial dress, this action is “becoming friends again” (“reconciliation”), the initial act of “salvation” -- the grace gift of sheer “*forgiveness*.”

Jesus used the terms simply to mean “forgiveness” and “reconciliation.” So did the Apostle Paul. I pray that we can return to this simple understanding. Opening the door, bringing the lost one Home, treating him or her as “not guilty,” offering the “right” relationship, enfolding them in the “transforming Friendship” -- all this and more is wrapped up in Paul’s full usage of the word translated “justify” and “set right.” It is made to carry the precious content of nothing less than “salvation.”

For those, who like myself, have had to come to Jesus by way of the juridic language of Paul, I say, “Welcome, fellow traveler.” Not only our Father and

Older Brother rejoice that we are Home, but so will our Brother Paul. However, I am sure that they would like to see us freed from all lingering vestiges of legalism.

### Conclusion

I long to grasp the element of truth in each of the views of “righteousness” discussed. The one I joyously affirm and those I fiercely reject. I believe that such a grasp is possible. Perhaps, if we look carefully enough, we can see the relation between “imputed” and “imparted” righteousness.

While God’s initial gift is not “holiness” of character, the two are not unrelated. Right relation opens us up to the One whose nature we come to share. It leads to “holiness.” The gift may be said to be “credited,” “imputed” or “reckoned” because it is God’s *declaration* of *acceptance*. And God’s word is never mere verbalism, but is the dynamic word that issues forth accomplishing what it affirms. Consequently, it is not legal hocus pocus. In the act of “justification” God actually “aligns” or “sets right” all who are open to being “set right.” That “openness” is “trust” or “faith.”

In the Cross God did “show his righteousness,” proving “that he himself is righteous [in character and in action -- “Holy” and “Deliverer”] and the All-Holy does “deliver” [i.e, “accept” and “align”] those who have “faith in Jesus” (*Rom. 3:24-26*).

We must not, however, see the Sacrifice as something Jesus did because the Holy God could not, or would not. It is precisely through God’s Self-identification with Jesus in his sacrifice and our self-identification With him in that same offering that we are “aligned” or

spiritually united. We are “accepted” into the new relationship. We are “forgiven.” We are “delivered.” We are “saved.”

Though still unworthy, we share the relation in which God can share with us His mind, His spirit, His character, transforming us into the image of Jesus Christ (2 *Cor.* 3:18). Through the new relation the “new being” is created. “Justification” makes possible “sanctification.” This is not to say that we begin in God’s “righteousness” and end in our own. From first to last it is His grace-gift through Jesus Christ our Lord.

“Whose ‘righteousness’ is it?” God’s... from beginning to end. “Is it in no sense our own?” When we understand it as “the gift of right relationship,” we see that it is ours to *share* and *enjoy*, but never to *possess*. Yet, by His grace we can mirror the proof of His victory shout. Humbly and thankfully we bow. Then the Father lifts us up and joyously cries,

“See my ‘righteousness;’  
Behold my ‘salvation!’  
Through Jesus, my faith-full Son! †

# 3

## THE POWER AND PERIL OF A PREPOSITION

### **The Stone in Our Slingshot**

There was nothing like a good debate to set our blood racing. When our champion and their champion met in mortal combat, there was no question over which was “David” and which “Goliath.” We could toss four of our five stones back in the brook, for one was all we needed. It was a little preposition spelled “*e-i-s*” (often mispronounced “ice”), which we knew meant “into” or “unto.” It most certainly didn’t mean “because of,” as their ignorant champion affirmed.

Baptism was indisputably “*unto* the remission of sins,” as the debate proposition stated. We were certain that it never meant “because of,” and so their soul salvation (and ours) depended on getting it straight. In fact, many of “our” people declared not only that baptism was “unto remission of sins,” but “into the one Body,” and it was as evident as Hitler’s forelock who that “one Body” was. Therefore, anyone not baptized “*into the Church of Christ*” was lost and needed now to be “scripturally baptized.”

Temperatures soared over the issue, even among partisans who couldn’t clearly define it. Some of us were like Lloyd George, member of a little Church of Christ in the British Isles. While traveling (as I recall) through North Wales, he turned to a companion and announced, “The church to which I belong is torn by a

fierce dispute. One party says that we are baptized *in* the name of the Father. The other says we are baptized *into* the name of the Father. I belong to one of these parties. I feel very strongly about it. In fact, I would die for it... but I forget which it is.”

Ah, yes, there is power in a preposition. When, however, our faith is centered in *it*, there is as surely peril, even when one remembers well his or her party.

### A Closer Look

It is this same preposition that Paul uses when he declares that “faith” is “*eis* righteousness” (cf. *Rom.* 4:5, 9,22). Here, as elsewhere, it denotes “motion toward” or “*into*.”<sup>23</sup> There are, also, a couple of other primary prepositions that the Apostle attaches to “faith” -- *dia* (δια, “through” or “by means of”) and *ek* (εκ, “by”).

“Righteousness” and “justification” are the same word both in the Hebrew and the Greek. It is the translators who switch back and forth between our English nouns “justification” and “righteousness” (verbs “justify” and “set right”). Consequently, the text reads both ways, “justified *by* faith” and “justified *through* faith.”

*Dia* can be a bit tricky, though, and we’d better watch it. When used with a genitive, it signifies place, medium or instrumentality. With an accusative, however, it generally signifies indirect causation. This fact has led many to speak of “justification *because of* faith.”

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<sup>23</sup> It is usually rendered “credited,” “reckoned” or “regarded as.”

For example, the *Living Bible* employs this phrase in *Rom. 4:11,13*,<sup>24</sup> and contemporary writers use it generously.

### So What??

We need to be clear about the meaning of the phrase “because of.” Is “faith” the *ground* of God’s gift of right relationship? A gift that could be given for any other cause it pleased God to choose? Or is it the medium, the only medium, through which a wrong relation can be set right?

If ours is a legal relation, God can arbitrarily select any “condition” the Almighty Law-Giver pleases. If, on the other hand, the relation is personal, and God chooses to deal with us as *persons*, rather than *things*, that relation cannot exist apart from mutual trust. Between or among *persons* faith becomes the unclogged channel. There simply is no other.

Tragically, we do not always make clear that such usage must not present faith as the root “cause” of justification. That cause is grounded in God alone. Not in us. God’s outgoing love is the primary cause of the Father’s openness to us. “Faith” is but our affirmative response to so gracious a God, the channel

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<sup>24</sup> While its revision (*New Living Translation*) more aptly reads: “The circumcision ceremony was a sign that Abraham already had faith and that God had already accepted him and declared him to be righteous—even before he was circumcised” (v. 11); and “It is clear, then, that God’s promise to give the whole earth to Abraham and his descendants was not based on obedience to God’s law, but on the new relationship with God that comes by faith.” (v. 3).

through which the Almighty becomes the All-Gracious, giving Himself away. *It is the only possible way for separate selves to become one, and the only way "righteousness" can be by "grace"* (cf. Rom. 4:16).

It is, therefore, critical for us to understand that "righteousness" is "*through* faith." If "because of" is ever meant to imply that God trades righteousness for faith, the personal relation has degenerated into a commercial and sub-personal one. Justification becomes a swap, a *quid pro quo*. Faith is now the coin we deposit in the heavenly treasury or drop in the celestial slot machine programmed to pay off with a signed pardon. Our not-so sanitized version of indulgences.

Faith as the required payment for salvation is simply salvation by work. The work is mental, rather than physical or ritual, but it is still the reward of a laborer -- the price we pay for the product we buy. God has merely marked down the merchandise, so that the bargain is a real steal.

### **Overhearing a Conversation**

Recently my brother Harold and I had an exchange via email on the relation of faith to God's righteousness. He cited encouragingly the current statement of a prolific writer whose words were heartening. We rejoiced together.

I did, though, go on to observe, "It does appear that Brother \_\_\_\_\_ has moved farther than ever before. Yet, he seems to have the common view that righteousness is granted 'because of' faith. That still makes it a bargain of sorts, with faith as the price paid, a work of the mind and heart, rather than of the hands. My

point has been that it is ‘through’ faith. The channel is ‘essential,’ not because of some arbitrary requirement of a God who doesn’t want to give something for nothing, but as the means of doing just that.”

Harold responded, “Like ‘John Doe,’ I surmise ‘Blank’ hasn’t yet comprehended or agreed with the implications of God’s already having done all we need through Jesus Christ. I (we) can either believe that or disbelieve that. But I can’t add anything (even my belief) in order to procure (purchase) what God has done without doubting to some extent His complete sufficiency and power, thereby distorting the proclamation of His righteousness. Goats and kids (a la the Elder Brother) or street of gold, or just escaping hell, may conceivably be purchased (a la Judaism or Islam or legalistic Christianity) through works cerebral or physical.

“But if what God has in store for us, and earnestly wants to give us lest we perish, is His very own divine nature so that we may experience Eternal Life, how can we insult the Spirit of grace by preferring some lesser ‘thing’? So we may say that the blessing of God’s righteousness is beneficial to anyone when that one hears and believes what God has offered to us in His Son. But to boast (humbly, of course) that God gave me Himself because I believed (or because I was baptized or did anything) is a serious assault on the gospel itself.

“Curiously, the world (religious and irreligious) is divided between believers and unbelievers.”

How true!

## Conclusion

One sort of disbelief is not to deny God's existence, power or grace, but simply to distance ourselves from God. And a prime way of achieving distance is to depersonalize the relation by viewing it as legal, commercial or even ethical when we regard our morality as the way to gain favor. Sometimes a preposition becomes luminous, lighting up the nature of the relation, disclosing its intimacy or distance.

We are not to strive about words to no profit (2 *Tim.* 2:14), and prepositions are often so small. Yet, the stakes can be high.

These are critical questions:

1. Are we saved by "works" or "by faith?"
2. Does "by" mean "by means of?"  
Or, "because of?"
3. Is faith the coin we offer?  
Or, a hand open for the Gift?
4. Are faith and salvation vitally, inherently, organically related? Or, is the relation formed by the arbitrary dictum of the Almighty?

Our conclusion impacts our image of God and God's relation to us. A distorted image always damages the relationship. Prepositions may be charged with power, but they are as surely charged with peril. Through them we grasp a naked wire, and everything depends on how it's grounded. †

## 4

### “BODY” OR CORPSE?

The pews were full and the crowd pleased as punch. The knowing glances and superior smiles said, “He’s really laying it on them, isn’t he?” There weren’t many of “them” there, but that didn’t seem to matter... either to the preacher or to the people.

Then came the kill: “I challenge anybody here to name one missing part of the ‘body!’” He had picked up the pieces one by one: “right plan,” “right worship,” “right structure,” “right name.” The dramatic pause. The thundering silence. Nobody moved or spoke.

Final flourish: “I challenge anybody here to add one essential part!” Dramatic pause. Thundering silence. Immobile audience. A giant-sized cowardice or modicum of common sense sealed my lips. I really didn’t want to appear either as idiot or heretic amid a host of happy warriors enjoying the slaughter of all their foes.

The “Amen” said, an exuberant soul, beaming, asked, “Wasn’t that great? What did you think of it?” By this time guilt and shame left me less charitable than usual, and I responded, “He left out the most important part.” She reeled as if struck, then snapped, “What was that?” I said, “The Spirit.” She quickly retorted, “Well, he couldn’t get to everything.” Her hasty departure told me that she wasn’t enjoying this conversation.

What I refrained from saying was, “This man wasn’t even a skilled surgeon. He was a butcher, hacking limb from limb and piling one on top of another. There was nothing that bound them together in

any organic whole. He didn't even do a coroner's analysis. He just threw down the parts and dared us to add or take one away from the lifeless pile

"Faith" was but "a step in the plan" (believing the right doctrine). He showed not the slightest understanding of "faith"<sup>25</sup> urged by Paul or "believing"<sup>26</sup> by Jesus.

"Repentance was a "second "step." No understanding of it as the volitional side of "faith," the reorientation of the entire self turning outward to hurl itself on a merciful Savior.

"Confession" was an intermediate "step" that must come after repentance and before baptism, simply because it's commanded. Not "faith" eagerly voicing its presence. "Baptism" was an arbitrary condition to test faith. Not a visual, visceral movement of "faith" in self-identification with Christ. All together comprise "the Plan," and God pardons because the conditions are met.

How sad that one can be so arrogantly blind and not recognize a corpse when he sees it. Or commit 2nd-degree murder without ever knowing. The applause of the crowd is mighty intoxicating.

When God creates "a new being," He does not leave a battlefield of dry bones or coroner's office strewn with organs and limbs. Nor leave "the old self" intact, proud and bloodthirsty as ever. The "Cross" is no pretty symbol to exhibit, but a grim Reality to experience. *The self must die!* And it cannot with its own fists grasp its throat and choke itself to death. We

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<sup>25</sup> Trust in, reliance on, self-identification with, *Christ*.

<sup>26</sup> Receiving the Bread of Heaven and Water of Life, Christ's Person ("my flesh and blood"), in a word "union."

must by identification with the dying, rising Lord be “born over.” That’s no legal pardon, but a personal encounter. An internal revolution. A Father’s embrace. A welcome Home.

“Thanks be to God for His unspeakable Gift! ✠”

## 5

### SECT DENOMINATION CHURCH (Which Are We?)

Here are three terms widely used in Churches of Christ. The first two generously applied to others. The last zealously retained for ourselves. How, though, are the terms defined?

#### **What is a “Sect?”**

Whatever it is, we’re not one! We’ve been loud and clear about that. We’re not even “*non*-sectarian, but “*un*sectarian.”

In common usage “the sects” have been “the denominations,” simply all those other so-called “Christians.” We don’t want to be confused with them. Consequently, one of our favorite “protracted meeting” sermon subjects has been “The Identity of the Church.”

“The True Church,” “The Lord’s Church,” has certain concrete identifying marks:

- 1) The Right Steps in the Plan of Salvation:  
[Faith, Repentance, Confession, Baptism].

- 2) The Right Items of Worship: [Singing, Praying, Teaching, Lord's Supper, Offering].
- 3) The Right Plan of Organization: [Elders and Deacons, with the Elders in control].
- 4) The Right Name: [Church of Christ].

We make clearer than the Town Creek on a lazy Autumn afternoon that baptism is by immersion, the Lord's Supper is each Sunday and singing is always unaccompanied. While doing a lot of wiggling with the "name," we all know precisely where to stop and spell it out.

### **Function of a "Name"**

I painted the first "Church of Christ" sign ever to go on the little white frame meeting house in Town Creek, Alabama. A growing number of us wanted to be sure we wore "the right name." There were but two other (white)<sup>27</sup> congregations, Methodist and Baptist, in our town of 500. None of us needed a sign, because we all already knew who everybody was and which church they belonged to, if any. Nor did we put it up for tourists driving down from New York City.

*We* simply wanted to placard one of "the identifying marks of the Church." We knew we had "the right steps in the plan," "right items of worship," "right organization," and "right name." But our building didn't say so. We couldn't put all those "rights" up over the door, but we *could* put the name.

And we *did*.

It was the final act of disengagement, separation, division... and it was meant to be. Our name was official and different... and we proudly said so.

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<sup>27</sup> The only kind that counted as far as we were concerned.

We were seeking our *identity*. We wanted to know who we were *in distinction from* the Methodists and Baptists. We wanted to affirm that we are “the true Church.” (Implication: they are not.}. We wanted to reassure ourselves and provoke the outsiders. We did both and successfully co-opted the name “Church of Christ.”

Later we would say that this was not the only name of “the Lord’s Church.” It could be called “The Church of God,” “Church of the Firstborn” or just “The Church,” but I wouldn’t have dared put up a sign with any other name on it.

Suppose I had painted, “Church of God.” Do you think the elders would have smiled and said, “Son, we’re delighted that you picked a scriptural name. This truly is ‘The Church of God’?” The fact is that everybody would have misunderstood, and I would have caught holy Gehenna. We could shout all day long that we weren’t denominating ourselves, but that was our explicit intention. We simply refused to call it “denominating” and substituted the word “identifying.” With our razor honed sharp, we deftly split that hair. No surgeon could have been prouder.

It is understandable that every group seeks identity. Unless it is intentionally subversive, it wants its “identity” evident, both to itself and to outsiders. Thus, it takes a *name*, and that name carries all the intellectual and emotional freight that the group packs into it.

To use it wrongly becomes a serious offense. Devotees of “Islam” do not want to be called “Mohammedans,” even as inheritors of “the Restoration” do not want to be called “Campbellites.” I remember an angry 89-pound Grandmother Key facing

an 189-pound part-time Baptist preaching son-in-law, crying, "I'd rather be a 'Campbellite,' than to have no light at all!" We want a name, but we will jolly-well choose it, and nobody else had better try to usurp that privilege.

We may contend that the Lord has already chosen the name, but we still pick from the Biblical list the one we're sure He wants us to nail over the door. A sign with any other name would have clarified nothing. It simply could not "denominate" the intended bunch. It *wasn't* "the right name."

The word "name" in English comes from the Anglo-Saxon *nama*. As a noun it is an appellation or designation, a synonym being (can you believe it?) "denomination." As a verb its first meaning is "To give a name to: denominate; entitle; term; style; call."<sup>28</sup> To name a dollar bill is to identify its denomination. It's a "one," not a "five," "ten" or "twenty." It prevents confusion at the cash register and before the offering plate.

That is, it prevents confusion on one level. Like all proud, intelligent creatures, we mark our territory. "Church of Christ" on our signs and over our doors makes it possible for us to find one another and let outsiders know who we are and where our boundaries are drawn. Functionally it denominates us well.

### **Definition**

Since we very well know that such an identifying mark was not around in Jerusalem, Antioch or Corinth

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<sup>28</sup> *Funk and Wagnalls New Practical Standard Dictionary.*

in century one, we feel compelled to deny what we have eagerly embraced. Consequently, we define “denomination” to mean a “sect” and a “sect” to mean a fraction of a “spurious Christendom,” whose adherents are “counterfeit Christians,” “wolves in sheeps’ clothing,” “robbers who enter not by the door, but climb up another way.”

The dictionary defines “sect” as:

1. A body of persons distinguished by peculiarities of faith and practice from other bodies adhering to the same general system; specifically the adherents’ collectively of a particular creed or confession; a denomination or an organized body of dissenters from an established or older form of faith.<sup>29</sup> Or,
2. A group having in common a leader or a distinctive doctrine; a following, a school...
3. A group holding similar views, a party.
4. In religion: **a.** A party dissenting from an established church... **b.** One of the organized bodies of Christians; a denomination.<sup>30</sup>

In sociological terms new religious groups begin as “sects,” exclusive and fiercely combative. Over time they grow into more irenic “denominations.” At length they emerge acceptable and accepted as “church.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary.*

<sup>31</sup> Ernst Troeltsch’s classic work of 1911 (*The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, 2 Vols.), looking at the European landscape, contrasted two forms of the Christian faith, the “Church-type” and “Sect-type.” The “Church” was State sponsored, tax supported, and composed of all citizens, who entered by means of infant baptism. A “Sect” was any voluntary community of Christian faith. Since according to this definition there is no “Church” in America, the terms understandably have been redefined.

Scripture has nothing to say about this kind of historical ecclesiastical metamorphosis. It is silent on the subject of “denominations.” They simply did not exist in New Testament times. The Bible does, however, have a great deal to say about “sects” and gives a rather fulsome account of distinct communities of Christians<sup>32</sup> facing our contemporary issue of sectarianism versus denominationalism, a matter we’ll note later.

In the New Testament the word “sect” is αἵρεσις. Pronounced with the rough breathing, the word is “hairesis” or “heresy.” “Heresy” is so often considered “unsound doctrine” that it loses its true meaning of “an action promoting schism.” Literally it means “choice,” but it is a choice that cuts and separates. So, it has come to signify “dissension” and “schism.”

There were religious “sects” among the Jews: “Pharisees, “Sadducees” and “Essenes.” There were political sects or schisms such as “Herodians” and “Zealots.” There are currently “sects” among Moslems: primarily “Sunni,” “Shiite” and “Sufi.” These designations are all given to identify particular fellowships, their beliefs and practices. They are groups that claim to be purer, more faithful and truer to “the faith” whatever that faith is.

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<sup>32</sup> The “Jewish” fellowship versus the “Gentile” fellowship. This was not to denominate two *racial* communities [as in *Acts 6*, where “Hellenists” (Greeks) are distinguished from “Jews”]. It was to highlight the distinction between *Christians* who continued to observe Jewish forms of life and worship and *Christians* who judged themselves free from those same rites and customs.

A prominent Church of Christ historian defines a “sect” as: “a religious organization that insists that it and it alone--constitutes the entirety of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>33</sup>

“Denomination” is a less-exclusive grouping. It has come to mean an organized body of “Christians” who pursue the Christian mission, but recognize that they are but part of the “Church.” Their claim is to be: “church,” but not “*The Church*.”

In America “denomination” has become a church that recognizes it is only a part of the universal body of Christ. A denomination has typically made its peace with the dominant culture in which it exists.<sup>34</sup>

Of necessity, then, “church” (lower case “c”) has in America come to denote denomination or congregation, and “Church” (upper case “C”) to designate the whole of God’s Family in Christ. Obviously, there are those who quarrel with the general usage. “Sects” by definition contend not that they are “church(es),” but that they are “*The Church!*” Their very nature is to be schismatic.

In our earlier history we raised the more modest cry, “Not the only Christians, but Christians only”-- the claim of a denomination. In later years we transposed the words to cry, “Not Christians only, but the only Christians!”-- the claim of a “sect.”

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<sup>33</sup> Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America*, Glossary xiii, from *Discipliana*, Vol. 56, No. 4, Winter 1966, p. 108.

<sup>34</sup> *Loc. cit.*, xii.

For any thinking person the question squarely shoves itself up into consciousness, “Is ‘The Church of Christ’ a ‘sect,’ a ‘denomination’ or ‘The Church?’” Unless it includes all the Christians in the world, it is either a “sect” or a “denomination,” depending on its claim. If it claims to be “*The Kingdom*,” it is a “sect.” If it claims to be a *part* of “the Kingdom,” it is a “denomination.”

### **Why Are We So Horrified At the Word “Denomination?”**

The word *per se* is not our problem. It is likely that most members of the Church of Christ will admit that there are Christians not included in our census polls. Some are called “brethren in error” (as if we’re the “brethren with *no* error”). Others are considered “unknowns” from parts of the world that never heard of “us.” At any rate, through most of our history our leaders have warned against the sectarianism of claiming to be “the only Christians.”

Nevertheless, we resisted the term “denomination,” because it made us one among many, and we saw ourselves as unique -- alone. So, we consented to be called “a movement.” We wanted to *be* separate, but not to be *called* “separatist.” We wanted a *name*, but simultaneously to deny that it was a “*denomination*,” even though that is its very meaning.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ονομα (onoma) is the word in the New Testament. *Nomen* is the Latin. We do not despise the family from which come offspring such as: “nominate,” “nomination,” “nominee,” “nomenclature,” “*non de plume*,” or even “denominate” or “denomination,” unless someone points out that “name,” despite all our disclaimers,

The ultimate question is, “Does this group calling itself ‘The Church of Christ’ include all Christians everywhere, with not one anywhere else on God’s Earth? If so, it is, “indeed, “*The Church*” and neither “sect” nor “denomination.” If it does not, then it is assuredly one or the other... or both. Which?

### ***The Earliest “Denominations”***

The early Church included two “denominated” groups, “Hellenistic” and “Hebraic.” Let’s move in for a closer look at them.

*Acts* 15 begins:

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the believers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the Law of Moses, you cannot be saved.’

What Church of Christ today would receive into their fellowship such people? Or so much as consider such teaching? Let alone, hold “a Council” to discuss the matter? These folks are clearly “denominationalists!”

In the Jerusalem Church were “believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees” who contended, “It is necessary for them [the ‘Hellenistic’ believers] to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”<sup>36</sup> Here is a party that not only keeps the Law of Moses, but demands that everybody else keep it, as well. Party No. 1.

There is another group that does *not* keep the Law, and contends that Christ has set them free from it,

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is one of the tribe.

<sup>36</sup> *Acts* 15:5.

with all its dietary restrictions and Levitical sacrifices. Party No. 2.

The task is to mediate between No. 1 and No. 2. Paul is leader of Party No.2, but eager to maintain fellowship with Party No. 1. So, he willingly goes down to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with James and the Jerusalem Elders. Peter helps Paul by telling the story of his visit to the Gentile soldier, Cornelius. Barnabas aids by relating “all the signs and wonders” God worked among the Gentiles.<sup>37</sup>

The result is a decision that both parties can live with and maintain table fellowship. There is no evidence that Party No. 1 quit following the Law of Moses or that Party No. 2 began. They were still distinct. Each recognized the other as belonging to “the Church.” Neither claimed to be “the Kingdom of God.” Neither would claim to be “the only Christians.” Nor was either “Christians only.” Party 1 was “zealous for the Law,” but wouldn’t part company with those who were not. Party 2 was not, but wouldn’t part company with those who were.

Lest anyone fail to grasp the dynamics of this struggle in the two-Party Church, look carefully at Paul’s final trip to Jerusalem. It caused a major stir among the “Hebraic” Christians. So much so that James and the Elders made this “radical” proposal:

You see, brother, how many thousand of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their

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<sup>37</sup> 15:7-12.

children, or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites, and pay their expenses so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know that there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.<sup>38</sup>

Can anyone fail to see that here are two distinct parties: one “living in obedience to the law,” the other not? And can anyone fail to see the length to which Paul went to accommodate the “Hebrew” Party? He accepted their plan. Went to the temple. Paid for the purification rites of those who had taken the Nazarite vow. Was himself purified with them.

We’ll never know how far Paul would go to draw tighter “the tie that binds.” He was arrested, taken to Rome for trial before Caesar... and death.

The Church was at the crossroads. It could split into two groups, each excluding the other, and so embrace “sectarianism.” It could maintain its two groups, but reach out to each other and settle for “denominationalism.” The choice was ( and is) clear.

We can reject the *word*. We can’t deny the *fact*.  
“Whoever has ears to hear...✠”

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<sup>38</sup> Acts 21:20-24.

## 6

### “IS BAPTISM ‘ESSENTIAL?’”

Where I grew up this was the question most frequently asked in local religious circles. It was asked of us by our Baptist and Methodist neighbors. We asked it of ourselves when they were not around, though we knew the answer, what it was, is and evermore shall be. We would have been horrified had it ever been different and would have been galvanized into arranging a debate for tomorrow night.

#### “Essential for What?”

We all assumed that we meant “essential for salvation,” not “for full obedience to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.” So, we answered one way and our religious neighbors answered another. It was years later before the thought ever hit me, “Do you suppose we should check the meaning of the word? What does ‘essential’ mean?” I couldn’t find it in the concordance, so I turned to *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, Fifth Edition, which defines the term as follows:

**1.** Being such in essence, or by reason of its substance or intrinsic nature; absolute; as what is *essential* poetry? **2.** Ideally perfect or complete; as, *essential* bliss. **3.** Important in the highest degree; indispensable, as in *essential* foods. **4.** Having the nature of, or containing, an essence... **5. Logic.** Pertaining to the essence; necessary; inherent; as, an *essential* property of matter. [Synonyms include inherent and intrinsic.]

## Is This What We Meant?

Is this what we meant by insisting, “Baptism is essential for salvation?” That it is of the “essence,” or shares in the “nature,” of salvation? That it is “intrinsic” to, and “inherent” in, forgiveness and reconciliation? That it is “indispensable” to eternal life in the way that food is indispensable for physical life? That by nature it brings union with God-in-Christ?

And, did our Baptist and Methodist neighbors mean that baptism was not “essential” to a full obedience to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Did they mean that it is perfectly all right to ignore his instructions and do as we please, should we please to disobey him?

The answer is, “No.” No, that is not what *we* meant. “No,” that is not what *they* meant. Neither “No” was ever meant by anyone I ever saw or of whom I ever heard. Had we meant “Yes,” no view of legal dispensationalism could alter an eternal fact. No legal edicts, even God’s, could change the inherent nature of anything but the law! And for one willfully and deliberately to flout the will of Christ discloses a rebellious nature (or “essence”) that inherently is at war with God, and unchanged could not enjoy divine fellowship no matter what edict was issued by the Almighty.

We need to face the immutable fact: *legal dispensationalism cannot alter eternal reality.*

For full obedience to Jesus Christ baptism was “essential.” There was no disagreement on that point. The conflict erupted over the relation of faith to forgiveness and of baptism to faith. Our religious neighbors held that justification is by faith, and baptism is the

seal and symbol of it. As they saw it, baptism was the initial obedient act of a Christian. As we saw it, it was a legal “condition of salvation,” an essential “step” in “the Plan,” the culminating act in “becoming” a Christian. Nobody wanted to do away with it. Everybody wanted it kept in its rightful place.

### **A Tectonic Shift**

Differences over what we called “the design of baptism” led to controversy not only with our neighbors, but ultimately among ourselves. The negative response to Alexander Campbell’s *Lunenburg Letters* reveals a contention that has been around since our beginnings: “There are no Christians in the sects!” Most of our pioneers, though, never questioned the existence of Christians beyond our circle. Their consuming passion was to *unite* them under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

It was later that we upended the motto of “Not the only Christians, but Christians Only.” Our claim became, “Not Christians Only, but the Only Christians.” The passion for unity (our original end) was replaced by “restoration of the ancient order” (the means to that end). It was no longer our common faith in Christ that united us, but our adherence to creedal statements of “sound doctrine.” “Love of the truth” was now “loyalty” to “sound doctrine.” And, “abiding in the truth” was adhering to “the ancient order” and current creed.

### **Early Shock**

Giving momentum to this tectonic shift were those who not only affirmed that the unimmersed could

not be “Christian,” but neither could those who *were* immersed... unless they did it understanding that it was “*for the remission of sins.*” The “design” continued to balloon until it included the specific intent “to get into ‘the Body,’” and “the Body” meant us. No other. “The Church of Christ.” We stressed “the design of baptism” until we ripped apart the fabric of our own fellowship.

The first debate I ever read was between two Church of Christ editors, one from the *Gospel Advocate* (J. C. McQuiddy), the other from the *Firm Foundation* (John S. Durst). As a teenager I was fascinated by the argument and for awhile feared that my own salvation lay in a true discernment of who was right and who was wrong.

Durst challenged the long-time view held by forebears such as Lipscomb, Sewell, Harding, and later, Kurfees, Armstrong, Brewer and still others. McQuiddy simply affirmed what we had long believed. The propositions were as follows:

Durst: “A belief that baptism is for the remission of sins is essential to its validity.”

McQuiddy: “Persons who at the time of their baptism believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who repent of their sins and are baptized to obey God, receive scriptural baptism, although they do not at the time understand that baptism is unto the remission of past sins.”

### **Aftershocks**

As Campbell discussed both the “mode” and “design” of baptism with Walker, McCalla and Rice, we debated with pedobaptist and baptist alike, though we at

length turned our heavy artillery inward. With the Durst-McQuiddy debate the matter of “design” became an instrument of internecine war. “Remission of sins” was no longer God’s gracious gift, but part of the divine command and our necessary obedience to it.

David Lipscomb pointed out that in *Acts* 2:38, Peter said “for the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Why split the apostle’s words right down the middle? Why not be consistent and declare, “Unless one believes that baptism is ‘for the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit,’ it is not valid?” Lipscomb went on to point out that if there is a design as such, it is “to get ‘into Christ.’”

### **Focus of Christian Baptism**

I have just read K. C. Moser’s *Gist of Romans*, recent gift of a friend who thought I would appreciate it. I did. Moser highlights a vital truth that neither of the above propositions includes: “One must submit to Christ as *sin offering* to be saved by Him” (p. 8).

Why did not Paul and Peter simply demand obedience to Christ as one in authority? Because they knew that Christ saves by way of his death on man’s behalf, not simply by his authority. The authority of Christ can be recognized in obedience with no thought of his death as a propitiation. (p.9).

For baptism to be *Christian* it must focus faith on *Christ*. Christ as God’s own Self-Sacrifice. It points not simply to faith in God as Creator, Provider or Judge, or to Christ as giver of “the New Law,” but to God Incarnate giving Himself all the way to Calvary. To know Him is to know Him in His unconditional love poured out completely, to identify with Him there in his

death..., but also in his burial and resurrection.

Lipscomb had it right, if there is a design, it is “union with Jesus Christ”... all the way from death to life. This is what is “essential,” “union with Christ.” It is of the “essence” of “eternal life.” “For *this is life eternal*, to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You did send” (*John 17:3*).

### **Question of the Nature of God**

Moser repeatedly insists that God is not arbitrary, and that the means of bringing us to Christ are not arbitrary. He focuses on a crucial matter. God does not merely want obedience, He wants fellowship. He wants a loving Family, not a performance of trained humanoids jumping through hoops on command.

A preacher, insisting on baptism as a “foolish” command, bellowed, “If He wanted to, God could say, ‘Stand on your head, look up the chimney and say, ‘Peep, fool, peep!’”” His intent was to show that such a “foolish” demand tests faith more sorely than a “reasonable” or “moral” one.

Such a view may be true where the design is sheer obedience, not loving fellowship. It may be true where there is no desire for the maturity of love and understanding. It *is not* true where One tells his companions, “No longer will I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing.; but I call you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (*John 15:15*). Whoever regards God as arbitrary has seen Him somewhere else, not in Jesus Christ.

## **Role of Ritual**

Was animal sacrifice a valid means of bringing Jewish worshipers into fellowship with God? Yes and No. It was when the worshiper identified with God by means of the offering, saying, "Here, Lord, is the gift of my life offered in thankful praise to You." But, not automatically simply to obey a command. Read *Amos*, *Hosea*, *Micah*, *Jeremiah*. When ritual is a substitute for justice to the neighbor and fellowship with God, it is rotten and a stench in the nostrils of the Holy One.

Was circumcision a valid sign of the covenant? Yes and No. A mark in the flesh meant nothing when there was no commitment of the soul. No real, spiritual covenant. In fact, Paul speaks of a circumcision that becomes "uncircumcision" (*Rom. 2:25*). In the same place he speaks of an uncircumcision that becomes "circumcision" not in the flesh, but in the heart, circumcision "by the Spirit" (vv. 28,29).

### **Discounting *That Word for This Time***

How could Paul talk this way? Was it because the old Law had been taken away and the new Law was now in force? A legalist will draw just such a conclusion. Paul did it because rituals, however meaningful, are not the end. They are means to the end. They are not of the "essence" of salvation. If they were, every person from Adam till the end of time would have to employ them... all of them.

If circumcision and animal sacrifice were of the "essence" of salvation, no change in legal dispensations could alter that fact, and every soul who ever lived must

come to God by means of both. If baptism were of the “essence” of salvation, it would be “essential” not simply for people living after Pentecost, but all those who went before. It would be “essential,” *because it is itself* an integral, natural part of the process of salvation.

If rites and ceremonies do not in themselves share the nature of salvation, but are given as gracious means to that end, they are not “essential,” but may very well be “effective.” Why, then, do we invariably think and talk of them as “essential,” rather than “effective?” The word appears to have been forged in the fires of debate to wield against our adversaries. A means of grace was clothed in a word of judgment.

### **Blinded By the Stake in Their Eye**

Jews fixated on the Sabbath could not understand Jesus’ attitude and practice regarding it. Others fixated on circumcision couldn’t see the truth Paul preached. Souls fixated on baptism miss the same truth. Most were not ready then to hear Jesus say, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (*Mark 2:27*). Many are not ready now to hear Him say, “Baptism was made for people, not people for baptism.” Nor would they understand Paul, if before contemporary “Galatians” he cried, “Christ or baptism! Choose!” Holding arbitrary views of God and His means of grace, they don’t get it.

Paul was not against circumcision. He was against labeling it “essential for salvation.” He circumcised Timothy, but refused to circumcise Titus, crying, “Christ or Circumcision! Choose!” Yet, he could say that in their baptism the Colossians had experienced a

“spiritual circumcision” (*Col. 2:11-13ff*), putting off “the body of the flesh” and being “made...alive together with him.”

We shall never understand Jesus or Paul until we understand that ceremonies can either facilitate or hinder spiritual union. They can facilitate it when they enable one to open up in trust to God. It is only in that openness that spirits interpenetrate and souls unite. *That* is “essential.” There is nothing arbitrary about it. It is part and parcel of being saved. Ritual can hinder when it becomes an end in itself, blocking openness to the Spirit.

### **Baptism and Faith**

Baptism is a grace-gift given to focus faith. So to direct it that it may be most open to the Spirit of Christ in His sacrificial death, burial and resurrection. Yet, (and let this be as clear as firebells at midnight and as familiar as the school bell at 8:00 a.m.) baptism is not of the “essence” of faith, or *every soul from Adam till the end of time would have to be baptized to be in union with Christ.*

Unless God arbitrarily gives salvation to those who perform the prescribed ritual (whether sacrifice, circumcision, baptism, church attendance or the “right” items of worship), there is only one thing that is “essential”-- an openness in trust that lets God into our imprisoned, self-centered selves.

The Scriptures characterize such openness as “trust” or “faith.” In its volitional dimension, confronted by the holy mercies of God, it is properly called “repentance.” But, it is still faith, faith turning from self

to God-in-Christ, self-renunciation and Christ affirmation. When baptism is effective, it enables just that, self-renunciation and Christ affirmation. It focuses faith on the dying, rising Lord, “who was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised for our justification” (*Rom.* 4:25).

But, it ill behooves us to mount God’s judgment throne and hand out sentences to those who do not see what we see here. If baptism were of the “essence” of salvation, the Spirit could not fall on Cornelius prior to his immersion in water. And, if he did not intentionally say, “My baptism is for remission of sins,” many of us would insist on repeating the ceremony.

### **“Remission” Never “*The Design*”**

Durst argued that Paul’s rebaptism of the anemic souls at Ephesus was because they “were not scripturally baptized.” He implied that their faulty baptism is like that of today’s believers beyond our own circle. However, if “remission of sins” is “*the design*” of baptism, they *were* scripturally baptized, for they received the baptism of John, which was “a baptism of repentance *for remission of sin*” (*Mark* 1:4).

Their lack was precisely the lack of so many coming after them. They knew about Jesus, but knew nothing of the Gift of the Holy Spirit! They had no opportunity to know. Durst and his heirs have had abundant opportunity. Yet, they chop God’s promise in half, turn the first half into a command and leave the last half on the cutting room floor.

## **Words Not Easily Accepted...**

How could Jesus more than once say, “Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (*Matt.* 9:13; 12:7)? Or that love of God and neighbor is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifice (*Mark* 12:33)? And how could Paul insist that “the whole law is fulfilled in one word...” (*Rom.* 13:8-10)? Surely, they didn’t mean what they clearly said! Did they? If a command cannot be fulfilled in spirit though not in letter, both Jesus and Paul were dead wrong. The scribes and Pharisees were right.

## **...Because Of a Legal Perspective**

We simply cannot bear to think of either Jesus or Paul talking about baptism the way they did about sacrifice and circumcision. Rather than wrestle with their insights, we turn fiercely to the creedal term. If we shout it loud enough, it will surely be true.

It makes union with Christ easy and cheap. The devil’s bait is to make immersion in water not a means to, but a substitute for, “dying with Christ!”

The old self-centered self will do everything under heaven to avoid *death*! It will go to the mourner’s bench, give an impassioned testimony, memorize reams of Scripture, take up preaching, weep in the pulpit, walk on coals of fire. It, most certainly, will be baptized and debate the heretics... if only it doesn’t have to *die*!

## **One More Time**

To think that one has preached Christian baptism when he has hammered home its “essentiality” is to see

it simply as one of God's *edicts*, to many the most important one. It is "essential" not because it is by nature intrinsic to or inherent in salvation, but because God "legislated" it as a "condition." It is the "law." A statute in "the Law of Pardon." A "step" in "the Plan of Salvation." It is the arbitrary requirement of an arbitrary God.

### **Quicksand of The Legal Mind**

The legalistic mind then wrestles with the affirmation that "God has bound Himself to His own Law of Pardon, and cannot save the unimmersed even if He wanted to." He is in the position of those who a few nights ago might have spared the life of Karla Faye Tucker, but had so bound themselves by their own law that they felt they had to kill her. And that is the better portrait of God. The other is the callused one of a Deity who has issued an edit and, no matter the reason, when one falls short of it, that's tough.

### **On The Receiving End**

In an unofficial heresy trial the ultimate question was put squarely to me, "Do you teach that baptism is essential?" The hush of the mortuary descended on the crowd. Though it was the final minutes of the game, nobody headed for the exit. "I do not," I replied. Then followed with something such as this, "I find that term nowhere in Scripture, and I do not choose to import it."

After what seemed a full minute the hush was broken by a fluttering and then a corporate moan. "What do you do with *Mark 16:16*?" was the follow-up

question. The gist of my reply was, “I accept it. I believe it. I preach it. I practice it. What else would you have me do with it, unless it is to affirm some unwritten ‘creedal’ statement in connection with it? Is that what I am to be forced to do?”

*None of it seemed to matter so long as I would not stand and recite “the creed.”*

Unless we really are creedal after all, you do not have to agree with me to be a Christian, my dear sister, my esteemed brother. Unless we really are creedal, I do not have to agree with you. Except... we must both accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God, our Savior and Lord. We must hurl ourselves totally upon Him as our hope in life and death. *He* is “the way, the truth and the life.”

No series of dogmatic assertions drawn from illogical (or logical) deductions about Scripture is “the truth” or “the way.” It assuredly is not “the life.” But, don’t we all know Who is?

### **A Final Word**

It is not my intent to “strive about words to no profit” (2 *Tim.* 2:14).” I am uninterested in semantic skirmishes. I am passionately interested in these basic questions:

1. What kind of God is God, and what is the nature of our relationship to God?
  - a. Is God arbitrary, and are His instructions capricious?
  - b. Ultimately, is our relationship to God personal or legal?
2. Are we willing to grapple with the truth

embedded in such a passage as *Romans* 4:16, “Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace...?”

- a. Will we accept the reality of the rationale “*so that it may be...*,” realizing that inherently there is no other way?
- b. Can we with thankful and penitent praise recognize the “essential” relationship of “faith” to “grace?”

As I confront these awe-full truths, I ask you to confront them with me. It is a tragedy to know all kinds of biblical facts without knowing the Bible. It is a tragedy to quote the words so as to obscure the Word. It is the final tragedy to know all sorts of things *about* Jesus Christ without ever knowing *Him*.

May we join the Apostle in crying, “That I may know Him in the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, so as to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (*Phil.* 3:10-11). Amen. †

# 7

## “INTO WHAT WERE YOU BAPTIZED?”

A common refrain in current religious publications is the striking contrast between the vigor of the early Christian Community and the anemic character of the contemporary church.

Paul’s question to the church at Ephesus is still relevant: “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”<sup>39</sup> Their amazing answer was, “We haven’t even heard about the Holy Spirit.” The Apostle’s quick follow-up was, “Then, into what were you baptized?”

The implication is that when people are baptized, they are baptized into *something*, something besides the water. They are baptized into *God*: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If that is true, they are baptized into a *Spirit*. Not just any spirit... some vague, ghostly fog. They are baptized into the Spirit that *created* us, that *redeemed* us and that *empowers* us.

Here is where the problem erupts. If folks have been baptized into the Spirit of Power, the Spirit of Love, the Spirit of Joy, how can they look so powerless? so loveless, so joyless? How can they look like the dead?

What in the world went wrong?

“What difference can baptism make?” “Didn’t you just admit that it’s not ‘essential’?” “After all, it’s only a symbol,” someone parrots, as if s/he knew what a

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Acts* 19:1-7.

symbol is. As if a symbol did not participate in the reality symbolized. Remember the comment of Lloyd George, who knew he was baptized into a formula, but couldn't remember which? "In?" or "into?" and what difference did a preposition make? Whatever its intended goal, baptism was not into *God*, but into the *formula*.

That's deadly.

It is not true that only those who teach "Original Sin" and "Baptismal Regeneration" take baptism seriously. Not all enlightened, spiritually-minded people regard it as unimportant. It was precisely because Paul was enlightened and spiritually-minded that he asked the question.

Wherever Christians are anemic, anxious, hard-working and making little headway, living under the law instead of grace, not yet free, open, loving or joyful, the question needs to be asked.

When we know full well that we were baptized "into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," we need to consider our kinship to Lloyd George. Were we baptized into a Person or a passage? Slogan or Spirit? Code or Christ? Organization or Organism pulsating with the life of Jesus? Into what...?

It's tragic to miss our inheritance. Knowing what it is, we can claim the Gift. Since the Gift is the Holy Spirit of God-in-Christ, we walk/talk, eat/sleep, work/play, live/die with nothing less than the Empowering Companion.

May our baptism be "*into* the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Amen. †

# 8

## MUST WE BELIEVE IN “THE TRINITY”?

**No!**

But, we shall certainly be the poorer, if we do not know the God who is symbolized by the doctrine.

### **Genealogical Nugget**

The Bible says nothing about “the doctrine of the Trinity.” Many Christians have questioned its usefulness, even its truthfulness. Many others of us in awe sing, “Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God Almighty! God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.”

Let me tell you a bit about why I hold the doctrine, while agreeing more with many who do not than with many others who do.

God, our Creator, wants to be known, loved, trusted and enjoyed. So, God came out of His hiddenness, stooped down and showed His Face. Reached out in vulnerability to give Godself away that we might live and love and work together in rich companionship. More than any one-dimensional personality, God is much more complex: God is: Creator, Redeemer and Friend.

The belief that God is three separate individuals is “Tritheism,” the view attributed to Christians by most Jews, Moslems and Unitarians. And not without reason. Many Christians *are* “Tritheists,” definitely believing in three Gods, literally sitting on three separate thrones.

They claim to believe in “one God,” i.e., “one in *spirit*,” they say. “Spirit” here, though, has become attitude, will or purpose. There remain three distinct, separate *Selves*.

This is not the teaching of Scripture. God’s Spirit is still God in His creative outgoingness. In God’s transcendent, energizing Power. God wanted to live fully in the human creation, but the creation failed Him again and again. “In the fullness of time” came the breakthrough. God’s Spirit found complete openness in one Man, “Jesus,” who accepted the call to be “Messiah.”

Such a conclusion was not a doctrine created by the early disciples. It was their *experience*! In this “Jesus” they met God. Not merely a messenger or representative, but *God!* The One who alone can forgive sins, heal the sick and raise the dead. They saw him, touched him, ate with him, lived with him. Then they saw him die. Yet, they met him alive after death, again and again. Then he left them... but...

They recognized his Presence among them in Power. They were turned inside out, their cowardice replaced with courage, their folly with wisdom, selfishness with service, individualism with fellowship, skepticism with faith. It was not their doing, but his.

Yet, he was gone! How could this be?

Their theology was not worked out in the study. It was born in the marketplace, the street, the home, the worshipping assembly. They were all good Jews who said the *Shema* daily, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.” And yet, this one God was present *in Jesus* as in no other. Furthermore, The God they met in Jesus was still present as the Spirit *in them*.

How do you give witness to that faith without becoming a “Tritheist?” In New Testament times the believers simply spoke of the work of “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Later Church leaders formulated the doctrine of the Trinity, speaking of “God in three *Persons*.”

“Person” then did not mean “individual,” as in our Western individualistic self-idolization we employ the term. It comes from the Latin *persona*, whose primary meaning was “mask.” In the doctrine of the Trinity it indicates a facet (or “face”) of One who cannot be known apart from this particular revelation. It means that God is neither three separate personalities, nor a single individual, but multi-dimensional.<sup>40</sup> Three-dimensional in the experience of Christ’s original disciples. What God is beyond our human experience we must wait to behold.

In “the doctrine of the Trinity” the “Son” is the aspect of God that was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. So, He lived the complete life of the obedient Son, opening the way for all God’s “sons” and “daughters” who will follow “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,”<sup>41</sup> trusting in the Sacrifice that our High Priest has in the Holy of Holies offered once for all.<sup>42</sup>

### **One in Three!?**

This is no problem in arithmetic, but in a complex relationship. Let’s try to illustrate. As a cube

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<sup>40</sup> C. S. Lewis’ *Beyond Personality* could prove helpful here.

<sup>41</sup> *Heb.* 12:2. Cf. also, 1 *Cor.* 15:24-28 for the Son’s subjection to the Father..

<sup>42</sup> *Heb.* 10:1-10.

is more complex than a square, so God is more complex than an individual. God is beyond solitariness. Full personality is communal, rather than individual. And what God is making of us (a Community of Love) He always is.

Here is a pale illustration: a person may be a child, a mother or a teacher. A mother is more complex than a baby. A teacher is more complex than a kindergarten. Yet, a person may grow from a baby to a mother to a teacher. We can then say of her, "She has achieved depth." If she becomes a concerned global citizen, we may say, "She has achieved breadth." If she gains authority in her sphere of influence, we may say, "She has achieved height."

By the terms "depth," "breadth" and "height" we indicate a richness of nature that we contrast with those we call "dull," "flat" and "shallow."

Many people of Jesus' day knew God, but did not know Him in the rich fullness Jesus portrayed. They certainly did not "know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings." In Jesus Christ, though, they met their Creator-Judge in the healing of their minds and souls, the Forgiver of their sins, the Eternal who stoops to show them His Face and hold them in His heart.

It was not another God or two or three Gods that Jesus revealed, but it was *God* in a depth, breadth and height that mortals had never seen. Through Jesus they came to know God in a new way, and so move into a new relationship of intimacy, a closeness of which they had never dreamed.

God as revealed in the world of nature and the events of history is not all there is to God. It is truth, but

not the whole truth. Do you see that without Jesus there would be a huge gap in our understanding of God that nothing else could fill? Do you see that without his spiritual Presence with us still, we would lack the wisdom, power and love we so desperately need?

The unseen Presence of God wearing the Face of Jesus is our contemporary Spiritual Companion: Father, Son and Holy Spirit... Creator, Redeemer and Eternal Friend. In this dynamic Companionship we are enabled to grow up into the divine likeness

At first, in contrast to God, we are “dull,” “flat” and “shallow.” *That* may be the reason we don’t more readily grasp the reality of “Trinity.” We are one-dimensional. At best, two-. We are so individualistic that we have great difficulty grasping the inner meaning of “Community.” Consequently, we think of God more as an isolated individual than a Corporate Personality who within Godself contains a Community of Creative Care.

### **The Snake in the Garden**

The age-old temptation continues. God creates us in the divine image. Falling “flat,” we turn around and create God in our image, that of the isolated self. As animists make different aspects of God’s *creation* into separate gods, we make the aspects of God’s *nature* into separate Gods, then fool ourselves (though not others) by labeling the “three,” “one.”

Speaking of the “Trinity,” I repeat, is not an attempt to solve a problem in arithmetic that, if solved, would change nothing. It is to point to a new revelation with the potential of creating a New Order, a New

Society of the loving and the loved. I point to the God who is creating a Cosmic Family *because that is God's own nature.*

I pray that we shall be able to catch on and join in. †

## 9

### CHRIST JESUS - OUR RANSOM

*(Isa. 53:10-12; Mk. 10:35-45;  
Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 2:3-7)*

The Son of Man came not to be served,  
but to serve, and to give his life  
as a ransom for many. (*Matt. 20:28*)

#### **What is a "Ransom?"**

The Psalmist cried, "Truly, no one can ransom himself, or give to God the price of his life" (49:7). That's your "ransom" and mine - the price of our lives. For Christians ransom refers to a single aspect of the Atonement - its cost!

#### **What's the Problem?**

The word, however, has not been in usage among "enlightened" Christians during the last three or four generations. One reason is its abuse among a number of fundamentalist groups. "The Ransom Theory of the Atonement" lifted up the doctrine of the Devil

holding all souls captive and refusing to let them go till God paid his ransom demands. Like a modern terrorist, he storms God's House and takes away His children. The ransom note demands blood. Without its payment the Devil will destroy the captives. God pays the ransom with the blood of Jesus, His only fully-obedient child. The Devil, then keeps his pledge and sets the captives free.

That's the doctrine in its crassest form. And... because so many of us are repulsed by its form, we reject its substance. Because we reject the figure, we rush to reject the reality behind it.

Even those who would preserve the truth of the Gospel divide over how to go about it. One camp says, "The old forms and words are worthless, many of them harmful, for they've carried the wrong content so long that they can't be salvaged. Away with them! New words and new forms for the message!"

Another camp says, "It's true that the words have been distorted and their forms emptied, but the answer is not in abandoning them. The solution is to reclaim them. Wipe off the tarnish and fill them with 'the Good News' they were created to carry. Use them aright and trust God to fill them with power for this day."

Seeking new forms, J. B. Phillips translates Jesus' words (*Matt.20:28*), "The Son of Man has not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life to set many others free." For that is what a "ransom" does... it sets the captives free. In the same place the *New English Bible* uses the word "ransom." However, in *1 Timothy 2:6*, Phillips uses the word "ransom," while the *New English Bible* reads, "For there is one God, and

also one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus, himself man, who sacrificed himself to win freedom for all mankind.”

What these scholars do is refuse the dilemma of either/or. They will not use the old words exclusively, nor exclusively seek out new. They refuse to be shut up to extreme alternatives. And so can we. We can seize both. Find new ways of affirming old truths and at the same time pour new life into ancient forms.

It's not true that people no longer understand terms such as “reconciliation,” “redemption” and “ransom.” When we say of a broken family, “There has been a reconciliation,” we rejoice. Even if we don't know that “redemption” is a term taken from the slave market, so long as there are saving stamps coupons, redemption centers, catalogs and check-out counters, we understand. If we have enough stamps and coupons, we get excited.

In a time of terrorist raids, kidnapping and high-jacking, how can one fail to understand the meaning of “ransom?” Our problem is not intellectual, but emotional and volitional. Not the cerebral problem of processing academic information, but the jarring question, “Is Jesus Christ actually *my* ransom... and *yours*?”

### **“News” No Longer**

A child listened to his uncle preach about the Cross. It was the first time he had ever heard the news. To the account of the crucifixion he listened with ever mounting panic. Surely there were all kinds of good people who would rush to the aid of Jesus. He wept. He seemed even to feel that pain with his Lord. Yet, all

around him people sat tranquil. Then when they left the building, they walked out as if nothing had happened.

That's our problem. We do not with all our heart care, and we do not care because the whole thing is so unreal. We watch a fictitious heartbreak on the screen and weep. The fictitious seems real. We hear the recital of that one Act in history disclosing the heartbreak of God and doze. It's so unreal. What would it take to make it real? To that vital, but thorny, question we turn.

### **When the Old is Once More New**

Arthur Gossip, a Scotsman, was during World War I a British Chaplain in Europe. One day he came on a dead laddie lying all alone. Why out of those hundreds this one so affected him he could never tell. But there he was, somebody's dearest, so still and so alone. In some way the dead eyes with solemn challenge seemed to look into his own. The dead lips crying so loud that his heart heard the words, "This is my body, broken for you." There on the battlefield they had a kind of communion service -- the Lord Christ, the dead laddie and the minister. Gossip says, "I swore that because he had died for us, please God, I would be worthier of that sacrifice."

If that were your son or brother, would you remember? Whenever his name was mentioned, your eyes would glow and your heart stir. That's your dear one whom you have held, touched, loved. To whom you have opened your heart and soul.

*Sixty Minutes* showed a father who had been immersed in his work. A good executive leading a

rather ordinary life for executives. Until... one night his son was brutally murdered. By a handgun. In this violent nation the issue of uncontrolled handguns was no longer academic. It was his son who was murdered! It was no longer possible to say, "I have no opinion on that matter... I don't have time... I don't want to get involved." What is it that does this for us with "the old, old story of Jesus and his love?"

It is nothing less than the Holy Spirit who brings the word to life. Words on the page, words on the lips, words in the air, are not "the word of God." The word "living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword," that when uttered accomplishes what is said. *That* word addresses us personally. Calls our name. Puts us on notice and under orders.

The word, written or spoken, is designed to be carrier of "the living word." But it can be carried only to hearts that are not paths packed hard by the world's traffic. Until the word leaps from the lips or lines to penetrate our hearts it shall remain academic, and we shall remain dead. No matter how much we know or how hard we work... scrupulously, brilliantly *dead*.

We sing, "I love to tell the Story, for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest." Those who know it best are by it still moved, as was that lad who for the first time heard his uncle tell it. For, through it God comes in Christ to set me free!

But I must know that I need to be set free. Free from my bondage to fear. Free from my anxiety about the future... my bank account... my health... my loved ones... my Family in Christ... this town... this nation I love... this fragile planet... this world God is making new. I need freedom from the lust of things. For too

much of the wrong kinds of food. For too much leisure. For greater recognition.

I need freedom from illness and pain. Either a healing of the body, or of the spirit so that I can rest and grow and rejoice in an inadequate body until He makes it all fresh and new. I need freedom from fear, from guilt, from bad memories and bad conscience. And from all this He came to ransom me.

But He sets me free at an incredible *cost*.

It is this *cost* to which the word “ransom” points. Other metaphors point to other aspects of Atonement. “Substitution” is one such figure. “Sacrifice” is another, a word frequently heard in wartime, but meaningful any-time. As “sacrifice” lifts up the extremity of the cost required, and “substitution” lifts up the freedom of one for the price by another paid, so “ransom” lifts up both realities: the cost plus the freedom by another bought.

The figures are at the same time incalculably valuable and definitely limited. Each says something, but must not be twisted into saying something else. That we are saved by the Self-giving of Jesus Christ is our “Good News.” *How* we are saved we attempt in all kinds of ways to portray. Yet never fully explain.

Academic interest seeks explanation, Theological interest seeks interpretation. Ethical interest seeks motivation, as well as, termination. When we, however, know ourselves to be the victim, we seek the experience itself (freedom) however poorly or well we understand. We do not refuse to leave the prison cell until we walk out a master locksmith. Nor do we ever walk out... alone.

## Free Together

Freedom alone is “exile.” The only difference between “exile” and “solitary confinement” is the size of the cell. The lonely are the lost. Despite Western romanticizing of “the rugged individual,” we are created for community. For *fellowship*. Powerful ecclesiastics seize God’s gift and forge it into a tool of control. While helpless to extend or withhold the Holy Spirit, they can successfully withdraw their own and coerce others into following suit. So doing, they draw line after line until they construct their own little cell.

Paul said, “There is one God, and One who brings God and [humanity] together, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom to free all people.”<sup>43</sup> He said this in the context of urging prayer for all, particularly those who wield power, “kings and all in high places.” He then proceeds to characterize the spirit of prayer, both for men and women.

The “ransom,” he declares, is for “all.” That means it is for “us” and for all who are not “us.” Those who love us and those who oppose us, who are like us and who differ from us. In these times of racial, economic and cultural diversity the temptation is sub-consciously to feel and consciously to act as if there is one Mediator for “us” and another for “them,” but the “Ransom” is for “*all*.”

When the Ransom is real, it not only costs, it transforms and unites. Hearts stretch. Spirits soar. Hands clasp. Like Jacob at the Jabbock we begin by

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<sup>43</sup> *1 Tim. 2:5* (Beck).

praying, "I will not let You go until You bless me." We end by praying, "I will not let You go until You bless her. Until You bless him." For the payment has become for us not a legal transaction. Not a divine nod to an abstract and external "law of justice." The ransom offered is "Life!" The Life of Jesus Christ Himself.

There is the account of what is reported to be the first successful blood transfusion. A baby girl was hemorrhaging, its life ebbing out drop by drop. In desperation the father's arm was laid bare for more than six inches, an artery extracted and attached to a vein in the baby's leg. Through this union the face began to show a tinge of pink, first at the rim of the ear. Then a glow suffused the entire body... and the baby cried. So did a number of the witnesses. The child was saved by blood, because in the blood was life. It was saved not because of the father's suffering, but by means of the father's life.

In our own faith-union with the Mediator, Jesus Christ, we are in reality joined to the Father. It is the Father's Life that surges through His children. God's Holy Spirit flows into and through us in life-giving power and peace, coming at awe-full cost. Use whatever metaphor you choose to point to that wondrous reality, but at last with Paul you will cry,

He loved me and gave himself for me... There is one God and One who brings us together, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all...

Thanks be to God for His unspeakable Gift.

The "Good News/Bad News" packed tight is this: I am not good enough by myself. I am not smart enough by myself. I am not strong enough by myself. Then the word comes that I am not alone in my predicament. You share it, too. So does the rest of the Race.

That's the "Bad News." The "Good News" is that Jesus has come as "a Ransom for all."

That is the breadth and width and depth of His intention. The breadth and width and depth of His invitation. The breadth and width and depth of the message. I am not at liberty to stretch it or shrink it. My authority (and yours) is to proclaim it. To do so with all our hearts in the hope that the Spirit who gives us the Story will now bring it to life for others in and through us. Amen. †

## 10

### BEYOND SECOND-HAND FAITH

#### **Our Deepest Need**

I come now with a simple conviction. If it is wrong, I have nothing to say that you want to hear, and I don't believe that God has anything to say that together we want to hear. The conviction that our deepest need and God's highest hope for us are one.

We may not yet sing with David, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God (*Ps.* 42:1-2, NIV). Nor with Augustine,

Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee. O that I might repose on Thee! O that Thou wouldst enter into my heart and inebriate it, that I might forget my ills and embrace Thee my sole good!

Yet, our deepest need is to move beyond second-hand faith. To move beyond theory to reality and discussion

to experience. We need to do more than talk about faith or believe in believing. Our need is for Him who in faith becomes *real* to *us*.

Therefore, my conviction is that you and I are thirsty. That in fact, we are famished and faint, and that we can identify with the woman of Samaria who one hot noonday plodded her way to Jacob's well.

Let's see.

On that day Jesus sat tired, disappointed, with memories of yesterday crowding His mind. A historic spot it was. The shadow of Jacob and his tribal-chieftain sons walked there. But it was a terribly ordinary day. A day like any day. A noon like any noon. Except... Jesus was there and a poor thirsty soul of Sychar. Something brought them together. Chance? You could say so. Most do. I "happen" to be there. We "happen" to be together. Something "happens" as we are.

John says (4:5), "Jesus had to go through Samaria." The fact is that one didn't *have* to go through Samaria on the way from Judea to Galilee. Most Jews didn't. They went East across the Jordan, up through Perea past Samaria, and then crossed back West into Galilee. They wouldn't set foot on the unclean, half-breed dust.

For Samaritans were a mongrel people. The blood mixture of poor Israelites left on the land when Sargon II's Assyrian troops displaced and resettled some 27,290 in Upper Mesopotamia and Media. Others deported from Mesopotamia, Hamath and elsewhere were settled in Samaria. As these and occupation forces inter-married with the locals the despised mixture appeared.

Not only that, but the Samaritans had as their Scriptures only the Pentateuch, and their temple was

atop Mt. Gerazim! They were racial, religious and social nobodies. Unclean. Unorthodox. Unacceptable. No ordinary self-respecting Jew would touch one.

But Jesus was far from ordinary and would not fit into their box of “respectability.” He had to go that way if poor, thirsty souls of a detested village would ever taste the living waters. People who didn’t know how thirsty they were until they met Him.

Hot, hungry, tired, disappointed, Jesus sat by the well while the disciples went into town for bread. The opening verses of *John 4* suggest the rising tension between the Pharisees and John’s disciples. Likely the end of the ministry of baptizing in Judea, with Herod having thrown John in prison and Jesus having to withdraw or risk a similar fate. How hard it is to stay encouraged in the face of mounting opposition and impending danger.

There he sat by the old well, memories surging. Maybe you know the experience. Some spot where your family history comes flooding whenever you are there. I see a well in Town Creek, Alabama, that holds such memories for me. I see another well 18 miles West in Tuscumbia where Mrs. Sullivan poured water over the hands of Helen Keller, spelling in her palm the word “w-a-t-e-r.” The light broke, and a child in her silent, darkened prison knew someone cared and was trying to make contact with her.

That’s the way it was at Sychar as Jesus sat waiting. For what? Disciples to come bringing bread? Yes. Also, for a lonely, disgraced, despondent soul in the noonday heat to slip out alone for water. A nameless woman, her sandals slapping against the hard-baked earth, made her solitary way to Jacob’s well, her once-

lovely face now sad, an embracing weariness closing in on her soul, a sixth heartbreak lying in ambush for her and an empty pitcher in her hand. An “unclean” pitcher from which He asked a drink.

Then unfolds a priceless story, one of the loveliest bits of drama in all the Bible. I’d like to sketch it for you, for I’ve seen it unfold for others. Has it... for you? We’ll entitle it:

## **“COMING ALIVE!”**

### **Scene 1: “Living Water”**

(2 short dialogues with 3 exchanges)

#### **1st Dialogue:**

**Jesus..... 1st request: - “Give me a drink.”**

**Woman... Shock! Jews versus Samaritans! “How can you ask of *me*?”**

**Jesus..... Insight!: “If you knew, you would ask me, and I would give you living water.”**

#### **2nd Dialogue:**

**Woman... Literalism (A Block): “You have no bucket, and the well is deep.”**

**Jesus..... Pointing past literal to spiritual: “Whoever drinks of this water shall never thirst, but have a spring of water bubbling up to eternal life.”**

**Woman... Request (Crude, but acceptable): “Sir, give me this water.”**

### **Scene 2: “True Worship”**

#### **1st Dialogue:**

**Jesus..... Concrete linkage: “Go call your husband.”**

**Woman... Diversion attempt 1: “I have no husband.”**

**Jesus..... Exposure: “You’re right. You’ve had 5 and are now living with a 6th, unmarried.”**

#### **2nd Dialogue:**

**Woman... Diversion attempt 2: “I see you’re a**

**Prophet. Let's settle the issue of right place to worship."**  
**Jesus..... Operational implications: "Place is not the issue. True worship is in spirit and truth (reality)."**  
**Woman... Dawning wonder: "I know when Messiah comes He will tell us all things."**  
**(Curtain Falls - Affirmation: "I am He."**

**Conclusion: Living Faith/People Alive**  
**People's Request..... "Stay."**  
**People's Confession..... "Now we know for ourselves that you are the Christ."**

### **His Highest Hope**

Tucked into these few scenes is the pilgrimage of a desert wanderer dying of thirst "chancing" upon an Oasis. A racial, religious, literalistic programming keeps her from the immediate joy of embracing the real, rather than the formal. But, Jesus will not be diverted. His offer of new life cannot forever be denied. Look at how it happened.

He *had* to go through Samaria. The "have to" was inside Him. The Lord of creation was thirsty not only for water, but for human companionship and shared creation. For understanding, love, trust and co-partnership. "Give me a drink," He said, making Himself vulnerable to that bit of human wreckage. How quickly He laid Himself open to be heard or hurt, probing for a chink in the wall she had in self-defense heaped up about a broken heart.

It was difficult to get past her literalism. When at length she asked, "Give me this water," she still saw not a new source of life within, but a fresh bubbling

spring without. He must focus on her greater need. “Go call your husband.” “I have no husband.” “You’re right. You’ve had five and now live with a man who is not your husband.” As His deft fingers reached through the jumbled shards of her private life she winced. Strange how He had at once touched the raw edges of her soul.

Is he a mind-reader? Has local gossip blown so far on South winds? At any rate, this conversation must take a quick right turn. She was quick of wit. Fending Him off, she seized the weapon of religion. To get this matter of faith back into the classroom, she asked the academic question, “Where is the right place to worship?”

Ah, yes. “Where is the right *place*...?” To worship? To have fellowship dinners? To eat with “sinners?” To sing? To play? To be bound? To be free? Our contemporary question is not, “Shall we worship in Mt. Gerazim or Jerusalem?” We hide in argument over whether this building is more holy than your home, office or City Hall. Skillfully we dissect the sacred from the secular and divorce religion from life. Argue fiercely over the right “form” of baptism and communion, as if they were not equally empty... or full. “*The right place to worship?*” As if that made any difference so long as what happens there is a formality.

But it was a weapon, this creedal argument, and she gripped it tight. For it could be swung savagely and leave her festering life untouched. Untouched at the place where to touch it would make a difference. A joyous, agonizing difference. No second-hand religion can do that. It can shield one from the naked truth and serve as an excellent substitute for first-hand faith.

Jesus refused “The Place” debate and pointed beyond a literalistic legalism to the Truth. Worship occurs *any* place *any* time it is *real*. Human *spirit* acknowledging the “worthship” of the Holy *Spirit*. Not form, but Content. Not somewhere, but Someone. Not place, but Face. Not *where* it happens, but *what* happens makes all the difference.

The rest of the story is that of a single life touching an entire city. Her water pot forgot, this nameless soul hurried into town crying, “Come see a man who told me everything I ever did!” That was her witness. The cutting question was, “Can this be the Christ?” Can it? These people would see for themselves. What more than that can be asked?

The community response was, “We no longer believe because of what you told us. We have seen Him ourselves and know that He really is the Savior of the world” (4:42). Here are folks moving from second-hand to first-hand faith.

Like second base, second-hand faith is a helpful spot to land, unless one dies there. In fact, it’s a place highly desirable to leave as soon as possible. The sober reality, though, is that for many it’s the church cemetery.

To that challenge we now turn.

### **The White Death**

In the early 14th century epidemics of the Black Death (bubonic plague) reduced the population of Northern Europe by a third and England by half. As a result the decimated ranks of monks and friars were filled with recruits falling far below earlier standards. Today’s counterpart might well be called “the White

Death.” Respectable, nominal, run-of-the-mill Christianity. It has led prophetic spirits such as Elton Trueblood to point to the Church as today’s greatest mission field. Why be surprised when the admission price is so cheap? We say to all who come, “We have only one question to ask.”

That would be fine, if we had given them “the Gospel,” rather than arguments about “forms” and so-called “necessary inferences” labeled as “essentials.” Whoever accepts his/her own *death* on that Cross with Christ is under no illusions about “cheap grace” and “the cost of discipleship.”

Remember the story about Lloyd George? What on earth or in heaven can a dry-bones religion masquerading as Christian faith do for a single soul... much less the world? “Nothing!” we are tempted to spit out in contempt, and we’re dead wrong about that. It can do a lot, and there lies the danger. As E. Stanley Jones insisted, it can inoculate us against the real thing. A slight case of Christianity can prove fatal. Immunized against a no-longer contagious Christ, we are doomed.

There is something thrilling taking place among Christians today, as we’ll note later. But there is also something deadly. Conventional Christianity offers us a fortress in which to escape the blazing demands of the living God. Karl Barth was right, “The Church is not only the place where one meets God; it is often the place where one takes [his/her] last stand against God.” Where “good” people fancy they’re quite safe. With a faith that far from shattering self-centeredness, rather confirms them in it.

We need eyes open to the competing brands of “Christianity” in today’s marketplace. One is the

bargain-counter kind attractively displayed in ecclesiastical supermarts -- costing little, centering in the peace and prosperity of the self. The other cracks through the self so that we come face-to-face with God and are led beyond the safety of our prison into the dangerous venture of caring and sharing.

The increasing tempo of newcomers "shopping around for a church we like" expresses the "consumerism" rampant and the cleavage between religious fellowships. The issue might as well be clear: the "Culture Religion," by sociologists called "Folk Religion," and many reverently call "the American Way," is just not Christianity. The difference is lightly indicated by the sales clerk in the dime store when asked if she had compasses. "We have the kind you make circles with, but not the kind you go places with." Only as we push beyond conventional, lukewarm, nauseating "Christianity" do we come upon "the kind you go places with." Only then can we speak to others of what we have seen and heard.

What then would it be for Jesus Christ suddenly to confront us behind the facade of our second-hand dogma? If we with our borrowed faith were met by His blazing reality? St. John Adcock in *The Divine Tragedy* put it like this:

When a blithe infant, lapt in careless joy  
Sports with a woolen lion -- if the toy  
Should come to life, the child so direly crost,  
Faced with this actuality were lost...  
Leave us our toys, then; happier we shall stay  
While they remain but toys, and we can play  
With them and do with them as suits us best;  
Reality would add to our unrest...

We want no living Christ, whose truth intense  
Pretends to no belief in our pretense  
And, flashing on all folly and deceit,  
Would blast our world to ashes at our feet...  
We do but ask to see  
No more of Him below than is displayed  
In the dead plaything our own hands have made  
To lull our fears and comfort us in loss,  
The Wooden Christ upon a wooden Cross.

The stabbing description of our second-hand faith: “The Wooden Christ upon a wooden Cross!”

Do we whine that the world is unimpressed by our faith? Are we alarmed at the spread of militant atheism? Shocked and saddened at the desertion of faith by our children? Horrified at the selfish addiction to what is literally a “white death?” We’d better recognize that sometimes, maybe often, these are desperate attempts to escape the strangulation of a dead creed. For if God does not matter infinitely, He does not matter at all.

Martin Luther once exploded, “No one is closer to God than those who hate and despise Him!” At least they take God seriously, while all around Luther saw professed believers taking God for granted. So did Nietzsche and, consequently, concluded, “God is dead!” God has received the kiss of Death. Rot wearing the mask of respectable religion. The White Death.

But “Death” is not the last word. People change. Prejudice is rooted out. Hate goes out. Love comes in. The dead are raised. A nameless woman, an outcast, drinks of the living water 2000 years ago, and today we sing expectantly, “Fill my cup, Lord.” Let’s look closer at what it is to move beyond a borrowed creed.

## It's Happening

Exciting events are breaking in among us. R. L. Kilpatrick through *Ensign* is witness to open windows with fresh winds blowing through at least some of our once-closed congregations, as well as closed minds. Edward Fudge's *gracEmail*<sup>44</sup> is a blessing falling on many and ready to fall on others who desire it.

Ordinary folks who have for years been ordinary churchgoers run headlong into the most extraordinary experience. I've seen it happen, and it is the most heartening discovery in the world.

Bernie was over six feet tall and weighed nearly 200 pounds. At his wife's urging he came to "church services." They sat a third of the way back on my right as I faced the congregation. Slumping noticeably, eyes closed and a scowl on his face. Not one of the most encouraging sights in view.

One Sunday I preached on "Christ For Casual Christians." It was born of the comment by Frank Clark mentioned in the *Foreword* of this book. His words, "I'm a rather casual Christian" and "I'm violently apathetic" stuck in my craw, and I had to deal with them. At the door this Sunday I got a series of "cold fish" handshakes and the comment, "You'll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." I went home pretty discouraged.

Midweek there was a knock at the Study door. There stood Bernie. My heart sank. "You got to me last Sunday," he blurted out. "O," I said and waited. I had no idea where he was headed and didn't want to step out

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<sup>44</sup> *gracEmail@Edward Fudge.com.*

ahead and get run over. “I knew it was true before and didn’t want to accept it,” he continued. “Sunday something happened to me, and I don’t know what it was. I’ve been reading my Bible, and I’ve decided to read it through... I want to come to Sunday School next Sunday, but I don’t know where to go.”

I was like Rhoda standing at the door with Peter knocking outside. A prayer meeting was going on for Peter’s release from prison. Now he’s out, and Rhoda can’t believe it. I pray for things like this to happen, and when it does, I’m dumbfounded.

I told him which class to attend and asked, “Would you like me to make a suggestion about where to begin your Bible reading?” “No,” he told me bluntly, “I’ll start at the beginning and read straight through, just like any other book.” I winced and thought, “He’ll make it through *Genesis* and *Exodus* and bog down in *Leviticus*.” I even wondered if he would show up for Sunday School. I see so many rocky ground hearers who “at once” receive the word and “at once” fall away.

But Bernie came. He kept coming, reading, praying, growing. In a few weeks I hazarded a check on him to see if he had already bogged down. “How’s the reading coming along?” I tried nonchalantly to ask. “O, fine,” he came back, “I’m in the *Psalms* now.”

In a university town this man with a high school education, a commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord, and the gift of God he didn’t begin to understand... served as a small-group leader, teacher, deacon, elder, chairman of evangelism, chairman of membership and chairman of the board (not all at the same time, praise God). And, I’ve likely left something out.

Beyond his service within the congregation, he took on clients from Social Services, ran a local Credit Union and at the Post Office impacted numbers of fellow workers. Even at the water fountain they gathered to ask questions. He helped secure a dialogue with one of the Catholic Churches and somewhere in his spare time began work with an alcoholic colleague.

One morning he burst in asking, "Would the church accept 'Bob,' if he wanted to make a confession, be baptized and begin worship with us?" "I don't know," I told him, "I certainly hope so. I'll make a bargain with you. When, or if, he stumbles, will you go with me on Saturday night to pull him out of the bar, take him home, clean him up and see that he worships with us in the morning?" Without hesitation he cried, "Yes!" We never had to make good on our covenant.

"What happened to Bernie?" a long-time elder asked. "I think it's called 'conversion,'" I replied. He moved from second-hand to first-hand faith, from casual to committed Christianity. He had not heard clearly Jesus' promise, "The water I give you will be a fountain leaping up within you." But do you know what? Jesus kept His promise anyway.

### **How Can We Be Sure?**

We can't. That is, we can't have theoretical certainty. The fact is that such certainty belongs solely to mathematical formulations. As soon as you put living content into the formula theoretical certainty evaporates. In Christian faith the certainty of logic is replaced with the certainty of trusted relations. We'll never on earth be sure as long as we sit around and talk (or write) about

it. There is only one way to find out. Make the test.

You know the difference between hearsay and eyewitness testimony when you are the news carrier. You know when what you are reporting is to you but rumor. It is rumored that there is a God who “holds the whole world in His hands.” It is rumored that one “Jesus” knew God first-hand and seeks to introduce us. It is rumored that he died rather than play either God or us false. That in some mysterious way, refusing to abandon to destruction this true Son of faith, God by incredible force shattered the prison to let him loose in creation to woo and win it Home. Furthermore, he is changing everything and everybody all around in the process. A rumor that we at times sigh wistfully “is almost too good to be true.”

Doubtless, in the experience of most there are times when the heart cries silently, “I wish I knew that truth at last triumphs over lies, that love ultimately wins out over hate and life over death.” The disciples had their doubts. There was Jesus in Gethsemane, crying into the darkness, “My God, my God, why...?”

This chapter began by affirming that second-hand faith can be prelude to first-hand faith. It will be unless it camps on second base, settling for death right there. At times all we can do is stand on tiptoe and look through the eyes of another’s faith until our own comes surging again. So John tells not only the story of a whole village moving beyond second-hand faith, but writes a letter to those he loves in Christ to say,

We are writing to you about something...which we ourselves saw and heard; something we had opportunity to observe closely and even to hold in our hands, and yet, as we know now, was something of the very word of life Himself. For it was life which

appeared before us: we saw it, and we are eye-witnesses of it... (*1 John 1:1-2a, Phillips*).

No amount of theorizing about improbabilities would daunt this man. He knew what he was talking about and wanted his friends to know. Furthermore, he knew such personal knowledge comes only in experience. Therefore, he wanted them not to nod to his affirmation, but to share his experience. So, in the next verse he continues,

We repeat, we really saw and heard what we are now writing to you about. We want you to be with us in this fellowship with the Father, and Jesus Christ his Son. We must write and tell you about it, because the more that fellowship extends, the greater joy it brings to us who are already in it.

Four words dominate these four verses: “life,” “fellowship,” “joy” and “know.” Whatever the Gospel is about, it’s about “life.” And John insists, “Whoever has the Son has life” (*1 John 5:12*). It becomes clear why he lays such emphasis on fellowship in the New Community. “Life” is not simply “endless existence.” That could be “hell.” It’s *sharing the right relationship*, the air and essence of such relationship being “joy.” The joy is complete when we “know” not only that the Story is true, but that the relationship is real. We know him and one another.

We experience life and joy at home not when we know what the textbooks (or political stumpsters) say about the family, but when as members of a family we know caring and sharing. We know “life” and “joy” in the congregation not as we argue the definition of “church,” “worship” and “stewardship.” We know “life” and “joy” when we are immersed in the spirit of

acceptance, forgiveness, mutual service and love. We no longer say "I think," but, "I know!"

It was this authority that stamped the early Christian Fellowship as real, firing its sweep across the Roman world. "We have seen, and we know!" those early heralds cried. It is this authority that characterizes those cells where new life springs joyously and fresh winds of God blow on dry bones, clothing them with living flesh.

Still, there is no way on earth for this to become real to me until I make personal experiment. Christ begins to become real to me when one I trust says earnestly, "I've a Friend I'd like you to know." "So, when we tell people, they believe, and we tell them by letting Christ speak" (*Rom. 10:17*, Beck).

"How beautiful are the feet" that run with the Tidings. How sweet are the lips that cry, "Come and see!" But *we* must come to the well. It is there the breakthrough occurs for us in our blind, deaf and voiceless world. It is we who must at last go down on our knees and let Him place the vessel to our lips. We cannot live on rumor or the water others drink

Your well can be anywhere when you know you are thirsty. Anywhere you'll talk with him and be honest. Anywhere you stop the diversion attempts and let the wonder dawn. Anywhere you hear him say, "I who speak to you am he," and you believe.

In fact, you can meet him through some nobody, some somebody, some anybody. Some castaway. Some "Samaritan." ...Some "Bernie." Later on you will say, "Now I believe, not because of what you have said. I have heard him myself and know that he really is the Savior of the world" ...*my* "Savior" and *my* "Lord."

# 11.

## TURNING WORK INTO WORSHIP

### **What!?**

One Saturday night a lady called to ask “What are you preaching on tomorrow?” “Sanctifying Our Daily Work,” I replied. “Sanctifying our daily work!?” she exploded. “I hate mine! This week has been a madhouse.”

That’s not a novel view. We know it well. Many call their job “the grind,” “the rat race” or “salt mine.” It’s seen as a necessary evil to get the money to take care of our family and allow a little “free time” to run away from it all and really “live.” Consequently, most of our life is spent in toil and drudgery, separate and apart from “life” -- off out there in a “godless” world.

The prevailing attitude bears a bitter fruit.

### **Our Need**

We are created to work. We are God’s “workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works” (*Eph.2:10*). Only, that’s God’s second creation. In Scripture God first comes to us as Artist and Lover. Artist because God creates. Lover because He creates not only robins and redwoods, waterfalls and rainbows, but persons... personal replicas, created in His “own image,” little artists and lovers. God creates “Adam,”

puts him in the Garden and says, “ “Here it is. Take it and care for it” (*Gen. 2:15*). Human work becomes the extension of God’s creation, embodying the shared joy of that audacious partnership.

We are created neither for idleness nor loneliness. Without meaningful activity and loving relations we are “nobodies.” We are only the “lonely” and the “lost.”

### **When Work Becomes “Toil”**

Many of us hold the notion that “work: is a consequence of ‘the Fall.’” That supposition is grossly false. While work is God’s offer to share in creation, our disobedience has changed our relation to the “good” environment. It is no longer our ever-friendly home. Now it is ambivalent, alternately neutral, hospitable, antagonistic. And, so are we toward God, toward one another, toward the world, toward our work.

Bondage turned “work” into “toil.” Hebrews in Egypt made bricks without straw. White slaves rowed someone else’s boat. Black slaves picked someone else’s cotton. Yellow slaves gathered someone else’s rice. For those who haven’t been there and seen it firsthand Edwin Markham’s *The Man With the Hoe* depicts it well.

### **Choice**

Nothing I say here should excuse our inhumanity to one another. Employers and employees alike live under the rule of One who demands justice from us all. From the exploitation of adults to children, bondage of every sort is inexcusable. There are those who even yet

are not free to choose their work. Circumstances hem them in. Yet, most of us *are* free.

We are not free to choose our salary, but we are free to choose our work. Each of us is, certainly, free to choose the attitude we bring to it. The spirit I bring is my own. I must be plain here: if our work is to us the “rat race” and the “grind,” we need to face the fact that this is not the biblical, and certainly not the Christian, understanding of work as “vocation” (or “calling”). It is not the glad response of a faithful steward. Therefore, we must change either our *attitude* or our *job*.

It was Paul’s counsel to slaves that helped me. I know the “toil” that can come with work. I have chopped cotton till my hands were blistered, picked it till my fingers bled. I have worked as a janitor, though then I caught a vision of clean and orderly rooms where learning could occur. I worked as a file clerk, but the job was to help people move themselves and supplies across this vast continent. I’ve turned mimeograph machine handles, licked postage stamps and sealed envelopes by the thousands. Of course, there can be monotony and even drudgery in it all, unless...

Unless we catch the spirit of Paul’s admonition to work “as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart...” (*Eph.* 6:6). I found that I could pray for students and teachers as I cleaned classrooms, for railroad workers as I pulled their files and checked their blood pressure, for those to whom I sent letters, for those involved in accidents as sirens screamed past my office. If slaves could work “as servants of Christ,” how could I do less?

As I pondered that question two other passages knocked on my front door. First was *Col.* 3:17, “And,

whatever you do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” I couldn’t think of anything that didn’t fall in the category of “word” or “deed.” Certainly, not what I did with most of my waking hours.

Second was *Rom. 12:1-2*. We who grew up without stocks, bonds or corporate power had nothing to offer the market but our “bodies,” though not even a whole “body.” We were “hands”: “field hands,” “factory hands.” And, *those* we were to offer up to God as our “spiritual worship” or “service.”

It can be done. It has been done. It is being done... and, *it is* our “spiritual worship.”

### **The “Offering”**

Jesus Christ is God’s Offering *for* us and *to* us. He is the Gift of God*self*. To accept that Gift, we must offer ourselves in return. We can accept “things” without offering *ourselves*, but in no other way can we accept other “selves.” To neglect or refuse to offer to God our whole lives, particularly the largest parts of them, is to secularize life and miss the joy of our greatest “offering.”

The offering in our gathered worship is symbolic of the offering of our daily work. The major offering is made out there in the world. The hours and days of my life are then compacted into a piece of paper that I bring and offer to God, along with my verbal prayers and praise. I say, “Here, Lord, I give to You my week’s work, the hours and days of my life, my activity of brain and brawn. Here it is compacted into this bit of paper.

But, God, this is who I have been, who I am, and I offer it to You as a steward of Your grace.”

We take our work-now-turned-into-money and divide it into packages to give away. Some goes to the market. Some to payments on the house, for the car, to the light company, etc. But, none should go where God is no longer the Senior Partner in the Partnership, or where it cannot be given with thanksgiving and praise.

It could be that God thinks more of factories and offices than cathedrals, for there are many more people there, and that is where their lives are poured out. The word “liturgy” comes from two Greek words meaning “the work of the people.” The minor liturgy takes place in the Church gathered. The major liturgy takes place out in the world with the Church scattered.

A freshly-energized Christian told me, “I have three objectives: 1) to be the best Christian that I can be, 2) to be the best husband and father I can be, 3) to be the best stainless steel kitchen creator that I can be.” I knew he had been seized by the Spirit and was now offering himself wholly to the God of the Great Creative Adventure. He became an inspiration to his family, the congregation where he worshipped, the company for which he worked and he became an unofficial counselor to his peers. His life was a prayer and a psalm of praise. Word and deed were wed in worship. Sam Smith incarnated the spirit of *Ephesians* 6:6 and *Colossians* 3:16-17. He blessed me abundantly.

## **Twice Made**

Our offering is twice made: 1) in the world as we do our work to the glory of God; 2) in the worshipping community as together we lift up the hours and days of our lives to God for His mission in the world. The major and minor liturgies are wed in worship as God and we rejoice together in the shared secret of life and offer ourselves anew to the fantastic dream of making all people one and all things new.

Early Hebrews offered themselves through the gifts of their fields and flocks. Early Christians brought food and clothing to the assembly, gave them to God, then took them out in God's name to give to the needy. We join them in the offering of our work out in God's world and a second offering of that work-turned-into-money in shared worship. By that time it truly is the gift of *ourselves*, "a living sacrifice."

## **Conclusion**

We are designed for work as joyous participation with God in creation. That "work" is not meant to be "toil." James Barrie pointed to the difference when he said, "Nothing is work, unless you had rather be doing something else." It's just that he confused the words. Furthermore, that "rather" doesn't automatically rise out of the job. The vision of co-creation comes not from below but from Above. "Flesh and blood" has not revealed it to us.

A heartbroken mother, hot tears splashing on her face, hugged tightly her brain-damaged child. "How much you love it," a guest observed. "Yes," came the

wounded reply, “but how much I long for it to love me back.” Isn’t that the way it is with every loving parent?

God aches to share with us both Himself and His work. God loves us, but longs for us to love Him back. Until we do, we are the “lonely” and the “lost.” We *will* work, either because we *have* to or because we *want* to. Both work and “want to” are God’s grace-gifts. It will be a truly glorious day when all of God’s People everywhere give thankful praise *for* and *by means of* these precious gifts. Then we can join that old soldier of the Cross who knew what it was by dim light with dimmer eyes to sew skins together for the glory of God, and cry with him,

And whatever work you may have to do, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, thanking God the Father through him. (*Col. 3:17*, Phillips).

With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you..., as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its mold, but let God remold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves toward the goal of true maturity. (*Rom. 12:1-2*, Phillips).

In the spirit of prayer I offer to God and to you these words from Badger Clark that he entitled

## “THE JOB”

But, God, it won't come right! it won't come right!  
I've worked it over till my brain is numb.  
The first flash came so bright,  
Then more ideas after it--flash! flash! I thought it  
some  
New constellation men<sup>45</sup> would wonder at.  
Perhaps, it's just a firework--flash! fizz! spat!  
Then darker darkness and scorched pasteboard and  
sour smoke.

But, God, the thought was great,  
The scheme, the dream--why till the first charm  
broke  
The thing just built itself while I, elate,  
Laughed and admired it. Then it stuck.  
Half done, the lesser half, worse luck!  
You see, it's dead as yet, a frame, a body--and the  
heart,  
The soul, the fiery vital part  
To give it life is what I cannot get. I've tried--  
You know it--tried to catch live fire  
And pawed cold ashes. Every spark has died.  
It won't come right! I'd drop the thing entire,  
Only--I can't! I love my job.

You, who ride the thunder,  
Do you know what it is to dream and drudge and  
throb?  
I wonder.

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<sup>45</sup> Written years ago before we developed the gender consciousness of today.

Did it come at you with a rush, your dream, your  
plan?  
If so, I know how you began.  
Yes, with rapt face and sparkling eyes,  
Swinging the hot globe out between the skies,  
Marking the new seas with their white beach lines,  
Sketching in sun and moon, the lightning and the  
rains,  
Sowing the hills with pines,  
Wreathing a rim of purple around the plains.  
I know you laughed then, while you caught and  
wrought  
The big, swift, rapturous outline of your thought.  
And then --  
Men!  
I see it now.  
O God, forgive my pettish row.  
I see your job. While ages crawl  
Your lips take laboring lines, your eyes a sadder  
light,  
For man, the fire and flower and center of it all--  
Man won't come right!  
After your patient centuries,  
Fresh starts, recastings, tired Gethsemanes  
And tense Golgothas, he, your central theme  
Is just a jangling echo of your dream.  
Grand as the rest may be, he ruins it.

Why don't you quit?  
Crumple it all and dream again! But no;  
Flaw after flaw, you work it out, revise, refine--  
Bondage, brutality, and war, and woe,  
The sot, the fool, the tyrant and the mob--

Dear God, how you must love your job!  
Help me, as I love mine.

To see God in Jesus, is to glimpse the true God of all creation and have God's creative Dream grip us like the teeth of tiger that will not turn us loose till we are together in the Divine Creative Partnership...

God's Job is mine, and  
my job had better be His.

## 12. A PERSONAL PILGRIMAGE

### Two Questions

"How did you at so early an age come to your convictions on 'justification by faith'?" is a question that more recently I am asked. Then comes the follow-up question, "Who most influenced you in your study of the matter?"<sup>46</sup> As frankly as I can I shall face these questions.

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<sup>46</sup> A few years ago it was put to me by Dr. John Mark Hicks of Harding Graduate School in Memphis. [He has since become Prof. of Theology at Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tennessee.] I did not answer him very well, for I had not stopped to visualize thoroughly the throng to which I owed so great a debt. He wanted particularly to know the extent to which I was influenced by K. C. Moser. I knew that I was indebted to him, but could not recall at the time just how and how much. I hope to do better here.

I believe that we are all on a journey, especially a journey of mind and spirit. I regard it as a “spiritual pilgrimage,” a dangerously exuberant quest, private at its core, public in its consequences, cosmic in its outcome. We should be eager to answer any question about who we are as disciples of Christ and the nature of our deepest convictions.<sup>47</sup> And yet...

### *Disclosure*

Question No.1 could hardly occur in an open environment, unless it is assumed that learning to deal with soul-shaking issues can come only late in life. What the question does is unmask the tyrannical atmosphere of the time.

How painful it was in the 40’s to reach a conclusion not already canonized as “sound doctrine,” publicly proclaimed by what our esteemed Brother Homer Hailey called, “the keepers of orthodoxy.” Even if one reached a new conclusion, s/he must consider the risk of speaking out. It could be at the cost of one’s vocation. It might even bring the death penalty -- disfellowship.<sup>48</sup>

“Sound doctrine” had by this time become so codified that all who veered from the party line were swiftly branded as “unsound in the faith.”

Question No. 2, is normal enough, since we are all taught by others. None of us is born with a faith intact or ever reaches our conclusions solo, with no outside help. Furthermore, our current credibility is judged in part by our past: parents, friends, where we went to

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<sup>47</sup> *1 Pet.* 3:15.

<sup>48</sup> I know, for I have borne the rope burns of the hangman’s noose.

school, the part of the country from which we came, vocation, race, color, class, sex, age, *ad infinitum*.

Yet, when the question is put by those who loudly proclaim, “We do not interpret; we simply read, believe and obey,” we see that down deep they know well that all of us are impacted by those teachers whom we trust and admire. Either that, or they regard themselves as the sole exception, all the while being skillfully molded by some “Brother Wallopum.”

*“Surprise?”*

Now to Question No. 1: “How could one so young...?” Such surprise was most kindly expressed by R. L. Kilpatrick, in an introductory comment on a series of articles carried by his publication and entitled “Whose ‘Righteousness’? or ‘Justification’?”<sup>49</sup> .

First, I must confess that a kind of compulsion to grasp the meaning of “faith” seized me when I was barely out of my teens. I had great difficulty understanding Paul’s teaching on “grace” and “faith” and their

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<sup>49</sup> Included as **Ch. 2** in this volume. He wrote: “Several years ago a reader sent me an article that he spotted in the Gospel Advocate, dated March, 1946. The article was titled ‘*The Righteousness of God*,’ and written by a young preacher named Roy Key. It was and still is one of the best articles that I had ever read on the subject and I have often wondered how a man could acquire such understandings at such an early age - when the rest of us had to spend years acquiring the same knowledge through countless days of toil, struggle and study, The doctrine in vogue in 1946 was justification by faith **PLUS WORKS!** Any suggestion that the kind of righteousness that saves might be God’s rather than our own through the merit of good works was questionable, and this is exactly what brother Key boldly proclaimed in his treatise.” (*Ensign*, Vol. XXII, No. 5, May 1994, p. 82).

relation to each other and sensed that I was missing something of immense value.

Some time during my student days at David Lipscomb College (1936-38) I saw a small paperbound book by S. H. Hall that had a section on “Abrahamic Faith.” I cannot remember anything else about the book, but the phrase stuck. What in the world was the nature of “Abrahamic faith?”

Though I had little illumination on the subject when in 1938 I left Lipscomb for Pepperdine, I went, however, with a different spirit from the one I brought. I entered DLC breathing fire and brimstone against “the sects.” Believed that they should be called by name and publicly warned of their impending doom. I left still considering them lost, but sorry about their fate and eager to save, rather than skin, them. In my soul timidly compassion began to vie with pride and disdain.

At Pepperdine I took an extra year of courses in Bible and Religion. I knew the pat answers to the popular questions, but that indefinable “something” was still missing. In 1943, after teaching three semesters at Dasher Bible School in Valdosta, Georgia, I went back to Pepperdine so that my wife (Evelyn) could finish work for her B.S. I took more courses still.

In 1944, fathered by W. B. West, Jr., on the Pepperdine campus the first Church of Christ Graduate School in Religion was born. I knew at once that I wanted to enroll. I knew something else, too. I wanted to study everything I could find on “faith.” I wanted to know the meaning of “Abrahamic faith” and, by God’s grace, share it. To me such a possibility simply had to be providential.

My field of study was Constructive Christian Thought. Along with courses in Christian Evidences and World Religion, I took additional courses in Canonicity, History of Christian Thought, Constructive Christian Thought and such Biblical books as *Revelation* and *Romans*.

During the first year I wrote every term paper I possibly could on some aspect of “faith” or “faith” as it related to “grace”: the views of Paul, Augustine, Luther, Schleiermacher, Niebuhr and other current scholars. I haunted the Library and feasted to the full. With considerable difficulty I persuaded my major professor to let me write the master’s thesis on “An Exposition of Christian Faith.” All year I prepared to do just that.

With the thesis not yet written and one more course to complete I went with Evelyn to Juneau, Alaska, to help launch a congregation. The following year we returned to the “Lower 48.” I completed the thesis, took the comprehensive exams, and we moved to New York. All this preceded my submission of the article to the *Gospel Advocate*. My convictions on “The Righteousness of God” came neither quickly nor easily. The struggle stretched across years. Only, for me it came in early morning, rather than at noon or evening shade.

#### *Mentors?*

Now to Question No: 2, “Who most influenced you...?” I know now that my parents, my grandmothers, Uncle “Pink” (my father’s brother) and members of the little church of my childhood had a major impact on who and what I am. From them, I believe, came my passion to serve the Lord to the best of my ability. And from them came my earliest doctrinal views.

It was not from them, though, that I learned that “justification is by grace through faith.” Nor even from my teachers at David Lipscomb College. Yet, I could not have accepted that truth had I not met them. There I was in the presence of the saints: E. H. Ijams, S. P. Pittman, J. P. Sanders, Charles R. Brewer, Robert Neil. There were still others whom I had not the blessing of knowing. I did not have President Ijams in class, but was profoundly influenced by him.

The cobwebs were still in my head, but God through these angels started sweeping them out of my heart. I did not truly enjoy God’s grace, but in it I lived daily as it radiated from Brother Ijams and Brother Sanders.

Writings as varied as *Aunt Charlotte’s Bible Stories*, David Lipscomb’s *Questions and Answers*, *The Gospel Advocate* and the McQuiddy-Durst debate on “The Design Of Baptism” were those that substantially shaped the views of my youth. From the *Advocate* I was introduced to such stalwarts as James A Harding, M. C. Kurfees and G. C. Brewer.

It was, however, at Pepperdine in the course on *Romans* that my views became a clear, consistent whole. The person who helped me most was Ralph G. Wilburn, teacher of the course on *Romans*. The most influential book unquestionably was Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans*. Next, though, was the International Critical Commentary on *Romans* by W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Other commentaries on *Romans* that I consulted included those of I. B. Grubbs, Moses E. Lard, J. W. McGarvey and Phillip. Y. Pendleton. In a general way I was challenged and sobered by two more popular authors, Leslie Weatherhead and E. Stanley Jones.

I did not agree with everything I read in the commentary, nor everything I heard in class. At times I couldn't even accept Paul, but I knew that at last I was hearing the message of the Apostle, rather than the shallow rantings of "Brother Wallppum"<sup>51</sup> or the echo of my own earlier pulpiteering. It was at once thrilling and frightening.

Around that time (I can't recall precisely when) I became aware of K. C. Moser's tract, "Christ Or a Plan." It was heartening to learn that there was "a voice in the wilderness," confirmatory, rather than condemnatory. Sometime afterward I saw Moser's *Way of Salvation*. Eagerly I read it.

While I cannot say now what gave me courage two years later to write that article for the *Advocate*, I'm sure that Moser's efforts helped. I certainly want to salute his contribution. Possibly he was a providential instrument, used of God to keep the Church of Christ from losing its soul.<sup>52</sup> I regard him highly and was blessed by the little that I read from him, even though I disagreed with what, to me, were vestiges of legalism and an inability to think through the implications of his conviction that God is not arbitrary.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> An earlier printing referred to "Brother Wallopum" as "Brother Skullcrusher," but, I have now resigned my judgeship, realizing that he may have sought a k.o., more than a kill.

<sup>52</sup> Prof. Hicks, in a significant W. B. West, Jr., Lecture at Harding Graduate School, concludes that Moser reintroduced to Churches of Christ the temporarily-neglected Biblical doctrine of "grace."

<sup>53</sup> I could not accept his "penal satisfaction" theory of the Atonement. His treatment of "the blood" of Christ (as I understood him) veered either toward legalism or magic. It washes away sin because God "legislated" it so, or because it is substantially

## Footnote

I must here enter a footnote to our history by revealing that Wilburn was the one who sowed the seed of “grace” at Pepperdine, and from there some lesser sowers went forth. In the 40’s and 50’s a handful landed in the New York and Chicago areas, planting there a few small plots. Most of these men knew nothing of Brother K. C. Moser. Ironically, it was from: 1) Pepperdine, 2) “that liberal University of Chicago,” plus 3) McCormick Theological Seminary, that God’s Gospel of “amazing grace” was channeled to them.

It seems that God periodically (or, is it continually?) raises up heralds unknown to one another to run with His tidings.

### **“The Road Less Traveled”**

That road I took was not my first choice. I have now at length a clue into the hearts of those ancients who wandered circuitously in the desert day after dreary day. I understand why it was in the wilderness that our Lord confronted the decisive temptations as to the nature of His identity and mission.

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different from all other blood. The question of *how* “blood” (including Christ’s “blood”) actually deals with murder, pride, etc., remains. Could God have legislated “the blood of bulls and goats” to “cleanse the conscience of the worshiper?” Is it God’s edict that “save[s] me from [sin’s] guilt and power?” This is the arbitrariness Moser rejects. Could salvation, then, come through a transfusion? This is the magic he would as surely reject. To me he never quite worked through the dilemma. Yet, he was, and is, still powerfully used of God.

### *Shattered Dream*

For years I dreamed of teaching in a Christian college and going out on Sundays to help small congregations. In 1946 that dream was dead, a promised<sup>54</sup> teaching career destroyed at my beloved Lipscomb. In being forced to sign a “loyalty oath” I affirmed my chief purpose to be that of teaching young men and women the “Gospel of Jesus Christ,” rather than warring against all the “isms.” For that simple statement the promise was broken and the offer withdrawn.

It was not merely a job that was lost, but a career. Not any career, but one that from childhood I considered God-ordained. I knew, however, that if I was not “sound” enough to teach at David Lipscomb College, I could not teach anywhere. My sense of identity was shattered. The “promised land” was barred, and I must die in the desert or seek God’s will anew about any future open to me.

It was then that we decided to go off up to New York and try to help a fledgling congregation find a location and build. Waiting for some pillar of fire by night, I received that inner nudge that identifies itself as God-sent. I could not teach in school. It might be that I could replace the desk with the pen.

### *Desert Decision*

At least, I could try. I sat down and thought about what I would most like to say to my brothers and sisters in the mainstream Church of Christ. The burning question in my soul was, “What kind of God is God, and

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<sup>54</sup> Lipscomb’s president had promised that in the Fall of 1946 I would be installed as Associate Prof. of Bible and Greek.

what is the nature of our relationship to Him?” How can I raise that question in a provocative, constructive way?

I knew well the popular view of God, that of an arbitrary Judge with a split personality. While God loves us and wants to live in fellowship with us, God is willing to destroy all whom He can weed out with arbitrary “conditions of salvation.” For, the Almighty can make those “conditions” anything He pleases. Consequently, He legislated immersion in water as a “condition” *simply because it is arbitrary*. Making no rational sense, it poses the superb test of faith.<sup>55</sup>

If I was to help people leave the bondage of legalism for the freedom of God’s grace, I knew that I must intellectually and emotionally travel my own troubled road again. What struck the shackles from my mind and spirit? What gave me power to trust God to love and accept me, despite my unworthiness? That I must share,

On that backward trek I encountered Jesus. I saw in his face a new and fresh image of God. A radically different image of his Father. In him I clearly recognized that God is not arbitrary and that our relationship is personal, rather than legal.

These two truths loomed large in Jesus. But formerly I was too immersed in our legal thought to accept them. Besides, Jesus lived before Pentecost and the New Covenant. How wonderful it would be if His portrayal of the Father were real, but for years it was too good to be true.

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<sup>55</sup> Obviously, a distorted view of baptism. Yet, a favorite contrast was often made between “moral law” and “positive divine law.” The former was in itself right; the latter was right simply by divine decree. It was, therefore, heralded as superior by virtue of the fact that it constituted the higher hurdle for faith.

Then I met Paul, who served as guide to lead me back to Jesus. While Jesus was never bound down in legalism, Paul was. He spoke my language, and it was his exposition of “justification through faith,” or “the righteousness of God” that confirmed to my heart what I had seen in Jesus: 1) God is not arbitrary, and 2) our relationship to God is personal, rather than legal.

*That (In)famous Article*

I began at the top. To the *Gospel Advocate* I sent the article on “justification” entitled “The Righteousness of God.” The editor, no less than G. C. Brewer, decided to run it. I was greatly encouraged. Then the avalanche! Letters started coming, both to me and to the *Advocate*. In messages to me the sentiments spanned the spectrum. “Thank you so much. Why have we not heard this good news before?” “What on earth are you trying to do? Destroy the church?”

Initially I knew nothing of the criticism pouring in to the *Advocate*. Like Jacob and Esau struggling in Rebecca’s womb, mingled elation and foreboding waged war in me. Would this message be accepted after all?

Apparently the struggle was occurring in the *GA*’s Nashville office, as well. Criticism was so widespread and severe that the editor felt he must respond. To me his response was a breeze from Eden.<sup>56</sup> Maybe, I

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<sup>56</sup> “The article on ‘The Righteousness of God’ is one of the best I have ever seen on the subject. It is well written, and it is eminently scriptural. If there is an unscriptural conclusion or thought in it, I failed to see it, and I have read the article again after the letters began to come in about it. Brother Key shows a grasp of the subject that even many preachers do not seem to possess. He has, what I consider, a true understanding of Paul’s teaching in

had heard God correctly this time, and I could substitute the pen for the desk.

Soon I gratefully accepted the invitation to join Eugene Smith's editorial staff of *The Gospel Broadcast*, where for months I fleshed out the article and continued exploring the theme of "The Righteousness of God." Messages both of praise and blame continued to come, but this time the former heavily outweighed the latter. I rejoiced and kept writing. It seemed I had weathered the first storm. Any victory celebration, however, was premature.

### **Fatal "Blunder"**

I recognize that I have been somewhat naive all my life. In my college year book one girl typed me as "Peter Pan." However, after being on the receiving end of the atom bomb, the barrage of hand grenades didn't seem so terrible. I was bloody, but far from mortally wounded. At least, that's what I thought.

After considerable prayer and midnight pondering, I came up with a simple strategy: "In my effort to help my sisters and brothers throw off their legalistic shackles, I will proceed with caution and with care, in the reverse order." Continuing, I said, "I must put some distance between us, or I won't lead anybody anywhere. I'll simply be one of the crowd. But, if I get too far ahead, I will achieve the same result. Cut off, I'll be useless."<sup>57</sup>

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Romans." (*GA*, March 7, 1946, cited from *Ensign*, loc. cit.)

<sup>57</sup> Just today I read Carl Ketcherside's observation, "If you are one step ahead, you are a teacher; two steps ahead and you are a

‘You can’t shout across the gulf!’” I told myself repeatedly.

*Gross Miscalculation*

I thought I was following my own counsel. I certainly tried to do so. But, the heretic hunters were out for blood. The biggest prey was Wilburn, and with zest they went after him. Since I knew Wilburn, for nearly two years sat in his classes and talked with him privately, I knew that he was no “unbeliever.” Nor was he a “modernist” or even an old-time “liberal.” I tried to present the man I knew, but the effort tarred me, as well.

Attempts to oust Wilburn from his position at Pepperdine succeeded. He departed for Phillips Theological Seminary and transferred membership to the Christian Church (Disciples). That left me out on the left flank of the Church of Christ, a tempting target for those who could cry, “I told you so!” but now, if they were to continue the chase, needed a fresh quarry.<sup>58</sup>

Not only was I now ahead of the crowd, I was too far ahead to be helpful to more than a few. I had miscalculated both the peril of my position and the lengths to which my brothers would go to blacklist me.

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prophet; three steps ahead and you are a martyr.” I didn’t know the saying, but I knew the truth.

<sup>58</sup> I owe to Pat Hardeman the honor of being kept in the papers continually, charged with being both “modernist” and “infidel.”

### *Counsel Declined*

Many ministerial colleagues offered private support, and some offered personal counsel. “We agree with you, but it’s unwise to say what you’re saying.” “Say what you want, but put nothing in print.” “Say whatever satisfies your conscience *and* the hearers, who will then translate the message into their own traditional views.”

Certainly, such counsel seemed wise to those who gave it. They were successfully following it themselves. I believe that their concern for me was genuine, but if their concern for the Gospel was equally genuine, I concluded, “Their understanding of what it means to be Christ’s ‘herald’ is different from mine.”

“I must not be their judge,” I kept telling myself, “but I cannot escape being my own. I know that my limited judgment is always flawed, and there is a Higher Court who will render the final verdict, but I must do what I believe God demands of me at this time in this place.” Consequently, I respectfully, fearfully declined.

Somehow, I believed that the Church of Christ was ripening for renewal, that souls living on husks were hungry for the “living Bread,” that the multitudes would weary of following false prophets who loudly debated cherished propositions, but kept strangely silent about our gracious Lord.

Convinced that the concept of “law” had to be dealt with in a way that established, rather than destroyed, it... convinced that legalists universally have too low a view of law and too high a view of its place... convinced that “the *law* of Christ” is ultimately “*Christ*,” and demands nothing less than the death of our old self and resurrection to a shared life with Him... I issued in 1954 a treatise entitled *The Law Of Christ*.

The responses were predictable. Much thanksgiving and praise. Much anger and gnashing of teeth. Only this time the latter outweighed the former. The pressures built. The boiler boiled and got ready to blow. If anyone could save me now, it would have to be G. C. Brewer. Again he took up his pen. Only this time he joined the opposition.

I cannot judge him too harshly, for had he done otherwise, even this mighty warrior would himself have been cut down. The time was not ripe. I was simply wrong, and the price of that wrong would be almost unbearably high.

Yet, I never regretted ignoring the counsel that could have saved me. I followed what I believed, and believe now, to be the leading of Him who is the supreme Counselor. The irony of my literary efforts may be that those earliest attempts ultimately prove to be the most productive of all, but at a cost I could hardly bear.

*“Judgment Day”*

I must not keep playing a broken record. Already I have described those fatal moments when the axe fell and my head rolled.<sup>59</sup> But, they are moments I cannot forget. Maybe, some day I will. In the meantime I trust it is not presumptuous to hope that they bring a partial answer to the prayer, “That I may know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, in the

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<sup>59</sup> In this volume, as well as in *Fire In My Bones, Sword In My Soul*. I get a bit of comfort and support from Paul’s thrice-reported conversion in *Acts*, though with each telling there a few fresh details appear.

hope that I may in some way attain the resurrection from the dead” (*Phil.3:10-11*.)

### **Unfinished Story**

When the doors closed to me in the Churches of Christ they opened in the larger Church, even as they had done for scores before me.<sup>60</sup> I did not push through those door, however, because they were open, but because the door behind me slammed shut.

#### *Hand Out... Still*

“Why did you leave the Church?” I was repeatedly asked.

I did not leave the Church. I said that then. I say it now. I finally recognized that I was being “asked,” or less-than-gently escorted, out that door. Did Paul “leave the Church” when hounded till he cried, “Lo, I turn to the Gentiles!?” Did he “desert” the Jews? Quit loving them? Seeking fellowship with them? Seizing every possible opportunity to serve them?

Even now as I think of Churches of Christ, I find myself writing “we,” “us,” “our,” not deliberately, but unconsciously, almost instinctively. I burned no bridges. Where bridges burned, fires were set by others. I attended every unity meeting possible, participated in all that were held: in Des Moines, IA; others in Hartford, IL, Bethany, WV; Cincinnati, OH; Tulsa, OK; Joplin, MO; and elsewhere. I have contributed regularly to Church of Christ publications wherever permitted. My hand has

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<sup>60</sup> Dr. Jay Calhoun told me that in the five years he served in the Christian Church (Disciples) Dept. of Ministry some 50 Church of Christ ministers were part of a continuing exodus.

always been out-stretched. It still is.

*Rejoicing in Hope*

Frequently I hear, “Things are different now. Much of what you were saying 50 years ago is widely accepted today.” I rejoice. I thank God and take hope. I have not asked for plaudits. I have asked for understanding. Why should that mean so much? The psychiatric scions could give a battery of answers. My own response is quite simple. I care. I still care.

Some of the dearest people in the world to me are faithfully serving in Churches of Christ. Some of my most cherished friends and early co-laborers work and worship there. It is the spiritual home of many from whom I learn and draw inspiration. Its once-sheltering arms, its devotion to Scripture, its staunch defense of what it sees to be “the truth,” its willingness to stand against the culture, bless me still.

For it all I “rejoice, give thanks and sing.”✠

In *Restoration Review* about 10 years ago Leroy Garrett ran an article of mine entitled “The Passion to be Right.” Among the responses came a plea that I took considerable time to answer. In the next, and final, chapter I include the article, the plea and the response. In so doing I conclude the account of my “Spiritual Pilgrimage.”

# 13.

## PASSION TO BE RIGHT

### **The Passion to Be Perfect**

One day in the midst of a discussion my oldest daughter blurted out, 'O Dad, anything's all right with you as long as its perfect!' I haven't the slightest remembrance of how that discussion ended, but I think it was abruptly.

My family has so often accused me of being a 'perfectionist,' that I had to make an appointment for a spiritual check-up. One positive result was that I was made aware of a few characteristics that I think we perfectionists need carefully to consider.

First, we have a host of good qualities: super-conscientiousness, ability and willingness to work far beyond expectation, tremendous desire to please, extraordinary humility -- until pushed too far.

Second, these qualities, though, reveal quite a bit: insecurity, desire for a love we're sure we don't deserve and are not sure we actually have, impatience with ourselves and others who do less than a perfect job, temptation to judge all who do not work as long and hard as we do, etc., etc., etc.

Third, it's not just that our work must be perfect, but our views, as well. It's often difficult to tolerate disagreement and downright humiliating to be caught wrong on a vital issue. For us irritation becomes righteous indignation, and opposition a personal attack. The world's future rests on 'the principle' we alone uphold.

The faith community that birthed and suckled us has an old adage that goes:

In faith unity  
In opinions liberty;  
In all things love.

One day I realized that my perfectionism as it tended toward judgmentalism hardly squared with this passionate profession. Furthermore, a question from the Apostle Paul brought me up short and left me speechless: 'Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls' (*Rom. 14:4*). He even declared, 'The whole law is fulfilled in one word...' and horrors, it wasn't 'perfection.'

It was a kind of revelation when the thought shot through my soul, 'It is not better to be right than to care.' Nothing less than 'amazing grace' assured me that God loves and accepts me -- even when I'm wrong. Do you suppose that such grace is contagious? Maybe it is. You and I had better press close to Jesus and find out. Yours for a quick incubation period.

### **Cry For Help**

That was the article that prompted an arresting plea, which read as follows:

Dear Roy,

I read with considerable interest your article in Leroy's *Restoration Review* this month concerning the perfectionist personality. I really thought you were reading my mind! I could identify with everything you mentioned.

Now talk to me about this 'appointment' for a spiritual check-up -- what scriptures, what other items

did you consult to help you? This perfectionism is really a curse! We can conceal it so rarely. --And yet we want so desperately to be liberated from this problem -- and be like 'other' folks!!

[It is] encouraging to know that someone else has this problem and is willing to share it in writing -- Now we perfectionists are asking you for some slant as to how to rid ourselves of it. -- 'Jim.'

### Response

As soon as I read the letter I sat down and began framing the reply that is offered here and, like the previous article and letter, should be viewed as all in quotes:

Dear 'Jim,'

Thanks for your good letter. With both empathy and sympathy I read your words and your plea. By no means do I intend to convey the impression that I am rid of this demon of 'perfectionism.' But I do believe that a gracious Lord has put it on a leash. Much of the time I am encouraged to see it as a fairly short leash. There are times, though, that I suspect it's made of rubber, or else I'm permitted to substitute a longer one of my own.

This is not a victory shout of one who has come totally to know Christ 'in the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering.' As I say gratefully, 'I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,' I experience the crucifixion as ongoing, rather than a single deed complete, past and done. The old 'I' fights desperately for

breath, and the new 'I' struggles to be free of that clinging, last-gasp corpse.

The precise nature of the 'spiritual check-up' I can't fully recall. Consequently, I must describe it for you as best I can.

**1)** To myself and God I said, 'I don't like being this way. It feels terrible, and if it makes me feel so bad, I know it can't be right. It can't be what You want, and with this spirit I can't be what You want me to be.'

**2)** Further, I confessed, 'This consuming need to be "perfect" is a kind of compulsion, shoving me toward the inevitable conclusion that I must "claim" a perfection that down deep I can't believe I have. Otherwise, this demon will throw me into the abyss of despair, precisely because I can't confidently make the claim.'

**3)** Continuing, I cried, 'I don't like the pressure I put on those I love most, the flawless expectations I harbor, the bitter disappointment I feel when they do not measure up. It seems that the more I love them, the more I demand of them. I don't set this perfect standard for others, making impossible demands of them. Consequently, my relationships with acquaintances are often less turbulent and much freer than with my family. Why do I seem caught in this destructive trap?'

Puzzling over the pressures of the Apostle, I asked, 'Is this not the very impossibility that devastated Paul? Did he not discover that a perfect keeping of the Law was not an option for him, not when he saw beyond the outward ordinance its real intent? Did he not learn that the very attempt to achieve God's acceptance by perfectionism leads to one of these two ends: **a)** self-righteousness in the pretense that one has achieved the

goal, or **b**) despair, in recognizing how far short one continually falls?’

**4)** ‘Do I want to go on this way?’ I asked. My response was ‘No! A million times, No! Furthermore, I can’t go on, even if I wanted to. I cannot play this game of “Let’s Pretend.” Is not this “play-acting” precisely that for which Jesus chided His contemporaries? Was it not settling for an “actor’s” stage role in the midst of history’s living drama?’

**5)** Somewhere down the line I wrestled with such questions as: a) ‘Why am I the way I am?’ b) ‘What is it that I really want to be?’ c) ‘Is there any hope that I can ever know victory?’ d) ‘If so, what is the source of that hope?’ e) ‘How can it lay hold on and envelope me?’

Looking back on this trauma, I see that I have shaped it into a more logical or psychological order than was the case. Biographically the cries came in more turbulent, chaotic fashion, with snatches of light and darkness interpenetrating, seasons of hope and despair overlapping one another.

Nor in the midst of emotional and intellectual turbulence was I asking for academic explanations, but for the presence of a gracious God. Looking backward, I see that having grown up in the Church of Christ (non-instrumental music segment) in a poor social and economic environment, with a passionate work ethic, I was fairly-well programmed to move in the direction I took.

Church and family laid prime stress on the injunction, ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,’ and that I certainly attempted to do. My family believed completely in ‘an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay.’ Not only was this a high ideal, it

was virtually a matter of necessity for survival. On top of it all, I was the oldest surviving child in the family and felt heavy responsibility for my mother, a long-time invalid for a long time, and my two younger brothers and sister.

I do not lay blame on my parents, for I never doubted their love. Nevertheless, I grew up feeling that I had to be good enough at home, in school, at work, everywhere, to be fully accepted. I tried my best to please, never feeling that I had tried hard or long enough. That feeling, deeply embedded, to some degree dogs me till today.

It was in concluding that not only do *I not want* to continue as I am, but that *God* does not want it, that I could dream of a new kind of life. I know that I should have been able to accept the freedom Jesus offers [how that compulsive guilt slips past every armor!], but His simple Gospel of forgiveness and full acceptance of all who would be accepted was too good to be true. I had to come to Jesus by way of Paul.

[Here I spoke of Paul's legalism that made his language meaningful to me when the warm, personal language of Jesus failed. "Justification by faith" was the phrase that grabbed me like forceps and would not let go. When periodically I tried, ignoring Paul, to flee to James and nestle in chapter two, I was inextricably lured by the incredible promise and lashed by the unendurable code till I ventured to look at Paul again.]

[I wrote of the struggle that led me step by step to realize that "justification by faith" covers the totality of life. Whatever dimensions I have missed, I experienced these three: 1) moral, 2) intellectual, and 3) vocational.]

(1) *Moral*. From the beginning I knew I wasn't good enough... or smart enough. I thought that I accepted that truth. I know that I rejoiced in simply being "accepted," having my sins blotted out. I did not yet see the implications for the totality of life, past, present, future, but knew that *morally* I was justified by faith.

(2) *Intellectual*. In W. B. West, Jr.'s, classes I learned that the biblical manuscripts contain grammatical errors. Later I ran into the whole area of textual and literary criticism. I finally had to say, "I don't understand it all, but I know that truth is from You, and I have nothing to fear from it. I will, doubtless, get some things wrong, but my ignorance will not destroy our relation or endanger my security." Only then could I accept the fact that *intellectually* I am "justified by faith," and always will stand in need of such "justification."]

(3) *Vocational*. After the devastating experience of having my chosen vocation destroyed (twice having to start over) I had to say, "Lord, I know that I must be hard of hearing. I thought I knew what You wanted me to be, to do, and I was wrong. Now I must choose again. What if I get it wrong continually? Here I fling myself in mercy on You, doing the best I know, trusting Your accepting grace to embrace me even so." It was a long time coming, but *vocationally* I could finally accept "justification by faith."]

[Letter to 'Jim' continued]

...But I forget. Knowing intellectually does not necessarily mean knowing at the depths of the subconscious, or the bottom of the soul. I have to take time to remember, intentionally go back to those critical

moments in my spiritual pilgrimage, and let God speak anew the word of reassurance.

This to me is what God's People are called on to do regularly. At the Table in the midst of the gathered Family of Faith we 'remember.' We 're-call' the Salvation Deed, and so re-call the living Lord who comes to keep His promised appointment with us. Like Jews about the Passover table, we remember, re-tell, then re-enact the Drama of Deliverance. As it again unfolds it sweeps up into its movement the expectant worshipers. His-Story becomes their story, our story.

My 'spiritual check-up' was not so much collating Scripture texts as returning to my Jacob's Well, Pool of Bethesda, Golgotha's summit, Joseph's empty tomb, Emmaus' glad disclosure. I wanted to relive those most-precious moments when I knew myself lifted out of myself and most-closely united to Him, when I could confess my imperfection and, far from being destroyed, be set free. I wanted to know afresh that healing touch where the weights became wings and worry worship. I wanted once more to say, 'I do give up...to you. Take me Lord and treat me gently, so that I may treat my dear ones, and Yours, the same way.'

It may be that we can never fully return to the bush ablaze or Transfiguration Mount, but by God's grace the bush can come to Moses in a pillar of fire by night, and Peter can live in the afterglow of that holy moment (*2 Pet.* 1:17-18). We can re-call the memories till they glow and grow and split wide open to let the Lord of Life come again to His expectant children.

There is one passage on which I leaned heavily (*Rom.* 6:11). Ironically, rather than assuring me of what God has graciously done and does, it calls on me to do

more. I found it supportive, because Jesus convinced me of God's incredible and unconditional love.

My doubt was/is self-doubt. At least, it comes disguised as self-doubt, and I attack it in two ways. First, I rip the mask off the intruder and reveal it as, indeed, doubt of God. Not of God's love, but of God's power. God can deliver everybody... but me. I am the one case too difficult, too stubborn, too victimized, too something-or-other, even for God to make new. Then I see this doubt as inverted pride, the last refuge of the old self-centered self, fighting furiously to escape death.

I read and re-read the context of that verse. These are 'Christians' to whom Paul writes. He is not getting them ready for baptism, but for resurrection living. So, he has them remember. 'Remember your baptism. By faith you were *joined* to Christ...in His Death...and in His Resurrection! That is what your baptism affirms. Here is the outward form of that inner reality. You were buried. You, the old dead you, were *buried*! You, the new living you, were *raised* with the Living Lord! You really were, and you must tell yourself again and again that this is true.'

My prayer was that I would know ever more fully the reality of the faith I affirm. I want to be alerted to the appearance of that old compulsion, so I take my daughter's sword-thrust as a form of God's gracious judgment, His call to remember. Even so, I do not want to give undue and unhealthy attention to even my spiritual condition. Self-centeredness is the bondage from which I seek release, the very illness of which I would be cured.

Recently I received a letter from a young woman undergoing awesome trial. Struggling with the biblical

concept of 'discipline,' she pleads for help, convinced that she must be extraordinarily self-centered to warrant such pain. Here is something of what I wrote to her:

[Inserted here is a portion of the letter to "Amy," identified by placing it in smaller script with a slight indentation.]

As to the matter of 'dying to self,' there is no doubt that it is Christ's demand and our experience at the beginning of the Christian journey. Yet, it is paradoxically His demand and our experience all along the way... I suspect that your struggle is very much like my own and that of most others. Those who can fully surrender at the beginning are, indeed, few. It's not that our initial surrender is phony or even unacceptable at the time. Most of us simply do not know how utterly to give up and forever after fling ourselves completely on God's mercy. That must in large measure be the reason that the discipline, also, continues with us.....

To one agonizing over a less-than perfect self-surrender I would point to Jesus' patience with all the tormented souls he met. I would also affirm more loudly that all our sins (including and especially our self-centeredness) were nailed on that Cross, and I am to see this one, too, as mine. I am to see it put to death. I don't know how long it can writhe in its death throes. I only know that death is certain, not because I will it, but because he wills it and has pledged it will be so.

Yes, I become impatient. Yes, I badger...I berate...I harangue this guilty, despairing self. I act as prosecuting attorney, presenting a conclusive case that such a hypocrite deserves the full fury of the Court. Then I see him whirl on me, eyes blazing, to ask, 'Who made you Lord God?' 'Who are you to judge the servant of another? Before his own

Master he stands or falls.’ ‘Yours is not the last word. Why do you not hear mine?’

One day it dawned on me that I was more uncharitable toward myself than toward anyone else on earth. The question shot at me, ‘If you found another beating your child over the head, mercilessly, continually, how would you feel? Then how do you think God feels to have one mercilessly, continually, beating His child over the head?’ It was a judgment that seemed to release me. I determined to try to look through Jesus’ eyes—even at me--and certainly, at mine.<sup>61</sup>

When Paul told the Romans, ‘Consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus,’ he knew that here was a ‘discipline’ they very much needed to practice. These are baptized Christians who have not grasped the implications of their baptism, who do not understand what it means to be ‘united with [Christ]’ in His *Death... and Resurrection*. Paul assured them of the *fact* of their union, but knows that it is real *in* them only when they themselves continue to affirm it.

We grow into the image that we steadfastly hold. Whether it is a bad image or good, we become what we dream. Faith is power, even false faith. Faith in Christ, however, keeps us humble as we ‘are transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.’ (2 *Cor.* 3:18).

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<sup>61</sup> On the surface this appears to be but another attempt at salvation by a “law of works.” Words such as “try” and “determine” lend themselves to that conclusion. My only justification is to cry, “God gave me the insights, the wish and the will. From first to last it is God’s grace-gift, for which I am eternally grateful.”

There is a caution I would raise. It is not likely that we lose our self-centeredness by centering on ourselves, even by telling ourselves what a miserable representative of Christ we've turned out to be. If I knew *The Screwtape Letters* well enough, I am sure I could point to a passage dealing with just this matter. We really do have to trust God to accept the unacceptable. That is His promise and our hope.

'Amy,' when things go wrong for us, we are likely to blame ourselves. We may be to blame. We may be partly to blame. We may be to blame not at all. We may be the victim of circumstances. We may at times be the victim of others' sins. It is good to conduct an honest self-examination, but it must be one that includes God's 'amazing grace.' We cannot live even by the law of self-sacrifice--unless it is the Law of His Self-Sacrifice with which we in trust identify.....

The first gift of the Risen Lord is 'Peace!' May His peace be with you and in you and through you is my prayer:

In His Name,  
Roy Key

'Jim,' in my psyche is a little courtroom with a judge. Sometime 'Judge' should be spelled with a capital 'J.' At other times not. There are, in addition, a prosecuting attorney and defense lawyer who do battle for my life. At times one or both of them should begin with a capital. I don't know whether this in part comes from my legalistic background, is an expression of creative imagination, or what. There are times when it is I who play one role, two roles or all three.

My 'spiritual checkup' was a free-flow process that included the internal debate, recalling of Scripture

(particularly *Rom. 3--6*), prayer and remembering those critical stages in my spiritual journey when I was 'surprised by joy' and knew I was justified by faith **1) morally, 2) intellectually** and **3) vocationally**.

Further, I tried to visualize how I would feel to have my child bludgeoned continually. Then I resolved, 'By God's grace and in His power I will quit doing that! I will quit doing it to myself and to those whom I love.' I concluded that my high expectations are in part good, a genuine evidence of care. Yet, my impossible demands are evidence of fear-of-failure equated with some loss of personhood and a broken relationship.

Again I tried to see how God could accept us in our imperfection and affirm that I will open up to drink in that Spirit. I tell myself that impossible expectations are counter-productive, as well as unloving. I try to visualize myself unthreatened, understanding, charitable, grateful for God's acceptance, and finally, a significant channel through which that acceptance flows out to others about me.

I have come to believe that there are some citadels of the soul that are virtually impregnable to frontal assault. Jesus must have thought so, or he would not so often have used the parable to outflank engrained habit and deep-seated prejudice. Consequently, he used a sort of moving-picture language, flashing before his hearers a series of images, trusting the open soul to see, embrace them or be embraced by them, and so be changed. For this reason I conclude that one of our greatest needs, especially those of us who have tried the way of 'the law,' is what I call a 'baptized' or 'sanctified,' imagination. So when Paul says, 'Consider yourselves...', I take it to mean, 'Think of yourselves in this manner...Hold in

your hearts this picture...Remind yourselves of this your true nature...'

My best counsel, 'Jim,' is:

1) Let your baptized imagination serve you in making an appointment with Jesus. Get in a quiet place, close your eyes, and ask him to meet you in the spot where you and he seem closest... at the foot of your chair, your desk, bedside, Communion Table, joined with fellow-worshipers in song or prayer, just over the hillside under your special tree... or wherever.

Be patient till you sense his presence. Then reverently acknowledge him, but before speaking see if first he has something to say to you. After awhile tell him what is most on your mind. Tell him how you feel, what you feel good about, what you feel bad about, what you passionately desire, what you desperately fear. Talk to him about this 'perfectionist' problem and how you want to be rid of it.

Don't try to force a response. Recognize the danger of prayer as monologue, rather than dialogue, and that a forced response is apt to be either wishful or fearful thinking. Take time. If there seems to be no concrete reply, begin walking through the Gospels with Jesus. See him meet and touch the troubled. Be one of them: a distraught father, a helpless cripple, a wondering child, that desperate soul reaching out for only the hem of his garment.

Try to see his eyes turned on you. Listen to hear the tone of his voice. In the spirit of all you know about him as he dealt with others let him now speak to you. Like the two disciples of John, ask, 'Where are you staying?' and go home with him awhile. Or, like Matthew, invite him home with you. Again talk to him

and tell him how you feel. Begin to ask your questions; then be still and wait for the response.

I simply ask you to try this imaginative form of prayer. Test it by everything you know of Scripture, so that you prevent it ever becoming an emotional 'fix' or an exercise in self-hypnosis. For most of us Westerners, though, prayer is largely a rationalistic recitation or shopping-list presentation.

**2)** Utilize your regular prayers as times to seek God earnestly and persistently, asking Him to confirm to your heart that you are loved, accepted in your imperfection and freed of either the perfectionist's theatrical 'claim' or the defeatist's dark despair.

If you have been blessed by your venture in imaginative prayer, then visualize God keeping His promise and answering your cry. See yourself as the recipient of His grace (as both forgiveness and power). Begin the discipline of taking time regularly to 'consider yourself' united with Christ both in his Death and in his Resurrection.

**3)** Go back in your own spiritual journey to those priceless, rapturous moments when you did accept God's 'amazing grace.' Re-call them. Re-live them. Remember what you did and said, how you felt, the wonder-full days following. 'Repent [re-think] and do again the first works' (*Rev. 2:5*). There the flame of a grateful love may again leap high. I see this procedure as a recurring step fruitfully undertaken at home, among friends and associates, as well.

**4)** Be alert (not obsessed, just alert) to your progress. Thank God for and celebrate those times when you serve as carrier of His grace to yourself, to your family, to strangers. Praise Him for keeping His promise

in you, as well as to you. At those moments of failure thank God for making you aware of them. Use them not as reasons for self-flagellation, but for re-assessment, re-thinking, re-adjustment.

We never want to take failure casually. However, that is not the true perfectionist's temptation. The doctrinal perfectionist is not the genuine article, but simply a theatrical 'actor.' He/She is into the game of 'Let's Pretend.' They take neither Sin nor the Law seriously, but reduce them to their own possibilities. In the end they pick and choose, dividing up 'essentials' and 'incidentals' along sectarian lines, rather than following Jesus' rank and order. They escape despair by perfectionist pretense.

The true 'perfectionists' are the emotional or existential perfectionists. No matter whether they are legalists or not, they know they fall short of God's requirements. They know that 'not the labor of my hands can fulfill the law's demands.' They can escape despair only by accepting their acceptance. Such is trust or faith, and God gives it to us who find ourselves laid hold on by the love, the mercy, the power streaming from Calvary.

There is a sense, therefore, in which even faith 'is not our own doing, but is the gift of God' (*Eph.* 2:8). Yet, so far as faith is surrender-in-trust-to or self-identification-with the dying, buried, risen, reigning, nurturing Lord, it is saying 'Yes' to our welcoming God. It is 'No' to the old self-centered self and 'Yes' to the new Christ-centered self, resulting in a re-orientation of the personality.

Our trust in God is trust in God's integrity, trust in God's promises, trust in God's power – not simply

outside and beyond us, but inside us, making us into the image of His Son. This I remember. This I re-call. This I envision as occurring within me and all my sisters and brothers who earnestly desire the coming of our Lord, not only at the end of history, but in the very midst of it ...to us. Not because of our imperfection, but despite it.

*Not imperfection, but self-sufficiency, shuts that small but vital opening through which the power of God does surely surge.*

This response may be far more than ever you expected or wanted, but you know how we ‘perfectionists’ are. We want to give more than is asked and do better than our best. Still, those of us who have known God’s incredible mercy do come to poke fun at ourselves and permit others to do so, as well. Perhaps, even so small a pin prick prevents the Enemy from taking undue comfort in our still-flawed selves.

God bless, comfort, nurture, disturb and pour you out in His service.

Yours and His,  
Roy Key

These letters are shared in the hope that they may be of assistance at least to a few. Who knows how wide-spread the problem of “perfectionism” is, and how much help we may offer to one another? Does not God often answer our prayers by sending us to minister one to another?

The names, of course, are pseudonyms. No matter; the real ones were long ago forgotten .

## AFTERWORD

In the Family of God I wish you more than an “in-law” relationship. Consequently, I hope that you have traveled with me all the way to the end. I hope that you were aggravated... a bit. But not too much. For, my deeper hope is that you were not so much aggravated as stimulated... to think, to re-think, to study, to pray, to praise God as Christ gently raises the windows of your soul to let fresh winds of the Spirit blow in. As he opens the blinds of your heart to let the Light shine.

One day as I held our little girl she looked up and asked, “Is God someone that I would like to sit in His lap and put my arms around His neck?” I could have said, “Dear, God doesn’t have a lap nor a neck. God is Spirit, and as we think of Him we must not fall into the fallacy of anthropomorphism.” I paused a moment, pulled her close and whispered, “Yes.” And then we sat there quietly, we three, she and I together, nestled in the lap of God.

I want us to be able to think and “think again.”<sup>62</sup> To revel in “the Good News” and probe what it means for our purpose in the world and our daily routine. But, beyond all that, I want us to rejoice in our calling, be secure in our relationships, just to sit awhile and nestle in the lap of God. Then get up expectantly to go out and share God’s Great Creative Adventure of making all persons one and all things new.

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<sup>62</sup> Literal meaning of “repentance.”

I wish you peace, but not too much.  
I wish you joy without limit.  
I wish you life without end.  
I wish you Christ.

I wish you nothing less than *God*:  
Father,  
Son  
and Holy Spirit.

Amen. †

## APPRECIATION

My thanks are again extended to my brothers, Harold and Raymond, who have kept me from making factual and textual blunders of which we would all be ashamed. For all those that remain I alone am responsible.

How humbling and heartening it is to realize that even *literarily* I must now and forever be “justified by grace through faith.”

“Thank you” is not nearly enough to say to Evelyn, who is, indeed, “the better half,” and, it seems, should “merit” at least a smidgen for the aggravation she endures and support she gives as I labor with these lines.