

Forerunner

Preparing Children for the Kingdom of God

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In several places in Scripture, newly converted Christians are compared to newborn babies—sometimes positively, as desiring the pure milk of God's Word, and sometimes negatively, as consumed by fleshly desires. They are also shown as babes who are expected to grow into complete, mature Christians. This imagery springs from Jesus' born-again teaching in John 3.

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contact

UNITED STATES: P.O. Box 471846, Charlotte, NC 28247-1846 U.S.A.
803.802.7075 / 803.802.7089 FAX

CARIBBEAN: P.O. Box 7004, St. Anns Post Office, St. Anns Rd, St. Anns, Trinidad, West Indies

FRANCE: Amicale Ruben, 370 Hameau du Bourg L'Abbé, La Mailleraye-sur-Seine, 76940 France

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Born Again or Begotten?

Part Three

Among all of the Bible's teachings, the instruction given in John 3 regarding being born again is perhaps the most liable to being misunderstood. In fact, as soon as it was out of Jesus' mouth, Nicodemus misconstrued His meaning, taking Christ's spiritual symbolism literally and physically. Ever since, people have stumbled over various parts of Jesus' teaching in this passage, and usually the stumblingblock is the imagery.

To convey essential, spiritual principles, Jesus uses imagery extensively in the gospels, and perhaps the most in the book of John. Along with John 3's imagery of the new birth, the book contains many references to light, water, bread, blood, blindness, sheep and shepherds, fruit, seed, vines, and several others. In nearly every case, they have spiritual meanings that transcend a plain, literal sense.

The book of John also contains a remarkable witness to the fact that Jesus was constantly being misunderstood. An example appears in nearly every early chapter and continues sporadically to its end. Even in the last chapter, Jesus has to tell Peter three times to feed His sheep before the apostle realizes that His Master is teaching him that he could demonstrate his love for Him by truly caring for His people for the rest of his life.

As we have seen, John 3 contains not only the

imagery of the new birth, but other images as well. Last time, we concentrated on John 3:5-6, in which appears the images of "water," "Spirit," and "flesh." In this final part, we will consider the remaining images and a few related terms and concepts.

Wind and Spirit

John 3:7 addresses a false teaching in which Nicodemus was no doubt well-schooled: "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" The fullness of the word *must* as used by Christ here is often misunderstood. People think of being born again as a moral duty that they are required to meet, but that was not Jesus' intention. He does not mean that a person must see to it that he becomes born again. No, Jesus says it in terms of being "something that has to happen *to* you." He intends us to understand that the Father, by an act of His will, must implant His Spirit in an individual's heart for this birth to take place (Romans 9:6-16).

No one can bring about his own human birth; it is the gift of a person's parents. In the same manner, spiritual birth and life are gifts from our Father in heaven. He is sovereign over His creation, and He is engineering the salvation of His Family Kingdom from the birth of each child to his glorification. Did Rebecca's son, Jacob, in any

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way initiate his calling and receipt of salvation? Yet, though God had chosen him for that while he was still in her womb, Jacob was not actually called and converted until many years after he was born and had produced a life of sinful acts apart from God. Paul explains God's sovereign choice in Romans 9:11-13:

... (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."

Undoubtedly, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, had been circumcised and therefore had become a party to the Old Covenant in that customary manner. All of his associates—indeed, everyone in the entire Jewish culture—believed essentially the same things regarding salvation. In John 3, however, Jesus is teaching something a great deal different from what Nicodemus had believed all of his adult life. This passage makes it clear that he was having difficulty grasping it. He is being taught that salvation is a gift of God, and God solely and personally initiates it in a circumstance in which the person is essentially passive. God, by means of His Spirit, is entirely sovereign in this matter of producing the spiritual regeneration of which Jesus speaks.

John 3:8 expands on the sovereign character of God's personal involvement in each person's new birth. At the same time, Christ teaches us that we should judge what has happened in the born-again person's life by what it produces. He illustrates this by saying, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

This is another verse where people jump to a wrong conclusion, concluding that Christ is speaking of a post-resurrection situation. They do this by assuming that a person is not born into the Kingdom of God until the resurrection. At that time, they will indeed be composed of spirit and be invisible like wind. With that as their assumption, they give themselves the "hatpin test," saying, "I can't possibly be born again yet because I'm still human." We must not fall for this line of reasoning, though, because such a thought directly contradicts the exceedingly clear Colossians 1:13, as well as other scriptures. Once again, people who have concluded this have not correctly analyzed another of Jesus' figurative illustrations. The Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35)! There is another answer, a right answer.

Interestingly, the Greek word underlying "wind" is the same as the one underlying "spirit": *pneuma*. This truth

supplies one facet of proper analysis because wind and spirit share a few characteristics: They are both invisible to human sight, and neither can be controlled by humans. In other words, each is sovereign and independent in its actions. The wind does as it pleases. No human can direct where the wind comes from, nor order where it is to go or what it is to do.

However, even though wind is itself invisible, its effects can be seen. In addition, the sound of its movement can be heard, and the changes it produces—such as trees swaying, dust blowing, and clouds passing across the sky—can be seen. In this same manner, the invisible Spirit, by which a person receives spiritual birth and produces spiritual fruit, operates.

Notice in verse 8 that the definite article "the" appears before the word "Spirit." In this case, "Spirit" is not used as a mere general term, but Jesus draws attention to a particular Spirit—the One who causes our spiritual birth, our Father in heaven. He is spirit (John 4:24), and He is holy (1 Peter 1:16). Who can order Him about and direct the course of His actions? He does as it pleases Him. His operations are sovereign, and He has power over even the most hardened of sinners.

We can witness the changes that He produces in people by noting that the formerly sinful person is becoming holy; the immoral person is becoming moral; the stubborn, obstinate person is becoming gentle, thoughtful, and helpful. In other words, just as with the wind, we see the effects of an invisible cause. The Father grants regeneration and repentance, and He reveals Himself, bestowing His Spirit and spiritual growth on whomever He will (Romans 9:15-16). He does these things at the times and in the ways that please Him.

The born-again person knows his life has changed and enjoys it, but we do not always grasp how God operates on our hearts to subdue our wills to His. However, if we take up the challenges of God's calling, understanding comes. As Paul says in I Corinthians 2:10: "But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God."

It is small wonder that Nicodemus was perplexed by Jesus' instruction. He apparently had never dreamed of a relationship with the Creator God so personal, intimate, and continuous.

"Jerusalem Above"

Some will contend that Galatians 4:26—"but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all"—proves that a Christian is a fetus conceived by the Holy Spirit, and by analogy, is being carried in the womb of the church, awaiting birth into the Kingdom of God at the resurrection when Christ returns. This

cannot be so on several counts. The first is Paul's use of the term "mother." In context, it indicates that the "mother" is not carrying a fetus, but rather, she has already delivered a child—actually many children, the born-again Christians who make up the membership of the church.

The second problem begins with a fact that several commentators assert: Neither Paul nor any other of the apostles ever once equate the church with "Jerusalem above." Growing out from this truth is that Paul specifically states that "Jerusalem above . . . is the mother of us all." However, the church is on earth. Paul is using Jerusalem figuratively in his illustration, in the sense of a homeland from which people spring (Galatians 4:25). It is as if the homeland gives birth to the children in question.

In the passage, the apostle is comparing the weakness and slavery of the earthly Jerusalem with the freedom and power of the heavenly one. The children of God spring from the heavenly because that is where our spiritual Father is located. From there, we are governed, our blessings flow, our rights are secured, and our interests are promoted (Ephesians 1:3). Jerusalem above is the city in which our names are registered (Hebrews 12:23) and our citizenship held (Philippians 3:20). Heavenly Jerusalem, which will come down to earth following the Millennium, is the place we all aspire to be when that magnificent event occurs.

There is no scriptural way that this verse can be made to say that the church is our mother and that we are fetuses in its womb. Besides being unscriptural, it is illogical. Are not the members of the church simultaneously also the children of God? How, then, can the children also be the mother? Can a child be carried in its own womb and then give birth to itself? God does not use such strange, illogical illustrations.

What Does "Firstborn" Mean?

"Firstborn" is a term that appears quite frequently in Scripture. People most frequently think of it in terms of Jesus. He was Mary's firstborn (Matthew 1:25). He is also referred to as being "the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29). In Colossians 1:18 and Revelation 1:5, He is called "the firstborn from the dead." These biblical references are then linked in the minds of some with the belief that the resurrection, as described in I Corinthians 15:50-53, is a Christian's birth into the Kingdom of God, despite the fact that Paul never mentions being born in the context of resurrection (in fact, in I Corinthians 15:8, he uses "born" in terms of his *calling!*). So is this conclusion correct?

The Bible uses the term "firstborn" in a way that some may not realize, and in this way, "firstborn" may not

indicate a literal birth at all! Once again, we are dealing with a term that has a spiritual meaning different from its literal one. Clearly, in the earliest parts of the Bible, "firstborn" indicates the eldest son. Within the Hebrew culture, it indicated a position of strength and the son to whom leadership of the family would pass when the father died. Thus, firstborn was a position of distinction and a fair measure of sanctity.

However, as one continues through the Bible, one begins to find that "firstborn" does not always mean that the person so named is literally the first born. Abraham passed on this right to Isaac, not Ishmael, who was the actual firstborn. Jacob was not Isaac's firstborn ("the older shall serve the younger"), but God certainly esteems him above Esau ("Esau I have hated").

Joseph, son of Jacob from Rachel, was not literally Jacob's firstborn. When the true eldest son, Reuben, disqualified himself, the right of firstborn did not automatically pass on to the second born, Simeon. Instead, Jacob passed that title of prominence and its prerogatives on to Joseph (I Chronicles 5:1-2). Surely, God had a hand in this transference. This clearly shows that God Himself does not necessarily follow the traditions of Israelitish culture but awards this prominence to the one prepared for the responsibility.

A great deal of further evidence of the use of the term "firstborn" flows directly from God Himself. Ephraim was not Joseph's firstborn, as Genesis 48:13-22 clearly shows. Jacob gave him that prominent position and title by God's inspiration. God commanded Moses to say to the Pharaoh of Egypt, "Israel is My son, My firstborn" (Exodus 4:22). Many nations were "born" long before Israel, but God gave the title of preeminence, "firstborn," to Israel. Later, in Jeremiah 31:9, God says, "For I am Father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn."

God uses "firstborn" in ways that we are generally unfamiliar with but that are nonetheless consistent with its use elsewhere in both Scripture and secular writings:

- Job 18:13: "It devours patches of his skin; the firstborn of death devours his limbs." Here, Bildad refers to a disease that he describes as powerful and deadly.
- Isaiah 14:30: "The firstborn of the poor will feed, and the needy will lie down in safety." The phrase indicates the poorest of the poor.
- Psalm 89:27: "I will make Him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." This refers first to David, who was not himself a literal firstborn son, but also and more importantly, to Jesus Christ.

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In these examples, “firstborn” is being used as a superlative, indicating preeminence, special quality, or significance to God. When it refers to Jesus Christ, it implies a preferential status, priority, dignity, sovereignty, and oneness with God. His relationship with God is unique, of the highest and greatest significance and quality. His relationships to creation, man, and especially to His brethren are also unique.

Christ Is Preeminent

Colossians 1:15-20 illustrates this use:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

This passage clearly demonstrates that, just because the term “firstborn” is used, it does not mean the subject was literally born first, as occurs physically to mammals. In terms of a mammal’s birth, Exodus 13:12 provides God’s initial definition of a *firstborn*: “That you shall set apart to the LORD all that open the womb [*that open the matrix*, KJV].” So we must ask: Whose womb was opened so Jesus could be firstborn over creation? Whose womb was opened so Jesus would be the firstborn from the dead? Of course, Jesus did not have to be born again because there was never a time when He was not already and still God.

Colossians 1:15 makes this especially clear. How can the Creator possibly have been born when He is before all things? He existed before all things as God (John 1:1-3). Colossians 1:18 uses the term again, but also answers why the Greeks used the term in this manner. They used the term to indicate preeminence, priority, and first in rank from a beginning. In this case, the beginning is when the things that were created came into existence.

Thus, in verses 15-17, Christ is preeminent over the physical creation by virtue of His being Creator. In verses 18-20, Paul shows Christ as being preeminent in God’s plan of redemption because He is the Savior/Redeemer. How could He be born into God’s Kingdom when He was never apart from it (Luke 17:20-21)? Jesus

indeed was Mary’s firstborn, but He was never born again as His spiritual brethren are, as His teaching in John 3 shows. When resurrected, He was not literally born, but was transformed and glorified—changed, as I Corinthians 15:51-54 clearly describes, from being physically dead to the fullness of spiritual life. He was not born into the Kingdom of God as humans are physically born in this life.

When describing spiritual realities, the use of the term “firstborn” changes. Spirit beings are not born; they are created, changed, or transformed, and come into existence. The Bible says nothing of angels, which are spirit beings, being born. *Born* can, on some occasions, simply mean “to come into existence; to be delivered, to begin.” The “birth” of the United States was in 1776. It was a beginning, but it was not born as a baby is. We might say a person is a “born musician” or say a concept or idea was “born.” Each simply indicates that a state of prominence began at a particular time.

Romans 8:29 uses “firstborn” in this manner. It is not indicating a literal birth, as in human families, but that Jesus is preeminent over all who follow Him in God’s Family by virtue of Him being Savior and Redeemer. In relation to Jesus, the Bible uses “firstborn” in its figurative sense, not its literal one. For example, Hebrews 1:6 reads, “But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, ‘Let all the angels of God worship Him.’” Here, “firstborn” is being used in the same manner as in the Old Testament when God calls Israel and Ephraim “My firstborn.” He is establishing priority, uniqueness, and preeminence for His Son over all others. He is not saying He is literally a firstborn.

In Hebrews 12:23, the entire church is named as the “church of the firstborn.” This is clearly not indicating a literal birth, but the title is used to give significance to, elevate, and indicate the Christian church’s association with Jesus Christ and His priority and preeminence.

If one still desires to believe that “firstborn” may indicate, in some isolated contexts, a literal spiritual birth, then one must ask, “When does the birth take place?” Everything we have seen so far shows that the Bible directly says it takes place at the beginning of the salvation process, not at its end. The end of the process is a *glorification* through a resurrection. The Bible describes this as a change (I Corinthians 15:51-54) or a transformation (Philippians 3:21; II Corinthians 3:17-18), not in terms of birth.

Jesus Christ was never “born again.” He had no reason to be regenerated. He always had a spiritual mind to enable Him to “see” the Kingdom of God, and He was always in the Kingdom of God, so there was no reason for Him to enter it again. Since He never went through, or needed, a spiritual birth, His title of “firstborn from the dead” is not an instruction on how a Christian is

spiritually born. He was not born again by a resurrection, and thus the resurrection from the dead is *not* the model for how we are born again either.

A Few Closing Comments

Although *gennaō* can technically mean “begotten,” the weight of Scripture is heavily on it meaning “born” rather than “begotten,” even in scriptural areas far removed from the John 3 controversy. Notice this example from I Peter 1:22–2:3:

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, *having been born again*, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because “All flesh is grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever.” Now this is the word by which the gospel was preached to you. Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, *as newborn babes*, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. (Our emphasis throughout.)

In I Peter 1:23, the phrase “having been born again” is *anagennaō*, which comes from *gennaō*, and means “to beget or (by extension) bear (again).” The apostle makes quite clear in I Peter 2:1-2 that he considers those he is writing to as already born, rather than unborn and within a womb. Only a child already born would feed on milk, or Peter’s metaphor would be totally wrong.

A similar circumstance appears in Hebrews 5:13-14:

For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Again, the metaphor pictures an already-born child who eats and drinks.

Paul castigates the members of the Corinthian congregation because of their spiritual immaturity, describing them as babies who needed milk:

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to *babes* in Christ. I *fed you with milk* and not solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still

not able. (I Corinthians 3:1-2)

The metaphor of eating and drinking only works if we are considered already *born* spiritually. We *were spiritually begotten* by the Father at some point in the past through His calling, but we have progressed beyond that begettal to a spiritual birth long before the resurrection of the dead. There is not a single verse that shows us to be begotten but not yet born.

The analogy of being begotten and in the womb of the church is not only scripturally wrong, it is totally inadequate when God commands us to do practical activities normal to Christian life. A child in a womb cannot pray, study, fast, serve, consider, choose, sacrifice, humble himself, repent, forgive, be merciful, walk in the Spirit, rejoice, love, use wisdom, be discreet, intercede, or bring glory to God.

Does finding elements of an ancient born-again practice in pagan religions rule out consideration of it being a godly doctrine? Not in the least! When has Satan not attempted to counterfeit God’s truths in His counterfeit religions? It would be surprising if some elements of God’s truth did not turn up in his ancient perversions. It is his standard practice in his attempts to confuse.

Does this mean that I have converted to Protestantism? Not at all! Protestants have misused Christ’s teaching in John 3 by linking it to the false Doctrine of Eternal Security (sometimes called “Once Saved, Always Saved”), which asserts that salvation is a finished work upon the sinner’s justification. The Bible shows in many places that such is not the case.

At that point in a convert’s spiritual life, redemption has been completed, but salvation is far from complete. Is a baby complete fresh out of the womb? The child has been “freed” from the womb, but a great deal of growth must take place before he attains maturity. In like manner, much growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ lies before the convert (II Peter 3:18). He must grow to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13). We must prove our conversion and glorify our Father.

God is creating. It is a progressive work. From each of the apostles as well as Jesus, there are multitudes of warnings about falling away before our spiritual pilgrimage is complete. Understand that none of these efforts to remain faithful and grow earns salvation. How can one earn what is freely given? Yet, Paul clearly declares in Ephesians 2:10, “We are . . . created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” He also states plainly in Philippians 2:12 that we must “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling.” Christian works are

(continued on page 14)

Thy Kingdom Come!

Part Two

Part One ended with several questions regarding God's promise to us that we will inherit His Kingdom in juxtaposition to His equally firm admonitions to overcome sin and endure to the end lest we fall short. Does this mean that God's promises are conditional? Does He judge us on an individual basis? Do His promises depend on what we *do* with them? Or is it a case of "once saved, always saved"? Has Christ done it all for us?

Does it really matter what we do for the remainder of our Christian lives? Yes, it most certainly does! God is very clear on this:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. (I Corinthians 6:9-10)

These kinds of people will *not* be there! They will *not* inherit God's Kingdom. They will be cut out of the promise—out of the will, as it were! In Galatians 5:19-21, the apostle Paul presents another, even more detailed list of disqualifying sins:

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions,

dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Our inheritance *is* conditional! God's promises to us *are* conditional! That is how a covenant works, and the New Covenant is no different. It is a two-way agreement. We must fulfill our side of the bargain, and God will most certainly fulfill His side. In fact, as we have already seen, He and Jesus Christ have already fulfilled the greater part—the hardest part—of their side of it and have set the remainder of their responsibility into inexorable motion.

GOD'S KINGDOM WILL COME

Whether or not we individually fail to fulfill *our* side of the New Covenant "bargain"—whether or not we individually give up our crowns—Jesus Christ

will return, the resurrection and the Millennium *will* take place, and the Kingdom of God *will* come. The only thing is that, if we choose to give up our crowns, we will not be there to enjoy any of these blessings!

As Jesus prayed—and His prayers are always answered: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Because the word “come” here is not in the Greek future tense, but in the “second aorist” tense, many modern Bible translations correctly render this as “Let your kingdom come” or “May your Kingdom come,” giving the solid idea of a future certainty. God’s Kingdom *will* come. Jesus knew that it would come, but He wants His brothers and sisters to pray relentlessly for its coming, that it will come as soon as possible!

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

These verses speak of the impossibility of our separation from the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, unless, of course, we ourselves cause it. However, we may also apply these verses to the coming of God’s Kingdom. We may say, without any doubt at all, that none of these things—not death, life, angels, principalities, powers, things present, things future, height, depth, nor any other creature—absolutely *nothing* can prevent the coming of Jesus Christ, the resurrections, the Millennium, the Kingdom of God, and God the Father. However, as we already seen, failing to repent of our own unrighteous actions can prevent us from being there to have a part in it.

THE DOXOLOGY

Like many, I was brought up in one of the major denominations of a professing Christian church that, as I came to discover in my mid-teens, is one of the immoral daughters of the harlot mother church. During my years in that organization, its false ministers never taught me:

- That I have the opportunity of rising in the first resurrection;
- That Jesus Christ is going to come; that is, that

He will literally and personally return to this earth;

- That I have the opportunity of ruling with Him as a king and priest for a thousand years, then on into eternity;
- That the eternal Kingdom of God is coming;
- That even God the Father will ultimately come and that He too will dwell with men, or rather, with Spirit-beings that once were men.

Whether those ministers even knew any or all of these truths, I do not know. If they did, they effectively hid them from me! Either knowingly or unknowingly, they taught me a pack of lies—lies about going “up there” to heaven if I were a good boy, and going “down there” to an ever-burning hell if I were bad!

One of the biggest lies of the churches of this world—it is actually a series of big lies that are vainly repeated each Sunday at the end of each of their vainly repetitive prayers (Matthew 6:7)—is called the Doxology (also known as the “Lesser Doxology” or the *Gloria Patri*). Two of its three untruthful statements directly relate to the promises of God that we have been looking into. The modern Anglican version runs as follows:

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;

(Lie number one: that God is a Trinity)

as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,

(Lie number two)

world without end. Amen.

(Lie number three)

Let us concentrate on falsehoods numbers two and three. Where did the churches get these ideas? Probably from a shameless wresting (II Peter 3:16) of the intent of two scriptures, one of which is a regrettable mistranslation of Ephesians 3:21 in the King James Version: “Unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”

The term “world without end” in this verse is mistranslated from the Greek phrase *toú aiônos tôn*

prophecy watch *Thy Kingdom Come!*

aiônôn. The word *aion* can be translated as “ever,” “world,” “evermore,” “age,” “eternal,” “always,” “forever,” “an unbroken age,” “perpetuity of time,” “eternity,” “the worlds,” “universe,” or “period of time.” The doubling of the word in the phrase suggests perpetuity. The New King James Version corrects the King James Version’s error quite nicely: “To Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, *forever and ever*. Amen” (our emphasis throughout).

A direct contradiction of Mark 13:19 is the second source of this false doctrine, which the Doxology twists around to say the exact opposite of what Jesus clearly states: “For in those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be.” The Doxology, however, intimates that this world will continue “as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.”

The phrasing of the Doxology is a blatant denial of God’s Word! These false ministers—like the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and the corrupt Aaronic priesthood of Jesus’ human lifetime—are deceiving the professing Christian world into believing that “Our Lord is delaying His coming” (Luke 12:45) and that “Evil shall not approach, nor fall upon us” (Amos 9:10).

With such lying words, false ministers vainly set themselves up as a “dam” to try to prevent the unstoppable advance of the river of world events towards the end of this age—one that they apparently love, in barefaced contravention of God’s Word (I John 2:15), because this world and age (Greek *kosmos*) allows them to maintain their falsely-gained rank and status.

A MAJOR, SATANIC LIE

But why should we be surprised? This idea constitutes a major deception by their father, the father of lies (John 8:44), who hates with a passion the idea of the return of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Kingdom of God. Why does he hate it so much? Because he knows quite well that, when Christ returns, he (Satan), his demons, and his false ministers will have all their power and authority stripped from them.

This world—this age or era—is *not* endless. It will end! Jesus said so repeatedly. Things will not forever remain the same as they have been since the beginning.

Such false ministers do not seem to care what God’s holy Word says! They unashamedly twist the

scriptures in their attempts to make them appear to support their false doctrines. Nevertheless, God will not be mocked (Galatians 6:7)! Messing with Jesus’ words is messing with the very Word of God—and doubly so: the *written* Word of God in the Bible and the *personal* Word of God, Jesus Christ Himself! To do so brings a very serious penalty:

And consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. (II Peter 3:15-16)

Through the apostle John, Jesus gives the same warning:

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:18-19)

Perhaps Jesus is referring here to this same sin, the sin of trying to deceive God’s people (and the world) into believing that He delays His coming, that He will not come at all, and that everything will continue forever the same as it always has been since the creation of mankind.

Why do I suggest this possibility? Because of what He tells us in the very next verse, which happens to be the second to last verse in the whole of His holy Word, thus indicating its importance: “He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming quickly.” Amen [So be it]. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” (verse 20).

So let us remember that the river of time and of world events is flowing relentlessly on toward:

- the time of the end;
- the Great Tribulation;
- the resurrection of the dead;

(continued on page 14)

ready answer

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

Daily Thanksgiving

“In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

—*I Thessalonians 5:18*

This is the season in which millions of Americans will be focused on Thanksgiving Day—or “Turkey Day,” as the modern vernacular styles it—with its traditional turkey dinner, sumptuous side dishes, pumpkin pie, and football games. Many people will have various reasons for celebrating this autumnal holiday. Some will actually consider their own circumstances and America’s place in the world as they seriously examine reasons to be genuinely thankful. Others will consider it as an opportunity to take part in another routine holiday party. Football fans will look forward most to the games on television and perhaps a pickup game in the backyard. Certainly, shopaholics will see it as the day before Black Friday, the beginning of the final shopping lap before the Christmas holiday.

The first Thanksgiving in New England took place in 1621 in the Plymouth Colony in what is now Massachusetts. After arriving in November 1620, their first winter was filled with hardship: little food except the game they hunted, only crude bark shelters to live in, and much sickness. Sadly, about half of the colonists died during the first winter. Therefore, after a good harvest the next year, the Pilgrims, a devoutly religious people, wished to display their deep thankfulness to God for the help, guidance, and progress the colony had been granted.

In 1789, the first President of the United States wrote a Thanksgiving Proclamation. In it, George Washington stated:

It is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits . . . that we may all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection . . . for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty which we have enjoyed . . . and, in general, for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us . . . that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions.

ready answer *Daily Thanksgiving*

Most Americans, especially those who consider themselves Christians, make some attempt to be thankful on Thanksgiving Day, if on no other day of the year. However, once a year is not enough. For true Christians, thanksgiving should be a daily occurrence.

This article will present the answers to four critical questions on the subject of thanksgiving, and here is the first:

What Does It Mean to Be Thankful?

When we are thankful, it means that we have been impressed with a sense of kindness that has been expressed toward us, and we desire to acknowledge it. Essentially, it indicates that we are grateful.

Thankfulness is the actual expression of our gratitude and acknowledgement of the kindness done to us.

Thankfulness is also a state of mind, an attitude. It is a content and positive perspective, which does not focus on what one does *not* have, but rather values what one *does* have, no matter how basic. The apostle Paul expresses this concept in his letter to Timothy, writing: “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content” (I Timothy 6:6-8).

Paul continues this thought in the following verses, explaining that greediness creates a great many problems, ultimately bringing upon us discontent and unhappiness. This is just the opposite of the thankfulness that real contentment generates.

Reading these verses on greed and considering the greedy state of man’s mind, a popular bumper sticker from several years ago comes to mind: “He who dies with the most things . . . wins.” Of course, it did not take long for those whose thinking ran counter to this to reply with their own that read, “He who dies with the most things . . . is dead.” This is true; the pursuit of material gain to the exclusion of all else ends in death.

Being thankful is part of being content. Unfortunately, many people feel that being content means that they have to give up on their dreams and goals. It does not. Like thankfulness, contentment is a state of mind. God wants us to be content with and thankful for what we have been given. That does not mean that we cannot want better and work to make our situations better, but it does mean that we should not approach our proper desire for more with a greedy, covetous attitude.

Nor can we compare what others have and what we may not have from an attitude that we deserve the same or even better. Maybe we do deserve it, but right now God has chosen not to give it to us, and we must

be content with that and thankful for what we have been given.

How thankful and content we are can be seen in the illustration of water in a glass. Is the glass half-full or half-empty? Our answer depends on and reveals our state of mind.

Why Should We Be Thankful?

It may come as a surprise, but the Bible contains more material about thankfulness than it does about the Sabbath. Does that make it more important? No, but it does mean that it *is* important. Being thankful shows an attitude of humility toward God. It shows God that we know and understand that everything comes from Him, and that we are mindful of His generosity. This point is brought out in I Thessalonians 5:18: “In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

In other words, it is God’s will for us to be thankful because He knows that it is good for us to have an attitude of thankfulness towards Him. When we have a thankful attitude and an attitude of appreciation for Him and what He does for us, it does not leave much room for ingratitude in our lives.

In reading Psalm 8:3-6, we can see ourselves in perspective to God’s creation:

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man, that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet. . . .

God has given us—humanity—dominion over the things that He has created. And beyond that, out of all humanity, we have been given a tremendous responsibility to develop righteous character and have the potential of living eternally in His Kingdom. This thought alone should help us to be thankful each day.

What Should We Be Thankful For?

The Bible clearly instructs us on the things for which we should be thankful. There are countless examples of this as we read and study from Genesis (where we were created in His image) to Revelation (where we inherit His Family Kingdom). Salvation and eternal life are the most precious gifts that we could ever possibly be given. We can thank God every day that He has called us to them.

In Matthew 13:16-17, we see that God has given us another great gift in granting us the ability to understand His truth:

But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

For all the thousands of years of history, men have searched for the truth that we have, but the vast majority were not given the gift to understand it. How awesome does that make the gift we have been given? God opened our minds and guided us to repentance. Because of that, we should also be thankful that “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12). In terms of additional spiritual helps and benefits, Paul says in Ephesians 1:3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.”

As we can see, God extends countless blessings—both physical and spiritual—to us for following His way. As the apostle James writes in James 1:17, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights.” He blesses us so abundantly that, even if we tried, we could not name them all.

How Should We Show Our Thankfulness?

Philippians 4:6 answers this question: “[I]n everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.” Our prayers should reflect our gratitude towards God for what He has done in our lives and what He gives to us. Our everyday words and thoughts should reflect a positive mindset of hope and joy in thankfulness towards God our Father for His great plan of salvation and our parts in it.

As stated earlier, thankfulness is a form of contentment, or we could view it as peace of mind or tranquility. A truly thankful person is usually not an individual who worries a lot. Being thankful puts our thoughts on God, rather than on our problems. In Colossians 3:15, Paul writes encouragingly, “Let the peace of God rule in your hearts to which also you were called in one body and be thankful.” The more we allow God’s peace to be in control, the more settled and more thankful we will become. On the flip side, the more thankful we are, the more God’s peace will rule our hearts and minds.

In our society, many problems like discouragement, depression, anger, and other mental and emotional troubles are treated with chemicals and drugs. These medicines are designed to offer some form of relief. Some work and some do not. Many have side effects that, in some cases, are worse than the original problem. Some are addictive. For us, though, thankfulness and praising God are effective and beneficial antidotes for discouragement, depression, and anger.

Supplication with thanksgiving will enliven our prayer life. It will lift us up and give us a more positive perspective. A thankful attitude will help to erase any doubts we may have as we pray, and it will also decrease uncertainty in our lives in general because we know where our help comes from (see Psalm 121:1-8). Proper thankfulness will help us increase our faith in God because we will constantly be relating to and reflecting on Him.

God is *always* deserving of our praise or thanks—indeed, we cannot thank Him enough. How does our heavenly Father feel when we express only a qualified “thank you” occasionally or not at all? How does He feel, knowing that He has done what is the absolute and perfect best for us, and we just shrug it off? How do we feel when this type of unthankful behavior happens to us? Our thanksgiving to God should be so effusive that He will never feel that way!

Ingratitude, whether passive or active, is a tool that Satan can use to turn us away from God and His Family. By succumbing to thanklessness, we can allow him to plant us as tares within the church and spread our ingratitude to others. A steady outflow of gratitude to God will knock this weapon from the Devil’s hand.

Such a constant attitude of thankfulness and earnest thanksgiving, no matter the circumstances, is a gift from God to us. Gratitude spreads a healing balm among those with whom we fellowship, and it will help to speed us along the path to God’s Kingdom.

The nation will shortly celebrate its Thanksgiving Day. As we have seen from God’s Word, His people are to have, not just one day that is set aside for thanksgiving, but a daily practice of heartfelt thanksgiving.

Please reflect on these sentiments about thankfulness:

- Gratitude is the inward feeling of kindness received. Thankfulness is the natural impulse to express that feeling. Thanksgiving is the following of that impulse. (Henry Van Dyke)
- Gratitude is riches. Complaint is poverty. (Doris Day)

ready answer *Daily Thanksgiving*

- I wept because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet. (Persian Proverb)
- If a fellow isn't thankful for what he's got, he isn't likely to be thankful for what he's going to get. (Frank A. Clark)
- When asked if my cup is half-full or half-empty, my only response is that I am thankful I have a cup. (Sam Lefkowitz)
- Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has plenty, not on your past misfortunes,

of which all men have some. (Charles Dickens)

- See how many are better off than you are, but consider how many are worse. (Lucius Annaeus Seneca)
- A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, but also the parent of all other virtues. (Marcus Tullius Cicero)
- God gave you 86,400 seconds today. Have you used one to say "thank you"? (William Ward)
—Mark Baker

personal *Born Again or Begotten?*

(continued from page 7)

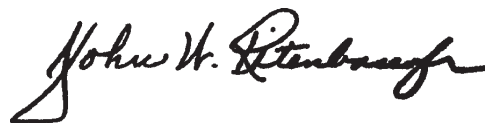
our part of God's process to transform us into His Son's image.

All that these three articles have attempted to do is to clarify the terms used in Jesus' instruction on born again, as gleaned from God's Word. In the end, the begotten-again analogy is found completely lacking in describing what happens to begin our spiritual life. What has not changed in the least is its practical application to Christian life.

However, what has been clarified should impress upon us even more forcefully that, because our names are

already entered into the Book of Life, we are already in God's Family Kingdom with our citizenship already issued, and there is every reason we should make it to the end. Therefore, we should be all the more responsible and urgent to bring glory to our God. There is much yet to do.

In Christian love,



prophecy watch *Thy Kingdom Come!*

(continued from page 10)

- the change of God's people who are still living from temporary, human, chemical existence to Spirit-composed children of God;
- the return of Jesus Christ;
- the Millennium;
- the Great White Throne Judgment period;
- the New Heavens and the New Earth;

- the coming of God the Father; and
- the wonderful eternity of the Kingdom of God.

The tide *is* coming in! These events *will* take place! *Nothing* can stop them—certainly not a physical dam, and not even a spiritual one! Not Satan! Not the false doctrines of the false churches of this world! Nothing!

The tide *is* coming in! Jesus Christ *is* coming! He is coming *quickly!* And He *is* bringing His Kingdom with Him. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

—John Plunkett

NATO: In Search of a Mission

Throughout the Cold War, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO, also known as the North Atlantic Alliance) served as a bulwark against a Soviet invasion of Europe. The core of the treaty is that “the Parties of NATO agreed that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.” This agreement was of the utmost importance to the nations of Europe that, unlike the United States, faced the very real possibility of fifty Soviet and Warsaw Pact armored divisions and nearly two million troops pouring down the North European Plain into the heart of the continent. At one point during the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact countries had a 2-to-1 advantage in main battle tanks. The Soviets and their allies believed that their numerical superiority would allow them to advance to the Rhine River in seven days, and thus Europe was highly dependent on America’s promise to retaliate critically as a safeguard against invasion.

Official credos aside, Lord Ismay, NATO’s first Secretary General, stated a more pragmatic view of its governing principle: “to keep the Russians out [of Europe], the Americans in, and the Germans down.” The U.S. wanted to be “in” because part of its grand strategy has been to ensure that no unified entity arises in Eurasia. If Russia occupied Europe, combining Europe’s technology, ports, and other resources with its own, it would be in a good position to threaten America. Lord Ismay’s mention of “keep[ing] . . . the Germans down” is also revealing, for NATO—like the European Union project—was designed to keep Germany so economically, politically, and militarily lashed to its neighbors that it would be unable (or at least unwilling) to go to war with them again.

For four tense decades, then, continental Europe depended on the U.S. to deter the Soviet Union. While Europe and America did not agree on various interests and strategies, the threat of Soviet invasion loomed larger than anything else on the horizon. Despite not liking all the arrangements, Europe needed a security guarantee against the Soviets. NATO provided that protection without requiring much in the way of finances (which, incidentally, led to the birth of the European welfare state: Its defense budgets could afford to be much smaller than for a country looking out for its own defense, allowing for increased state-provided services).

However, the geopolitical landscape has undergone substantial change over the last twenty years. With the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in mid-1991, and the U.S.S.R.’s collapse later that year, the 28-member Alliance has had difficulty defining its reason for existing. With no clear threat, NATO enlargement became a goal in and of itself. It took up the cause of “humanitarian intervention” in the Balkans, and the 9/11 attacks paved the way for NATO involvement in Afghanistan; but neither of these proved to be a unifying threat for the alliance.

In short, without the overwhelming threat posed by the Soviet Union, each member state has begun to develop its own threat priorities. While the U.S. prefers to fight militant Islam on foreign battlefields, most European nations consider terrorism

as a domestic law-enforcement issue. With the U.S. tied up in Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia has resurged into much of its former sphere of influence, causing consternation for NATO members in Eastern Europe, but eliciting little response from Western and Southern Europe.

Germany is certainly not interested in another Cold War. Rather than being “down,” Germany—again becoming the strongman of Europe—is shaping European policy, which tends to welcome Russian cooperation rather than to view it as a threat. Hence, European NATO allies are divided among themselves in their views on the biggest threat, and thus on the primary reason for the alliance to continue.

Recent events in Europe have shown that the EU is not a completely stable instrument of prosperity, especially where Germany is concerned. Much to its dislike, Germany is being called on to prop up some of the more insolvent members. Rather than pushing for further European integration (which could leave it entangled and unable to protect its own interests), Germany has begun to look outside the Union—and found Russia.

Russia supplies Germany with nearly 40% of its natural gas. Also, Germany’s population is declining, while Russia has a surplus population (relative to its labor needs, at least). Moscow needs Western technology and expertise in developing its economy. Thus, German investment in Russia allows Germany to get the labor it needs (without resorting to immigration) by moving production facilities to Russia. Berlin’s policy toward Russia is to give it enough of a stake in the European economic system that Russia does not seek to challenge the European security system. The bottom line is that, although NATO proved effective in deterring a Soviet attack, Russia is no longer “out” of Europe, and the Germans have not been kept “down.”

In November, the 28 NATO members will meet in Lisbon to approve a new “Strategic Concept,” the alliance’s mission statement for the next decade. That meeting’s outcome, however, already appears to be irrelevant. In late October, France, Germany, and Russia held a summit regarding a Russian proposal for a new European Security Treaty. Even though Moscow claims that the proposal is not intended to replace NATO, the U.S. and the Central Europeans see it as attempting to do exactly that—akin to the fox providing security for the henhouse.

The fact that France and Germany are willing to entertain such a proposal indicates that they no longer see NATO as in their best interests. Not only do they not see Russia as a threat, but having their own security arrangements would also keep them from having to participate in any future expensive “American adventurism,” such as the war in Afghanistan.

NATO is still technically viable, but it is becoming more apparent to many of its members that it has outlived its usefulness. We may be watching the beginning of its end.

—David C. Grabbe

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Healing Two Blind Men (Part Two)

In Matthew 9:28, Jesus asks the two blind men seeking healing, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” Christ’s challenge concerns their faith. If faith is present, miraculous healing will occur according to God’s will. If it is absent, God will grant no healing. A person of faith receives preferential treatment, and in fact, faith is so important to God that His Word declares, “Without faith it is *impossible* to please Him” (Hebrews 11:6).

The blind men answer Christ’s challenge with outstanding, genuine faith, saying, “Yes, Lord.” In the Greek, this is a strong affirmation, carrying a tone of certainty. The men had no doubt that Christ could heal them, unlike many people today. They believed Jesus was the son of David, indicating that, though they were blind, God had begun to open their minds.

These men faced many disadvantages that worked against producing faith, but they still trusted Christ in impressive ways. Those who—unjustifiably—excuse their lack of faith because of life’s difficulties hinder their spiritual growth. Many with handicaps and weaknesses have come to have faithful relationships with Christ.



1. Why does Jesus always touch the blind to heal them? Matthew 9:29-30.

COMMENT: Christ does not always touch the afflicted in healing, but in each of the four miracles involving the blind, He touches them, which was appropriate to their condition. They could not see Him, but they could feel His touch. He used a variety of methods in touching them, as the occasion warranted. In healing these two men and Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52), Jesus simply touches the eyes. In Mark 8:22-26, Christ spits on the blind man’s eyes then puts His hands on them. As the blindness is not completely healed, He lays His hands on them again. In the healing in John 9:1-41, He spits on the ground to make clay, then puts the clay on the man’s eyes and tells him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The blind’s sense of touch is heightened, so to feel Christ the healer perform this miracle would never be forgotten.

2. What is essential to healing? Matthew 9:29.

COMMENT: Jesus says, “According to your faith let it be to you,” similar to His words to the centurion whose servant was dying in Matthew 8:13. In both cases, the condition for the miraculous cure is faith. Faith opens the door for divine blessing; its lack closes the door. Christ could do few mighty works in Nazareth due to the people’s lack of faith (Matthew 13:57-58). Similarly, salvation is a great work, but unbelief prevents it. It is important to study the Word of God to increase faith, as it comes by hearing or reading God’s Word (Romans 10:17).

“Their eyes were opened” is more than a description of a literal action; it is also a Hebrew figure of speech. The Jews thought of blind eyes as “shut,” and seeing eyes as “open.” Jesus removes two men’s blindness—they can now see and comprehend what was once closed to them. Thus, the opening of the eyes also suggests spiritual understanding.

Most people do not grasp the value or the meaning of Scripture, but Christ can open a person’s eyes to enable him to understand His Word just as He did for His disciples after His resurrection (Luke 24:16-31, 45). The psalmist prays,

“Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law” (Psalm 119:18).

3. Why does Christ instruct the two men to keep quiet about their healing? Matthew 9:30-31.

COMMENT: Jesus gives this command in five of His thirty-three miracles. His warning is sternly given, as in Greek it is a scolding phrase linked to strong emotion like anger. It adds extra force and implies danger in disobedience. Here, it suggests that the two men need to improve in doing right.

We should not always go easy on new converts about living a strict, upright life. God’s standards must be upheld, guarded, and not watered down, whereas today’s society tolerates sin and weakens standards that are deemed “too hard” to keep. While ministers must follow God’s command in Isaiah 58:1 to, “Cry aloud, spare not; . . . tell My people their transgression,” they must be careful not to offend or burden new converts with requirements that, because of their weak understanding, they cannot fulfill completely. Nevertheless, new members need to know God’s holy standards. If His Spirit is working in their hearts and minds, they will not be driven away by them.

At first, Christ’s warning to keep quiet may seem to contradict the Christian duty to tell the world about His works (Mark 16:15). In this case, He has something else in mind. His command is first to protect against the impedance of His ministry (Mark 1:45) and imperiling Himself.

In addition, He wants to keep the healed men from being puffed up with pride, as well as to give proof of their healing in their conduct, not by words. Nothing proves faith in Christ as well as righteous conduct that comes from a true change of heart. However, though these men had faith enough for healing, they did not have enough to follow His commands. A Christian must make sure that His faith is not a temporary faith that lacks obedience, but one based on love for God. As Christ says in John 14:23-24, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word.”

—Martin G. Collins