

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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Churches of God

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Small islands dot the coastline of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Islands, pieces of land completely surrounded by water, can represent church groups surrounded by the raging sea of the world. In this sense, the church becomes a refuge from the chaos produced by sinful mankind. What a tragedy it is, then, when once-peaceful congregations are torn by rumor, gossip, jealousy, and offense! However, we can be thankful that God provides instruction on how to deal with such problems.

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The Tenth Commandment

In 1977, my wife and I attended a “Positive Thinking Rally” in Charlotte, North Carolina, that featured such famous motivational speakers as Paul Harvey, Art Linkletter, Robert Schuler, Ira Hayes, and the man considered by many as the granddaddy of them all, Earl Nightingale.

After one or two speakers, it became apparent that the “get” principle was being impressed on the forefront of people’s minds. Even though some speakers suggested that the reason for great profits was to be able to share more, they made financial success an end in itself. Always lurking in the background of their presentations was to get success by taking advantage of human nature and of people’s desire to conform, to keep up with the Joneses, or simply to have more and better attractive things. Yet, one of the speakers, Ira Hayes, showed clearly that a major key to success in business is not to worry about conforming to one’s competition but being distinctively different.

Marketers have thoroughly studied human nature’s desire to conform so that they will be considered to be at the same level as everyone else in a social status they admire. This desire is stimulated by constant urgings from marketers to buy what everybody else—obviously—already has, so that one does not seem “backward,” unsophisticated, a nerd in their peers’ eyes. In the face of this societal pressure, not to compete for the same

material things the neighbor already has makes a person appear to be unambitious and odd.

Sometimes it seems to be a paradox, a contradiction, that God says He wishes above all things that we prosper and be in good health, and that many of God’s servants, especially in the Old Testament, have been wealthy; yet He also tells us that it is better to give than to receive and that the accumulation of things is not to be a major goal. Overall, God teaches that the things prosperity makes it possible for a person to have are a means to an end and not the end in themselves. He teaches us that “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15). Others may make it life’s goal to have them, but we must not.

The tenth commandment in Deuteronomy 5:21 reads, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife; and you shall not desire your neighbor’s house, his field, his manservant, his ox, his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.” *Covet* means “to desire” or “to take delight in beyond God’s acceptable bounds.” It indicates “to long after a property that belongs to another in order to enjoy it.” It is covetousness to allow oneself to indulge in thoughts that lead to actions named in the other nine commandments. They are grasping thoughts that lead to grasping deeds.

Coveting normally arises from two sources. It

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often begins with a perception of beauty in a thing desirable to possess. It also arises from a persistent inclination for something more abstract like a desire for power. The first is generally stimulated from without, the second generally from within. Both are equally bad.

One commentator stated that he believed all public crime would cease if just this one law were kept. Another said that every sin against one's neighbor, whether of word or deed, springs from the breaking of this commandment. James 1:14-15 seems to agree: "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death."

To the Heart of the Matter

In the Exodus 20:17 version of the commandment, the word "house" implies household. Subsequently, six other items are listed so that we clearly understand that "household" is meant. In Deuteronomy 5, "wife" is moved to first position as the very crown of one's possessions, and "field" is inserted because earlier, when God gave the Exodus version, fields were of no concern to pilgrims who possessed no land. Thus, between the two wordings God provides a seven-fold safeguard of other people's interests, revealing the underlying concept of outgoing concern.

In this commandment, we step from the outer world of word and deed into the secret place where all good and evil begins: the heart. The inner life actually determines a person's destiny, as the desires of a person's life are held and nurtured there.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:27-28: "You have heard it said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." The Greek word translated as "looks" implies intent or special contemplation. The word underneath "lust" means "to set one's heart upon" or "to long for." Taken together, they make Jesus' instruction obvious.

Evidence from other portions of God's Word shows that it is not wrong to desire a husband or wife lawfully, but it is most definitely wrong when the one desired is legitimately beyond the reach of the admirer. How often does such admiration merge into a desire to possess and thus break the commandment? Considering the national statistics on divorce, this must happen frequently.

Jesus continues in Matthew 5:29-30:

And if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

The Jews of Jesus' time perceived adultery as a kind of theft. This is not entirely wrong, but in this context, Jesus' emphasis is on moral purity: Ruin awaits those who are unchaste, even in thought.

Perhaps nowhere in Scripture is the inwardness of Christ's teaching as evident as with this commandment—inward in the sense that within is where sin begins and also where change must take place. It identifies where the problem resides. Christ carries impurity back beyond the lustful act to the first touch of the hands to the look of the eyes—and beyond these, to the first inception of desire. The Christian must "amputate" the desire so that the sin never becomes an act. We will remain pure and so will the object of our desire.

God gave us the wonderful gift of imagination, but if fed dirt by the eye, the imagination will be filthy. Sin begins with our allowing the imagination to dwell on what it should not. What feeds the imagination is so very important to moral purity and thinking and therefore to sin. Philippians 4:8 provides excellent insight:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

The advice is clear: We must stop feeding our imagination dirt. We have to deal radically with sin! The purpose of this discipline is enrichment of life. The person who is condemned here is the one who deliberately uses his eyes and mind to awaken his lust so that desire is stimulated.

It is hard enough to avoid lusting after natural things, but this world deliberately designs many things to spark wrong desires in us. If certain books, pictures, magazines, places, activities, or people cause temptation, they must be avoided regardless of the cost. Avoiding sin is that important!

It Is Deliberately Pumped Into Us

We need to see where we stand. Since the turn of the twentieth century, life has sped up. We are constantly urged to rush to make more money, to have more things, and to have a good time. We are even encouraged to hurry to have more time so that we can get everything out of life. On every side, we are taught to compete with our neighbors for honors or material advancement. We are stimulated through advertising to crave luxuries that were unknown a generation ago. So often, the marketers who persuade us are promoting an image through verbal gimmicks such as "You owe it to yourself!"; "Wouldn't you rather have a Buick?"; "Move up to Chrysler!"; and "You deserve a break today!"

Earl Nightingale stated in his lecture, “The Protestant work ethic has been so successful, it has spawned advertising and monthly payments in order to consume what it produces.” The Protestant churches as a whole approached the Bible in a manner different from the Catholic Church. Seeing principles of material success in it, they openly proclaimed them from their pulpits. However, people did not grasp the whole picture of what the Bible actually teaches, but what they did understand produced the society we have been born into and caught up in.

God says in Jeremiah 5:1, “Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem; see now and know; and seek in her open places if you can find a man, if there is anyone who executes judgment, who seeks the truth, and I will pardon her.” This begins a passage in which the prophet is dispatched to find a righteous person in the city. Jeremiah 6:10-11, 13-15 reveals the dismal results of his search:

“To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Indeed their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot give heed. Behold the word of the LORD is a reproach to them; therefore I am full of the fury of the LORD. I am weary of holding it in. I will pour it out on the children outside, and on the assembly of young men together; for even the husband shall be taken with the wife, the aged with him who is full of days. . . . Because from the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even to the priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the hurt of My people saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ When there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time I punish them, they shall be cast down,” says the LORD.

God indicts the entire nation for its covetousness. A major reason why coveting is so dangerous is shown by our credit system, which is based on the premise of possessing something before one is actually able to afford it.

In this profit-producing scheme, advertising is credit’s companion. The marketer’s purpose is to speed up the business, possession, and profit cycle. However, in reality over the long haul, credit actually slows things down and makes items more expensive because the credit must be paid for through interest in addition to the item’s original price. It also creates greater debt, enslaving the debtor to the creditor. This same principle is at work in every other unlawful act of which coveting is a part.

Who will listen to this reality? Through America’s almost insanely massive and ever-growing indebtedness, God is demonstrating that people simply will not heed either sound human or divine advice because their minds are driven by whatever they desire to have right now. It has a grip on the heart so strong that nothing yet has been able to break it.

This tenacious hold is why tithing comes as such a shock when people learn that God requires it. Many are living way over their heads. When they learn of tithing, the penalty for earlier stealing from God greatly influences current spending. They must then learn to pay in adversity, sacrificing as they go on in obedience.

The Essence of Covetousness

Isaiah 56:10-12 says:

His watchmen are blind, they are all ignorant; they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber. Yes, they are greedy dogs which never have enough. And they are shepherds who cannot understand; they all look to their own way, every one for his own gain, from his own territory. “Come,” one says, “I will bring wine, and we will fill ourselves with intoxicating drink; tomorrow will be as today, and much more abundant.”

Does this nation not sound like America? In verse 9, God calls for the nations to devour His people. Its leaders are blind to the nation’s real needs because they are thinking of their lusts instead of speaking out and acting on issues of morality. They blindly plunge on, proclaiming that it will be better tomorrow!

Colossians 3:5 counsels us, “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth; fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” The Greek word underlying “covetousness” is *pleonexia*, which means “the desire to have more.” This is among the ugliest of sins because it involves idolatry as well as its effects on others. The Greeks defined it as “the insatiable desire to have what rightfully belongs to others.” It is further described as “ruthless self-seeking,” the kind of attitude that the arrogant and callous person has, assuming that others and their things exist for his own benefit.

The desire for more money can lead to theft; the desire for more prestige, to evil ambition; the desire for more power, to tyranny; the desire for a person’s body, to fornication and adultery. Paul identifies covetousness as idolatry because, in the place of God, it puts self-interest for illicit things. A man sets up an idol in his heart because he desires to get something from it. So he serves it to get that something rather than to obey God’s commandment. That, very simply put, is idolatry.

The essence of idolatry is to get for the self in defiance of God. However, we have to give ourselves to God if we want to overcome illicit desires. Paul says to “mortify” (KJV) or “put to death” (NKJV) whatever is sinful. That does not mean to practice ascetic self-discipline—it means to kill. The Christian must kill self-centeredness. In his life, he must make a radical transformation, a shift of the center of his life. It is the same principle as described earlier by

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Matthew 5:29. Everything that keeps a person from fully obeying God and surrendering to Jesus Christ must be surgically excised from his conduct. The tenth commandment, then, has a function similar to the first. They both act as governors, controlling whether we keep the others.

James 1:13-15 reveals a fundamental truth:

Let no man say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

This pattern of producing sin began in the Garden of Eden when Satan tempted Adam and Eve by stimulating their desire for the forbidden fruit. From that small beginning, sin entered and blossomed. It is easily seen that every problem produced by immorality, whether individual or national, is caused by allowing temptation to develop into sin. Sin is illicit desire brought to fruition, and everybody from peasant to king is subject to wrong desires.

From the beginning of time, it seems to have been a human instinct to blame others for our sins, just as Adam and Eve did in the Garden. James sternly rebukes that view. God does not cause sin and neither do things. Sin would be helpless if there were nothing in man to which it could appeal. Sin’s appeal is to human nature’s self-centeredness, which then builds through our desires. If a man desires long enough and intensely enough, the consequence—action—is inevitable.

It is because we desire our own way that we dishonor our parents and murder; because we desire a thing, we steal; because we desire being well thought of, we lie. Illicit desire can be nourished, stifled, or by the grace of God, eliminated. If one gives himself to Christ by submitting entirely to God, there is little or no time or place left for evil desire.

The tenth commandment pierces through surface Christianity, truly revealing whether a person has surrendered his will to God or not. The spiritual requirements for keeping this commandment are in some ways more rigid than any other because they pierce right through to the thoughts.

Where Is Its Generator?

Jesus teaches in Mark 4:19, “The cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires [lusts, *KJV*] for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.” A simple illustration helps understand this statement: A desire-driven “window shopping” for things to do in order to be “busy”—filling our time with meaningless, self-centered, carnal activities—crowds out God’s Word. When we elect to do this, we risk many spiritual dangers.

When we covet carnal activities or material things, we serve them. If we give our time, energy, and money to them to the extent that we leave only the barest minimum of those things for God, we are practicing idolatry. It may reveal itself in us through a fear that, if we give ourselves to God, we will have nothing for ourselves. We live as if life in God cannot be full enough to make up for the loss of other things.

Isaiah 2:6-9 vividly describes a people busy pleasing themselves:

For You have forsaken Your people, the house of Jacob, because they are filled with eastern ways; they are soothsayers like the Philistines, and they are pleased with the children of foreigners. Their land is also full of silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is also full of horses, and there is no end to their chariots. Their land is also full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made. People bow down, and each man humbles himself [before his idol]; therefore do not forgive them.

Portrayed here is an entire nation devoted to getting, much like our modern world. The American motto seems to be, “The chief end of man is to glorify prosperity and enjoy it forever.” We worship—we serve—what we make. Another facet of this is that potential fruits of material success are self-confidence and pride, which to the successful mind subtly makes God unnecessary. But since all men must have a god, and a righteous God asks awkward questions as to how the success was attained, such people turn to a more amenable god. They worship their own success, secularism, the confidence of men in their own powers. The quest for material wealth thus produces a powerful need to assimilate to the world.

Jesus, in Mark 7:20-23, provides clear insight as to the location of the generator of man’s drive to possess:

What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornication, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.

Notice especially what He lists first, as it is the generator that leads to the other sins. His instruction thus also points out where the other sins can be stopped. A person’s evil thoughts do not exist because of brainlessness, but because of confusion of values and lack of concern for godly spiritual truth, leading to careless, shoddy moral choices.

Paul adds in Romans 7:7: “What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not

(continued on page 13)

ready answer

“Be ready always to give an answer . . .” I Peter 3:15

Islands and Offenses

“Give no offense
neither to the Jew or
to the Greeks or to the
church of God.”
—*I Corinthians 10:32*

I am fascinated by islands! Recently, I was sitting at a local beach on a beautiful day, and as I sat there in the early winter sunshine, I gazed at all the different islands in the waters of the Georgia Strait, which separates Vancouver Island from the Canadian mainland.

Straight ahead to the north, I could see the beautiful, green Lasqueti Island, with the vast bulk of Texada Island towering behind it. To the northwest, I could see the relatively flat Denman Island, twinned with the lovely escarpment of Hornby Island. To the southwest, the tip of Gabriola Island and a few other small islands were visible off the port city of Nanaimo. As well as all these inhabited islands, lots of smaller, uninhabited islands and rocks dot our local coastline. Of course, I was viewing all of these islands from another island—the one on which we live—Vancouver Island, which is a decent-sized island, 290 miles long by about 50 miles wide at its widest point.

The globe features some huge islands: Australia and Greenland come to mind. My wife and I were born and raised on one of the British Isles. In the spring of 2007, we visited the stunningly beautiful, verdant, volcanic island of Sao Miguel in the Azores in the Atlantic Ocean, 1,000 miles from its home country of Portugal. Earlier this year, we visited another lovely Portuguese island, Madeira, which is actually closer to West Africa than it is to its mother country. In recent years we have also been blessed with opportunities to visit two Bahamian islands and two in the Caribbean group.

But enough of reverie! Just what *is* an island? It is, as we all know, a body of land surrounded by water. What benefit does an island give, if any? It gives home and refuge to many species of birds and animals. It is always amazing to find bear, deer, and smaller mammals on remote Canadian Pacific islands. How did they or their ancestors get there? How far did they have to swim to reach them?

Islands give homes and safe haven to human beings too. Although we frequently complain about ferry prices and services, most island dwellers love the relative peace and seclusion of island life. Men who declined to fight in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and '70s took refuge on some hard-to-get-to islands, and many of them enjoyed the life there so much that they stayed after the conflict ended.

As I sat and gazed at those lovely islands basking in the winter sunshine, surrounded by billions of gallons of saltwater, my mind began to think of them symbolically. To my mind, these islands represented church of God congregations. The smaller islands and rocks represented individual church members or small family groups meeting on their own each Sabbath day. The ocean surrounding them represented Satan's world that encircles God's oh-so-vulnerable people.

In the same way as a physical island gives some refuge and protection to birds, animals, and people, our church congregations do something similar for church members. We should feel a certain level of safety in our church of God congregations. In many—if not most—things, we should have a certain level of unity of opinion. Further, because of the teachings of God's Word, we should feel safe from gossip, criticism, and offense.

Let us home in on the subject of offense. We will explore a couple of scriptures warning us against it, as well as a couple that give us instructions for what to do when faced with it.

Give No Offense!

We will start with what is perhaps the best-known scripture on this topic: "Give no offense neither to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God" (I Corinthians 10:32). Notice that the apostle Paul is writing to church members, advising them not to offend fellow church members!

And what did Jesus say on the subject?

Then [in the end time] they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. (Matthew 24:9-10)

He tells us of a future time when people will offend each other—to the point of betrayal! What else does our Savior tell us about offenses?

Then He said to the disciples, "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones." (Luke 17:1-2)

Who are "these little ones"? Usually, this term would refer to children and to the newer members and attendees of God's church. But the term might also refer to those who perhaps tend to be a little more sensitive than most.

Handling Offenses

So, if Jesus says that it is impossible that no offenses should come, then how should we handle those offenses when they *do* come?

First, please keep in mind that, no matter which side of the fence we are on—whether we are the offended or the offender—it will not be easy. Solomon writes in Proverbs 18:19, "A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a castle."

What should we do if a fellow church member offends us? Should we immediately go running to the local minister and demand that the offender be disfellowshipped? Of course not! Here is what we are to do. We are to use Jesus Christ's four-step plan, which He gives us in Matthew 18:15-17!

Certainly, this may not be the most pleasant way of resolving the problem. It would be much easier to just give it to the minister and let him resolve it. But this is the method that Jesus commands His brothers and sisters to use. We will run through this procedure in some detail and break it down verse-by-verse.

Step One: Speak Privately to the Offender

Jesus advises: "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother" (Matthew 18:15). Mark well that Jesus says, "If your brother *sins* against you." The Greek word for "sins" is *hamartano*, which can also be translated as "trespass," "commit a fault," or "offend."

Hamartano can also imply the making of a mistake, and this is important to note. The offense might be the result of an innocent mistake by the offender—or the offended person might be mistaken in feeling offended. The discovery of a mistake or misunderstanding by either party can come out in Step Number One, the private communication between the offending and the offended parties.

Please notice that Jesus wants us to resolve such problems at the simplest possible level, if at all possible, before taking it to other people and definitely before taking it to the ministry. It should almost go without saying that we must pray about it in advance. If it is a major problem, we might also want to fast about it in order to draw close to God.

But what if the offender will not discuss the problem in a reasonable manner? What if he will not admit that he has done anything offensive? And worst case, what if he "blows a gasket" and yells at us for even bringing

it to him—even in this proper, Christ-sanctioned way?
Then we must go on to the next step.

Step Two: Get a Second Opinion!

Jesus continues, “But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established’” (Matthew 18:16). Jesus quotes this principle of appropriate judgment from Deuteronomy 19:15.

How do we go about this? We find another church member, or two if necessary, and we ask them to become involved. They should be members who are not gossip-mongers and whose word is reliable. An unbiased person is best in many ways. However, on the other hand, it is wise to have a person who to some extent agrees about the offense. Perhaps he has been offended in a similar way by the same offender in the past.

This is where it can become tricky. Be very careful! Do not be hasty! It should not be our intention to start a war over this. Nor do we want to split the “protective island” of our congregation into two opposing camps. Neither do we want to be accused of gossip.

At the very beginning of the first step, we should have advised the offender that we were bringing this to him in accordance with Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18. If Step Number One does not work, then we should tell him again that, according to Jesus’ command, we need to take it to Step Number Two, and that we wish to involve another person or persons. Be gentle! Be diplomatic!

Now, what if the offender refuses to resolve the problem even when we, the offended, are backed by our “two witnesses”? That is when we must involve “the church.”

Step Three: Tell It to the Church

In Matthew 18:17, Jesus counsels, “And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church.” Does this mean that we are then free to go to all the other church members and tell them all of the offender’s infraction? No, of course not! Doing such a thing would likely precipitate an unpleasant and unnecessary split in the congregation.

It is interesting to note that, at the time that Jesus gave these instructions to the disciples, the church per se did not yet exist! His disciples were, of course, the nucleus of His future church. Yet, even they sometimes had jealousies and disagreements between themselves—yes, even after the coming of the Holy Spirit. We see a few examples of these disagreements in the gospel accounts and the epistles.

The idea that Jesus was getting at here anticipated the establishment of His church and its leadership. It is to that leadership—the church ministry—that the offended person is to go in the event of the failure of

Step Number Two.

So Step Number Three is the appropriate time for the ministry to become involved. Again, we must avoid the temptation to jump the gun by trying to involve the ministry before we have completed the first two steps.

Moreover, we should not use the involvement of the ministry as a threat! Doing so will almost certainly inflame the problem. It is vital that we also understand that there are no absolute guarantees that the involvement of the ministry will definitely resolve the problem. Jesus’ words in the second half of verse 17 show this possibility clearly. The offending member might not recognize the authority or experience of the minister who is brought in to intervene, or he may adamantly refuse to admit that he did anything wrong. Whatever the reason, there is still the possibility that Step Number Three might also fail. If it does, then we go on to Step Number Four.

Step Four: The Dreaded “Heathen or Tax Collector” Phase

Continuing in verse 17, Jesus says finally, “But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.”

If the problem gets this far, and assuming from the beginning that our case is a fair and valid one, we are within our rights at this point to treat the offender as the Jews of Jesus’ time would have treated the most despised people, both of their own people (the tax collectors) and of the Gentiles (the heathen).

Jesus implies that, if negotiations fail even after the involvement of “the church” (the ministry), then the offender’s unwillingness might cause him to be officially treated henceforth by the church and its leadership as a non-member—maybe even to the point of disfellowshipment or even *marking*. The apostle Paul comments on this in Romans 16:17-18:

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

Paul says here that the church leadership is to “note” those who cause offenses. In the King James Version, the term “note those” is given as “mark those.” Paul is telling church leaders to mark, or name before the church, those who cause division or offense.

“Marking” is the extreme form of disfellowshipment from the church. If a person is disfellowshipped, it is done privately. But if he is “marked,” he has done something so serious that it must be announced to the entire congregation. This illustrates what a serious sin the giving of offense can be if not properly resolved.

(continued on page 14)

Who the Two Witnesses

Who are the Two Witnesses? Looking at Revelation 11 in an essentially literal way, we in God's church have always understood them to be two individuals, two human servants of God. Others, however, see the Two Witnesses not as individuals at all. Believe it or not, they see them as concepts or as two corporate bodies.

For example, there are groups that maintain that the Two Witnesses are Israel—God's Old Testament people—and the church—His New Testament people. Others think that the Two Witnesses are the New Testament and the Old Testament. This belief is not an uncommon view at all in the world of prophetic interpretation. And by the two testaments they mean the two collections of books—the collection of inspired, canonized writings of the Old and New Testaments.

There is no way at the present time to know who the Two Witnesses are—they have not yet been revealed—but we can know who they are not. We can determine definitively that they are *not* the Old and the New Testaments, and they are not for very important reasons.

ANTHROPOMORPHIC LANGUAGE

To begin, we need to set the stage by seeing what God has already revealed about His Two Witnesses in the pages of Scripture:

“And I will give authority to my two witnesses to proclaim the message, clothed in sackcloth for twelve hundred and sixty days.”

These are the two olives trees and the two lampstands which stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire issues from their mouth and consumes their enemies. Indeed, if anyone should try to hurt them, this is the way in which he will certainly meet his death. These witnesses have power to shut up the sky and stop any rain from falling during the time of their preaching. Moreover, they have power to turn the waters into blood, and to strike the earth with any plague as often as they wish.

Then, when their work of witness is complete, the animal will come up out of the pit and go to war with them. It will conquer and kill them, and their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is called by those with spiritual understanding, “Sodom” and “Egypt”—the very place where their Lord himself was crucified. For three and a half days men from all peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze upon their bodies and will not allow them to be buried. Then the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will hold celebrations and send one another presents, because these two prophets had brought such misery to the inhabitants of the earth.

But after three and a half days the Spirit of life from God entered them and they stood upright on their feet. This struck terror into the hearts of those who were watching them, and they heard a tremendous voice speaking to these two from Heaven, saying,

“Come up here!”

And they went up to Heaven in a cloud in full view of their enemies. (Revelation 11:3-12, *The New Testament in Modern English* by J.B. Phillips)

Notice the anthropomorphic language—all the descriptions of human traits and behaviors—of this passage. In verse 3, for instance, the Two Witnesses are clothed in sackcloth. How could this apply to two parts of a book? Most of our Bibles are “clothed,” if you will, in leather bindings or cardboard and cloth covers. It takes quite a bit of mental gymnastics to see how one can fit this type of terminology into the idea of the Two Witnesses being the two books of the Old and New Testaments. A person must symbolize away nearly the entire description of them.

Also notice verse 6: “They have power . . . to strike the earth with any plague as often as they wish.” In other words, these Two Witnesses have the power of volition, or will. They can make decisions, and they can execute them within the scope of the power God has given them. The Old and New Testaments are not animate beings with

Are NOT

minds of their own, and as such, those two collections of books cannot express volition. They cannot make decisions, nor can they execute decisions in this sense.

In verse 7, the Two Witnesses die, and they are described as having bodies that lie in the streets of Jerusalem. Admittedly, we can refer symbolically to the death of an idea. We can describe the end of an era as a kind of death and so forth. However, death in this passage does not appear to be metaphoric because God speaks of their bodies lying in the street and remaining unburied. This type of language is not amenable at all to understanding the Two Witnesses as the Old and New Testaments.

Then notice verse 11: “The breath of life from God came into them” (*The New Testament* by Richmond Lattimore). Are there any known instances of God breathing life into books? The idea of them being the Old and New Testament becomes even more ridiculous when we realize that the Two Witnesses then stand on their feet—this is a real resurrection—and they are translated to heaven!

In verse 10, John actually uses the word “prophets.” In Greek, it is the word *prophētēs* (Strong’s 4396), which appears about eighty times in Scripture. This word is always rendered in the King James Version as “prophet” or “prophets.” For instance, Jesus uses the word in Matthew 13:57: “A prophet is not without honor except in his own country.” There is not one instance where this Greek word refers to the Scriptures; it always refers to a person or to people.

Let us not belabor the point. A careful textual analysis makes it clear that the preponderance of the language of this passage points to the Two Witnesses being individuals, not collections of books.

ADDITIONAL PROOFS

A great deal of other evidence exists as well. For example, Revelation 11:3 tells us that God empowers His Two Witnesses for a limited period of time, 1,260 days. But does God ever set a time limit on the power of His Scriptures? God does not, in fact, set a time limit on the power that He gives His Word. Notice Isaiah 55:10-11:

For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

God is saying through an analogy here that, throughout the span of history—or as Solomon would say, “under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:3, 9, 14, etc.)—rain has always worked to produce food for mankind. In like manner throughout that same span of time, throughout all of history under the sun, God’s Word has been effective to carry out His purpose. Isaiah 55 places no limitation of 1,260 days or any other. Therefore, Revelation 11:3 cannot refer to a limited period of time when God empowers the Old and New Testaments to be effective because God’s Word is always effective.

As decisive as some of these points might be, still two other very important reasons militate against interpreting the Two Witnesses as the two Testaments. One of these factors is just this: There is no Old Testament, and there is no New Testament.

This statement requires some explanation. Nowhere in His revelation to mankind does God describe an Old and a New Testament. He never says that He divides His Scriptures—His written Word—into two parts, one old and the other one new. Rather, throughout the Scriptures, He refers to His Scriptures as just that—*the Scriptures, the truth, His Word*. It is a single, unified, and coherent revelation to mankind.

Our translations, however, are built around the concept of two Testaments. It is an arrangement that we have grown up with. But it is a false, unbiblical idea, and we need to be careful that, in using this terminology—and we use it all the time—we do not fall for what is one of the major lies of Catholicism. Theologians call this concept *supersessionism*. We probably already have a good idea of what it is because we use the verb “supersede” quite frequently.

Supersessionism is a theological term that means that

prophecy watch *Who the Two Witnesses Are NOT*

the writings that we call the New Testament supersede—that is, have replaced, have been added—to those of the Old Testament. A so-called “father” of the Roman Catholic Church, Tertullian, first expressed this idea in the second century AD, coining in Latin the terms “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” (By the way, he was also the person who coined the term “trinity.”)

Tertullian wrote, “This may be understood to be the divine word which is doubly edged with the two testaments of the law and of the gospel.” Observe what this cleric, a worldly, Neo-Platonist philosopher—who knew almost nothing of God’s revealed truth—did: Without authority, he divided God’s Word into two parts—one of law and one of gospel.

So was born the lie that the false church has foisted on this world ever since: that the writings of the New Testament replace those of the Old Testament, and thus that law is replaced by grace. This concept became enshrined in the various translations of the Catholic Bible, for instance, in the Vulgate. Later on, as if not daring to question it, Protestantism quietly retained it. Protestants simply accepted it and never really questioned the concept at all. To this day, this particular lie is alive and kicking as part of “dispensationalism.”

The concept of an Old Testament as distinct from the New is not scriptural, yet it has served errant theologians and commentators for centuries. Some people, for instance, think of the Old Testament as “done away,” or at least of very limited value. Others actually distinguish between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament! Herbert W. Armstrong used to tell a story about the lady who just did not like the God of the Old Testament because He was too harsh.

The concept of two distinct collections of Scriptures fits well into the dispensationalist belief that the law of God has been done away, having been replaced by grace. We know, of course, that it has not (Matthew 5:17-18; Romans 3:31).

GOD’S PATTERN

Indeed, the term “New Testament” is used only six times in the King James Version (Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20, I Corinthians 11:25, II Corinthians 3:6, and Hebrews 9:15). But in every one of those six occasions, the Greek words mean “New Covenant,” and all or nearly all of the modern versions of the Bible properly translate it so. These passages refer to the New Covenant that God has made with His called-out ones, not to a collection of books that we have mistakenly called the “New Testament.”

Further, the term “Old Testament” appears only once in the King James Version (II Corinthians 3:14). Again, all modern translations render it as “Old Covenant,” not “Old Testament.” This scripture does not

refer to a collection of books any more than the six “New Covenant” citations do.

Properly translated, there is absolutely no indication that the terms Old and New Testament refer to collections of inspired books in God’s Word. God’s revelation to man is single; it is not divided. There is one revelation, one inspired Word, one truth. And given the fact that God’s pattern consistently expressed throughout His Word is to treat the Scriptures as a unified whole, there is no support at all for the idea that He refers to the so-called Old and New Testaments as the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11. That would be inconsistent with His pattern.

Another point finishes off this fallacious argument that the Two Witnesses are the two Testaments, and it may be the most conclusive one. It can be called “the pattern of the executor.” Admittedly, we can say that God’s Word is powerful and does great things, and we would be correct in saying so. However, when God does a work, either He does it, or He empowers some man to do it for Him or on His behalf.

So it was that Christ stilled the waters; Noah built the Ark; or Elijah prayed and the rains ceased, and then a little while later Elijah prayed and it rained. The pattern is that God executes His work through an agent, an executor, a person whom He has called to do the work. Thus, God gets His work done either by doing it Himself or empowering a man to do it.

The Scriptures, though, do not in themselves execute God’s Work. So it is that the apostle Paul, in Romans 10:13-15, answers those who argue that the Two Witnesses are the Old and New Testaments. He is speaking about Israel:

For “whoever calls upon the name of the LORD shall be saved.” How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?

In Revelation 11:3, we see that this is exactly what God does. He tells us there that He will send His ministers, His preachers, His prophets, to proclaim His message. Paul continues in verse 15: “As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!’” The original of this, Isaiah 52:7, reads: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’”

Those will indeed be welcome words to anyone who has ears to hear the message that will be preached by God’s coming Two Witnesses.

—Charles Whitaker

personal *The Tenth Commandment*

(continued from page 6)

have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.” Some of God’s laws are self-evident even to the natural mind, but only God can tell us that it is *absolutely* wrong to lust. By contrast, at the Positive Thinking Rally, a major theme was “You can have whatever you want, if you only make the effort.”

This commandment, then, deals with attitude and motivation. Even if an individual secretly rejects God’s standard and way in his heart and lusts after something he cannot or will not lawfully possess or do, then eventually, this mental rebellion will break out in sin. Action will manifest what the mind has been doing all along.

Hebrews 4:12-13 reveals a searching principle:

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

Commentator William Barclay renders the beginning of verse 12 as, “For the word of God is instinct with life.” For the Christian, what God says is always an issue; it is always essential to process any given circumstance through it. However, by way of a vivid contrast, in terms of importance other writings easily slide into the background of one’s thought on their way to oblivion. God’s Word, though, is a penetrating critic scrutinizing a person’s desires and intentions. It can make him feel naked before it and compelled to take action in the right direction—almost as though he has a knife at his throat.

By Its Fruit

How can a person identify whether he is lusting? By the fruit he is producing through his desire. The apostle writes in I Timothy 6:10, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” A fruit of coveting is a hungering unhappiness in not possessing what is desired. The puppy-love syndrome, which exhibits the “I can’t live without him/her/it” reaction is a form of this longing. In more serious circumstances, coveting will cause far more severe consequences, the fruits of intense sorrow, pain, and remorse.

Israel’s King Ahab intensely desired a vineyard abutting his own lands, but the vineyard was owned by his neighbor, Naboth. Ahab attempted to purchase the land, but Naboth rejected his proposal strongly and on firm family and legal grounds. Notice how the Bible records Ahab’s reaction to the rejection he suffered:

So Ahab went into his house sullen and displeased because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him; for he had said, “I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers.” And he lay down on his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no food. (I Kings 21:4)

These are the fruits his coveting produced. II Samuel 13:1-2 provides us with another vivid example:

Now after this it was so that Absalom the son of David had a lovely sister, whose name was Tamar; and Amnon the son of David loved her. Amnon was so distressed over his sister Tamar that he became sick; for she was a virgin. And it was improper for Amnon to do anything to her.

He did not love her; he was lusting after her. Notice the initial fruit—distress! The story continues, eventually revealing that his lust produced rape. It did not end there but produced more evil fruit: “Then Amnon hated her exceedingly, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, ‘Arise, be gone!’” (verse 15). So much for lust producing good fruit! How many teen and/or young adult lives have been severely damaged by unwed pregnancy resulting from coveting?

James 4:1-3 says:

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

War is not a happy situation, but one that produces sorrow. God, in this brief context, ties war directly to lust. War produces terror, pain, destruction, and heartache, not peace. Divorce follows war in the family, most assuredly a very sorrowful situation. Even in the narrow confines of a family war, lust and its resulting anguish and despondency are tied directly to the motivations for the family breakup.

Conversely, Proverbs 10:22 provides us with a succinct reminder and promise: “The blessing of the LORD makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it.”

What Can We Do?

We are not helpless against the evil desires of our human nature. We can do several things:

1. *Recognize that human beings have an unstable, insatiable nature.* Ecclesiastes 1:8 says, “All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied

with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.” Being aware of this biblical truth can give us a better grasp of what we are dealing with. Do not be deceived; happiness is a fruit of true spirituality. God has not put the power into anything material to satisfy man’s spiritual needs.

2. *Seek God first.* Our Savior advises in Luke 12:15, 31: “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses. . . . But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you.” Paul adds in Colossians 3:1-2: “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.”

We must purposely and deliberately study, pray, fast, and meditate. Further, we must consciously practice God’s way of life. This takes sacrifice and discipline, but it fills the mind with the kind of thoughts that will eventually make it impossible to sin.

3. *Hate covetousness, not things.* Proverbs 28:15-16 states, “Like a roaring lion and a charging bear is a wicked ruler over poor people. A ruler who lacks understanding is a great oppressor, but he who hates covetousness will prolong his days.”

It is very helpful to observe what covetousness produces. Some sins are clearly understood, but covetousness is generally less easily observed, requiring careful attention to comprehend the very beginning of many sins. Making such observations is helpful in evaluating the self. We need to remember that coveting violates the basic principle of God’s way of outgoing concern. It also keeps us from listening to God, so we must be attuned to detect its presence.

4. *Learn to be cheerfully generous.* Luke records Paul saying in Acts 20:35, “I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” The apostle adds to this thought in II Corinthians 9:6-7: “But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who

sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.”

We need to keep in mind that we have such an abundance of self-concern mixed with a natural fear that, if we give things away, we will not have enough. God intends that we overcome these fears. Self-centeredness must be excised from our character. Working on it is an excellent discipline.

5. *Learn thoroughly what grace teaches.* Titus 2:11-14 tells us what this is:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.

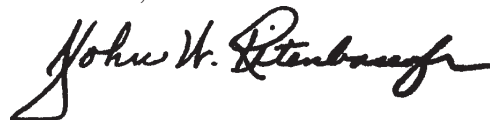
Isaiah 1:16-17 adds, “Cease to do evil, learn to do good.”

Jesus Christ has redeemed us from the power that motivates us to sin. He gives His power to those who strive to overcome the remnants of their old nature. Certainly, it is a tough and in many cases a long process, but with God’s help, if we make the efforts, we can overcome it.

The dynamic of this new life is the coming of Jesus Christ first to us by His Spirit and then to this earth to rule it. When royalty is coming, everything is made spit-and-polish clean and decorated for the royal eyes to see. That is what we are doing: The Christian is one who is steadfastly making himself ready for the arrival of his King.

To this end, let us strive consistently and mightily to think the right thoughts that produce right conduct.

In Christian love,



Islands and Offenses

(continued from page 9)

Fellowship in Love

Many branches of the church of God are small in the number of members. Most of our individual congregations are quite small too. There were positive and negative aspects of the large congregations of our former fellowship. Because of the much greater numbers of people in our old congregations, there were more opportunities for friends and companionship, but there were also more opportunities for offenses. This fact also allowed the offenders and the offended to “resolve” their differences by merely ignoring one another and gravitating to another set of church friends.

We do not have that luxury in our tiny congregations today! We have very limited opportunities for friendship and fellowship within our tiny congregations on our little “church islands.”

Remember that our little church congregations are small islands of truth and righteousness, isolated and surrounded by the vast ocean of Satan’s world. We need to stick together. We should not be giving offense to our beloved brethren, and neither should we be so touchy and sensitive that we are too easily offended.

Let us strive to get along together and to love one another with the godly love that is unique to the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

—John Plunkett

The Lisbon Treaty and the Future of Europe

On November 3, 2009, after Czech Republic President Vaclav Klaus put his signature to the Lisbon Treaty, he remarked that “with the Lisbon Treaty taking effect, the Czech Republic will cease to be a sovereign state. . . .” A month earlier, he had stated “I have always considered this treaty a step in the wrong direction. It will deepen the problems the EU is facing today, it will increase its democratic deficit, worsen the standing of our country and expose it to new risks.” The Czech Republic was the last of the 27 member states of the European Union to ratify the treaty that on December 1, 2009, turned the EU into an officially federalized state to which its member nations are subservient.

The Lisbon Treaty is one of a series of treaties that have gradually lashed Europe together via economic interests: the Treaties of Paris (1951), Rome (1957), and Maastricht (1992). The Lisbon Treaty is really only a repackaged European Constitution (begun in 2001), which was voted down every time it was put before the people (2005). By turning it into a treaty—which only the governments would be allowed to vote on—Europe’s leaders were able to push through a decision-making structure that attempts to turn the EU’s disjointed political reality into a coherent whole. It takes the EU beyond a glorified free-trade zone and defines a government, laying out authority for unified foreign and defense policies, as well as other facets of a fully-functioning regime.

Currently, individual European states wield little influence on the world stage. Since shortly after World War II, the leaders of Europe—predominantly France—have been working to get the states to act in concert economically to the benefit of all. Even with a monetary union, though, the EU has been hobbled by the lack of a single voice for the Union to hear, and another for the world to hear. To be truly effective, the European states need to be able to act with the economic, geopolitical, and demographic weight of a continent—which requires far closer coordination of European and foreign policies.

To this end, the Treaty spelled out two positions that would have the authority to speak for the whole EU. Its leaders elected Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy to the post of President of the European Council, essentially making him the president of Europe and the voice that the European polity will hear. European Trade Commissioner Catherine Ashton of Britain was likewise elected to the foreign minister post, known officially as the “High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.” She is the new voice of the EU to the world.

A federalized EU is viable only when dominated by a Franco-German consensus; if France and Germany are ever fundamentally and critically at odds, the EU will tear itself apart. The two nations lobbied behind the scenes to persuade the other states to elect figures that they believe they can influence. Van Rompuy, as Prime Minister of Belgium, has presided over a tiny state that is deeply fractured politically and culturally. Because Belgium’s condition essentially precludes a coherent national vision or direction, Van Rompuy has no national interests to defend—Belgium stands and falls according to the viability of the EU.

Ashton, on the other hand, may not so easily cast aside the national interests of her home country—one of which, incidentally, is to keep from arising a continental power that could

threaten Britain’s shores. Regarding the choice of Ashton, an analyst wrote in Stratfor’s November 20, 2009, *Geopolitical Diary*, “EU Leaders Name New President and Foreign Minister”:

This is quite a bet. It also goes to the very heart of the EU as a supranational project. It brings into focus one of the fundamental questions of geopolitics: whether one can truly discipline oneself to transcend the love of one’s own. The answer to that question pertains not only to how Ashton and Van Rompuy will perform as Europe’s foreign minister and president, but also to the future existence of the EU.

Yet, it is far from a foregone conclusion that the Lisbon Treaty will bring about a united Europe; many obstacles lie ahead. An agreement among the European elite does not make a super-power; 500 million citizens were conspicuously not consulted on the arrangement. European history is rife with examples of the people rising up to oust unpopular governments.

The current economic crisis in Europe has demonstrated that when push comes to shove, the individual nations will revert to looking out for their own first, while continental unity comes second. In 2010, it is expected that almost every EU member will exceed the allowed budget deficits, and the Union has no political will to do anything about it. In other words, for the sake of national interest the agreed-upon rules are already being ignored.

Nor is this the first attempt at uniting Europe—Charlemagne, Napoleon, and Hitler all likewise tried, and the continental psyche still bears those scars. The fact that the present attempt is with “soft power” rather than force of arms makes no difference. Europe is inherently divided by a geography that has always allowed various political entities to survive and resist amalgamation. Soft power is only possible while times are good; if a real crisis hits, such agreements will dissolve.

As stated previously, the EU depends upon French and German amity, yet as Stratfor notes:

There are plenty of obstacles to such cooperation, particularly economic interests. The French hope to continue to use the EU as a financial scheme from which to fund their enormous agricultural subsidies, while the export-oriented Germans frown on the deficit-fueled domestic consumption of which France, Italy and other European countries are so fond.” (“The Lisbon Treaty’s Geopolitical Context,” November 4, 2009)

On the other hand, when France and Germany *do* get along, the smaller countries are perpetually suspicious of a Franco-German axis that can run roughshod over the rest of the continent.

Rhetoric aside, the Lisbon Treaty does not automatically unite Europe. It is an agreement that the leaders have finally hammered out but has yet to be tested.

—David C. Grabbe

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Two Demon-Possessed Men Healed (Part Two)

Of the references in the gospels to miracles performed on demon-possessed people, only a few are personal, such as the exorcism found in the parallel accounts of Matthew 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; and Luke 8:26-39. In this case, it is emphasized that it was an actual demonic possession, not just demonic influence. Mark and Luke describe one of the demon-possessed men quite graphically, while Matthew includes a less prominent companion who was similarly afflicted. With a word of command, Christ was able to deliver these two men from the terrible uncleanness that demons cause.

The working of this miracle by the Word of God should give us a deep respect for and submission to God's commands. Divine commands are not, as the world believes, to take the joy out of life, but they are the means by which we can gain great blessings and escape great burdens. The apostle John clarifies, "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are *not* burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

• • • • •

1. Why are both the men and the demons unclean? Mark 5:2; Luke 8:29.

COMMENT: Christ was met by the unclean men coming out of the tombs. These rock-hewn tombs were repulsive to the Jews and to dwell in them was deemed a sign of insanity. Because of the remains of the dead they contained, they were shunned by the Jews as unclean (Matthew 23:27). Under the Old Covenant, one could be physically defiled by touching a dead body. Even when a person died in a tent, the whole tent was regarded as unclean (Numbers 19:11, 14).

Unclean in Scripture means "to be defiled, polluted, unhealthy, or unfit," and refers to foods that are unfit, defilement of religious character, and moral or spiritual impurity. The word "defilement" describes a sinful and unfit condition (Isaiah 6:5). The Old Testament distinguishes between what is clean and helpful and what is unclean and unacceptable (Leviticus 10:10). The New Testament deals more with the spiritual application and lists uncleanness or moral defilement along with fornication and other sins as "works of the flesh" (Galatians 5:19-21).

In the gospels, "unclean" describes those who are possessed by demonic spirits through constant submission to evil. Uncleanness represents sin, and sin separates man from God. Because of sin, "we are all like an unclean thing" (Isaiah 64:6). Believers are not called to uncleanness but to live in holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:7). We are not to yield our members to uncleanness but to righteousness and holiness (Romans 6:19).

The teaching about uncleanness springs from the concept of God's holiness (Leviticus 11:44-45). It is a miracle in itself that freedom from uncleanness and guilt is possible through God's grace. Holiness within, purity of heart, is possible through the exercise of faith in Christ's redemptive work and obedience to His truth.

2. What role does God's Word play in this exorcism? Matthew 8:32; Mark 5:8, 13.

COMMENT: There is great power in the Word of God (Proverbs 30:5). It can transform a person dramatically (Luke 4:4), working mightily in those who have faith in Christ (1 Thessalonians 2:13). No one could have as big a problem as these men possessed by a legion of demons. Nevertheless,

it took only a few words from Jesus to deliver them. In Luke 4:35-36 is another example of Jesus using the power of God's Word to exorcise demons:

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him in their midst, it came out of him and did not hurt him. Then they were all amazed and spoke among themselves, saying, "What a word this is! For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out."

The world tried many ways to restrain and control the two demon-possessed men in Gadara, but the only effective solution was God's power through Christ. Man's idea was to start on the outside with chains and other bonds, but Jesus began on the inside with the Word of God, which is not chained (II Timothy 2:9). Using their various "programs" to deal with evil, people only treat the symptoms. The best they can do is whitewash the outside. Christ corrects the problem at the source. So Christ is the solution, the remedy for the sin. He cleans out the inside, which is the best way to correct the problem on the outside.

When we study and accept the Word of God, we draw closer to the One who can give us access to the knowledge and power to conquer our spiritual enemy. Hebrews 4:12-13 reads:

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

The day of accountability is coming—at Christ's return with power and authority—when all people, as well as Satan and all his demons, will be forced to submit to the Word of God (Revelation 19:11-16).

We will continue to analyze this healing miracle in Part Three.

—Martin G. Collins