

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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The Value of Land

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The area around Jackson Hole, Wyoming, the Grand Tetons in the distance, is a spectacularly beautiful part of God's creation. American pioneers viewed this verdant land as a means to build a new life. The Bible shows that God places great importance on land, wanting His people to have a sense of ownership of it.

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Ecclesiastes and Christian Living

Part Two: Work

Previously, we covered the importance of the phrases “vanity of vanities,” “under the sun,” and “what profit is there” to help us understand the guidance the book of Ecclesiastes provides a Christian in his daily life. Ecclesiastes is a book of overviews. It counsels us to go this way or that in light of our overall calling. It does not delve into the mighty acts of God like His parting of the Red Sea or into our redemption through Christ’s blood. It does not prophesy of specific events. Instead, it helps us understand what general approaches to life are profitable in preparing for the Kingdom of God.

It could be said that it mostly points out activities and goals for life that are really nothing but vanities. Such activities might be interesting, exciting, and fun, and they may even pay handsomely in wealth and fame. However, upon evaluation from God’s Word, they have no lasting, eternal value toward fulfilling God’s purpose.

In other words, certain occupations or approaches to life simply burn up a lot of time, producing nothing of value worth carrying through the grave. All of us have involved ourselves with these activities to some degree without ever thinking that what truly matters is the Kingdom of God, His righteousness, and our relationship with Him. But we must be careful! Ecclesiastes is gradually teaching us that *everything matters* at least to a small degree.

So what must we spend our time doing?

Walking and Working

Solomon’s work and his conclusions about what he had accomplished occupy a large portion of Ecclesiastes 2, and to us, this chapter begins to clarify that we must not doubt that work is important to our glorifying God and preparing for His Kingdom. Christianity is a way of life that a person must focus on and work on to become skilled at it. It is a specialized way of life designed to produce a specific product. We understand that God is creating us in His image, and we play a distinct role in this creative process.

In the Bible, the terms “walk” and “work” are both used as metaphors to illustrate the activities necessary for the Christian to fulfill the requirements of a life lived glorifying God and preparing to be full-fledged members of God’s Kingdom. “Walk,” in all its forms, is used 413 times in Scripture, while “work” appears 476 times. Bible writers do not always use them in metaphoric senses, but the sheer number of times they appear indicates their importance to life and God’s purpose.

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, the children of Israel, now a free people, departed from their bondage to the Egyptians and began their pilgrimage to the Promised Land. They walked the entire way and for the entire time—forty years’ worth. Their walking came to illustrate in a single word the efforts necessary to achieve the

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great goal that God had brought into their lives. This metaphor succinctly illustrates the manifold activities under God's direction that are required to reach the goal He sets.

The Israelites were pilgrims working their way to their goal by walking. Their walking was not for relaxing entertainment or for exercise. It was a form of labor that God had assigned them to perform, and it includes any purposeful expense of energy in obedience to Him to conform to His purpose. Thus, the Bible addresses work in two broad categories: 1) the tasks that a person does for daily living and 2) the "works," as they are termed, that a person performs to fulfill the Christian-living responsibilities that God assigns.

It has become fashionable for many Protestants to denigrate the value of Christian works. Nevertheless, the fact remains that if a Christian does not work at being Christian, he will never be prepared for the Kingdom of God. Working and walking, perceived as metaphors, are essential activities if an individual wants to be in the Kingdom of God.

God Is a Working God

We will begin to look at work in a general sense but gradually shift our focus toward activities most important to preparation for the Kingdom of God, those termed "works."

In Matthew 6:31-33, Jesus informs us what our primary focus regarding work should be:

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

Undoubtedly, earning a living is important to life. However, we can easily drift into over-emphasizing the day-to-day, wage-earning job above Christian responsibilities. At the same time, the Kingdom of God can easily suffer from the "out of sight, out of mind" syndrome. To guard against this happening, we must consciously put God's Word and work as our highest priorities. This is not to say that Christian works should be given the greater time but that we must have a higher regard for them. We must consider it an absolute necessity not to neglect them.

Work is defined as "the physical or mental activity directed toward the accomplishment of a project one has either been assigned or undertaken on his own volition." God, in whose image we are being created, is our overall Model. The first image God gives mankind of Himself is of Him working.

Genesis 1:26 establishes the early time-setting when work was shown as an assigned responsibility of mankind:

Then God said, "Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over

the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

Most of the Bible's first two chapters are comprised of showing God working. In our culture, people generally think that as one rises in importance, he is relieved of most work, a flawed concept to say the least. In His culture, nobody is higher than God, and as we have seen many times in John 5:17, Jesus states that God works continually. Genesis 1 and 2 provide as clear an example of His activity as is found in Scripture.

Hebrews 1:3 further clarifies the Creator's continuous work:

. . . who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the majesty.

His "upholding" indicates continuous, purposeful, and energetic movement toward carrying out a purpose.

Genesis 2:15 adds to our understanding of God as our Model of work and of work being an assigned responsibility: "Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it." If we follow the orderly, step-by-step sequence of events as God creates, He did not create Adam and Eve until everything physically necessary for living was in place and operational. The narrative shows that He led them to the Garden, and His first command to mankind, represented by them, lets them know that they had to work to guard the Garden from deteriorating and to make it productive.

Note three significant things from this opening revelation about work:

- 1) God gives no indication to man that he is entitled to something for nothing.
- 2) The command to work preceded Adam and Eve's sin, so we must understand that work is not a penalty for sin. Genesis 3:17-19, God's pronouncement of Adam's curse, makes this point plain:

Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

The curses for their sin definitely made work more difficult, but the responsibility to work continued otherwise unchanged.

3) Therefore, Ecclesiastes 2:24 highlights God's original command regarding work: "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God." Thus, work is a blessing, a valuable gift from God.

The Christian Attitude Toward Work

Ephesians 6:5-8 provides a clear sense of the attitude a Christian must strive to have about work:

Servants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eye service, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is slave or free.

A major reason for this instruction is that the attitude and way we work is a visible expression of our gratitude for what Christ has done for us, and our work is a major means of glorifying God. We are thus to labor in our employment, as well as carry out our Christian responsibilities, with singleness of heart. Our minds are not to be divided because of the reality that God's calling has made us laborers for Christ.

The concept of our being laborers for Christ is expanded on and intensified in other passages, for instance, in I Corinthians 6:19-20:

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

Romans 6:17-20 expands this idea into specific areas of life including work:

But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

As God sees things, we are in fact Christ's slaves and more, and the way God sees things is what matters. Technically, we are no longer working to advance our own

interests. We are to fulfill our labors at all times and in all cases to Christ and to our human employer with energy, enthusiasm, and above all, service. As mentioned earlier, the world denigrates Christian works as being valueless, and they do this partly because they misunderstand Paul's statement that a person cannot earn salvation by means of works. We have become slaves of Christ. Our redemption has made us so tightly identified with Him that He sees us as members of His own Body. Our reality is that we are working for Him regardless of our day-to-day job, whether as a housewife, welder, salesman, or corporate administrator.

A number of proverbs on work report Solomon's observations about what he learned from his observations. For example, Proverbs 24:30-34:

I went by the field of the lazy man, and by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding; and there it was, all overgrown with thorns; its surface was covered with nettles; its stone wall was broken down. When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest; so shall your poverty come like a prowler, and your need like an armed man.

As Ecclesiastes begins, Solomon questions whether life is profitable. This proverb teaches us that, if we desire to produce profit in any endeavor, we will have to keep at it consistently enough to realize it. God clearly wants us to be profitable in life. Avoiding indolence or laziness requires sufficient vision and a sense of responsibility, not only to oneself, but also to others, to keep forging ahead. By means of His calling and teaching, God has given us both the vision of His purpose and a responsibility to Him, His Son, our families, and our brethren. Thus, He supplies us with the basics to achieve profit in what He has called us to.

Work Brings Wealth

Scripture teaches that wealth is produced by means of diligent work. We should not make the mistake of limiting wealth merely to money. It is far better to think of wealth in terms of skill: first, skill at living as God does, as well as skill in music, carpentry, auto repair, sewing, painting, computing, writing, speaking, etc. (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

We do not have to become skilled at everything we put our hand to. Not everybody is gifted to do everything skillfully, even as the various parts of the human body cannot do every other part's designed function. God gifts and places each member of Christ's Body as it pleases Him. However, He expects us to grow, overcome, and function well where He places us. So, we should work diligently to improve in our prayer and Bible study through practice, practice, and more practice, even to the point of devising exercises that train us to think and become better organized. Prayer is work and so is study. We must strive to be more than merely functional at them.

Proverbs 24:16 reads, "For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked shall fall by calamity." Solomon is encouraging us to overcome the

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depression we may fall into because of failure, despite our striving to succeed. We must not allow ourselves to slide into what Paul shows happened to some he ministered to in Thessalonica:

But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. . . . For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread. (II Thessalonians 3:6, 10-12)

Commentators believe these brethren stopped working due to misunderstanding the nearness of Christ's return. Nonetheless, they were breaking the pattern of conduct set by Christ Himself and taught by the apostles. Jesus worked right up until He was crucified. Paul calls their conduct unacceptable and serious enough that those brethren who were patiently working should withdraw from those who quit!

This example contains a practical truth about work that is not mentioned but is helpful to understand. Costs are tied to work, whether it is for the Lord or an employer, and not the least of these is sacrifice on the part of the laborer. Jesus teaches this in Matthew 16:24: "Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.'"

To be an active, producing Christian, Jesus says that, in laboring under and with Him, we must deny ourselves and then take up, carry, or bear up under whatever the cost may be. Thus, sacrifices are involved in Christian responsibilities, as well as in our day-to-day job, but Jesus particularly aims this comment about Christian works at His followers. Denying ourselves is required because the carnal nature is always present and invariably desires to take it easy and do the wrong things through ingrained habit. However, if we give in to this, profit in Christian life diminishes.

This we do not want because, without denying ourselves, life is guaranteed to be a failure. Recall how concerned Solomon was about profit. Life will be profitable if we do the right things, but sometimes, to do so we must literally will ourselves to do what is required. Sacrificing is the only means to accomplish what needs to be done.

What About Accumulating Wealth?

What if a person truly denies himself, works hard and wisely, and actually becomes wealthy? This question touches on our attitudes toward people who have accumulated wealth, whether in or out of the church, and it may severely test our judgment of them. The Bible says of

Abram: "Then Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the South. Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold" (Genesis 13:1-2). It also says of Isaac:

Then Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold; and the LORD blessed him. The man began to prosper, and continued prospering until he became very prosperous; for he had possession of herds and a great number of servants. So the Philistines envied him. (Genesis 26:12-14)

God blessed both Abram and Isaac. Obviously, He is not against wealth, as if it were some kind of evil burden imposed upon sinners. Wealth, however, brings trials just as surely as it brings blessings. We must not forget that Jesus warns that it is more difficult for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:24). Wealth presents temptations, and they are not always easily handled.

One major difficulty is that wealth tends to pave the way for a person to destroy himself spiritually through the destruction of his faith in God. This happens because the wealthy person has the tendency to place his trust in his wealth rather than in God (Matthew 19:20-22). A second major problem is that wealth tends to promote pride because of a person's excessive self-admiration over being astute enough to accumulate it. Scripture reminds us, though, that God responds to the humble (Isaiah 66:2). Thus, the Bible's overall warning is that, in the unwary, wealth can subtly create division between its owner and God through misplaced trust.

Hebrews 11:36-38 presents us with another view of the picture regarding God and wealth.

Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.

By comparing this record with God's enriching of Abraham and Isaac, we learn that God deals with those He calls according to His purpose, that is, according to what He desires to accomplish through or in them. The Jews of Christ's time generally believed that, if someone was prosperous, it was evidence that he was a good person and God was blessing him. However, that may or may not be true. The record of Scripture shows that many evil people become wealthy, and Solomon makes note of this in Ecclesiastes.

The other side of the coin is that, if a person is virtually destitute, he must be hiding a sin. We must learn to be careful in our judgment because neither blessing nor curse provides always-true evidence of the person's spiritual

condition. To ensure our standing before God, we must diligently pursue His righteousness by carrying out our Christian responsibilities in the hope that God in His mercy might see fit to bless us with spiritual wealth.

How Important Are Christian Works?

Some of the wrong thinking about works is derived from Martin Luther's teaching that salvation is by faith *alone*, a statement that does not appear in the Bible. It is true that God gives salvation through His merciful gift of grace. However, James says that a person's faith is proved by his works (James 2:14-26). If a person has no works, he is actually proving that he has no faith.

People who denigrate Christian works must be rigidly ignored because God pointedly assigns work to all Christian converts. Ephesians 2:10 pointedly states, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." God has prepared, ordained, and assigned these works beforehand. They are requirements and must be accomplished to the level and quality God judges as right and good. At the same time, these works are the very purpose for which the Christian is called and converted. Even though the works do not earn one salvation, God's calling, regeneration, and assignment of works are given so that we are prepared to live that same way of life for all eternity.

The works that we do—the way we live our lives—prove our conversion, that our faith in Christ is real and makes the witness that glorifies God. Thus, we must understand these truths regarding works:

- 1) God has never intended that works save anybody. Jesus is the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. God knew beforehand that we would need a Savior for salvation.
- 2) Doing the works provides practice in God's way of life, thus helping to ingrain His way as part of our character.
- 3) Doing the works is a witness before the world, and by them God is glorified. These are their major purposes.

Three Crucial Parables

Matthew 25 contains three parables that contain vital principles on the subject of Christian works. Pay special attention to where they are placed: They immediately follow the Olivet Prophecy, Jesus' instruction regarding the end-time. As this critical time approaches, the intention of this placement ought to be clear. Each of these parables has to do with making special effort to be profitable within our calling at this particular time.

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins at the beginning of Matthew 25 is especially clear regarding this principle. In verse 13, Jesus says, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of

Man is coming." He tells us not to waste time, not to allow ourselves to become distracted, to make our calling and election sure so we are ready at any time.

The Parable of the Talents comes next:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. . . . His lord said to him, "Well done good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord. . . . [But] take the talent from [the servant given one talent], and give it to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away." (Matthew 25:14-15, 23, 28-29)

The admonition here is that God, in His calling and gifting by means of His Holy Spirit, has equipped us to perform our responsibilities for Him before the world. He makes sure we understand that He is carefully judging how well we do with what we have been given. Always remember that He abundantly shows us how considerate and merciful He is in His judgments, but He also reminds us that, if we cannot live up to even His generous judgment, there is a time of reckoning.

The third is the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. . . . And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." . . . And the King will answer and say to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me." Then they also will answer Him, saying, "Lord when did we see You hungry and thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?" Then He will answer them, saying, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me." And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:31, 33-34, 40-46)

The first hurdle to accept here is that, though the parable appears to apply directly to that time after Christ's return

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This Land Is OUR LAND

In 1885, twenty-year-old John Pierce Cunningham left New York for the West. He spent three years trapping in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and studying the land. After identifying what he thought was the area with the best soil, he filed his homestead claim on 160 acres in the north end of the valley. He married Margaret, and together they began a life of working the land—what would soon be *their* land. Under the Homestead Act of 1862, they had to live on the land for five continuous years, build a structure, and improve the land. If they did this, and paid a \$15 filing fee, the land became theirs.

The valley of the Snake River, known as Jackson Hole, is a beautiful part of God's creation. The Grand Tetons loom large over its western edge. Numerous glaciers feed Lake Jackson. Back in the nineteenth century, the water could still be used for irrigation, and land was available for claiming. What a deal!

Unfortunately, winter lasts six months out of the year there, making for a short growing season. Large-scale farming of any kind is out of the question. At that time, raising cattle was the best choice, but to get the cows through the winter required a lot of hay. At any given time, J. Pierce, as he was known, ran eight horses and a hundred head of cattle, and for winter feed, he raised hay on a hundred acres. Life was tough, but they were building something tangible.

In 1926, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and his family visited Jackson Hole and the Grand Tetons and fell in love with the area. On one of his visits, he hiked to the top of a small hill and ate lunch while watching moose and elk graze against the background of the lake and mountains. Inspired, he decided to buy this land and its view to preserve it. Having the time and the money, he began to buy up the ranches, eventually buying even the Cunningham place.

After a lifetime of hard work, J. Pierce and his wife

retired to Idaho, where the winters are just as bad. Mr. Cunningham's original two-room, dirt-floored log cabin still stands today. He had lived in it for only a few years until he could build a better home for his bride. The couple used the original cabin for storage. Nevertheless, it stands there as a testament to their efforts.

In 1955, Mr. Rockefeller built a grand lodge on the shore of Lake Jackson, positioning it so that the west wall of the lodge faces the 13,000-foot, snow-covered peaks of the Tetons. He had 60-foot-tall windows installed so that when a person walked up a flight of stairs into the upper lobby, he saw that view. When he died, he deeded his land and the lodge to Grand Teton National Park, enlarging the park greatly.

When my wife and I walked into that great room recently, the sight of those snow-capped mountains awed us. Caretakers of the lodge had lined up several couches and matching chairs so that visitors could sit and gaze out the windows at the lake and peaks. Seated in those couches and chairs were a dozen older teens and young adults, but not one of them was looking outside. Every one of them had earbuds in, their eyes glued to the screens of their various electronic devices. They might as well have been in a windowless room somewhere.

I could not help but think of J. Pierce Cunningham leaving home at their age, coming west to build a life. He wanted land of his own to work, to improve, to create something with. If he had only had an iPhone, he could have saved himself a lot of calluses. Of course, at the end of his life, he would have had nothing to show for it.

GOD AND OWNING LAND

Contrasting the homesteaders of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and today's urban culture made me consider how God views land, as well as how Satan has perverted its use. J. Pierce worked his land, and it worked,

in return, for him. Ultimately, it provided for his retirement. Perversely, today's culture seems to have no interest in land, only the latest toys and gadgets.

In Numbers 33:53, as the Israelites' wilderness wanderings neared an end and they stood ready to enter the Promised Land, God tells them to "dispossess the inhabitants of the land and dwell in it, for I have given you the land to possess." In Leviticus 25, He lays out instructions about the Land Sabbath and the Jubilee Year, which are pointless statutes if a person does not have any land.

In Leviticus 25:23, God states, "The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me." God intended that the land remain in the family, to be handed down through the generations. If things got tight, an Israelite could sell the land, but it could be redeemed by a relative or released back to the family in the Year of Jubilee.

A house within a walled city could be sold, and if it was not redeemed within a year, it belonged permanently to the person who bought it and it would not be released during the Jubilee. Homes in unwalled villages, however, were treated as land. God puts land in a different, more important, category.

As mentioned earlier, a lot of folk do not seem to want land, and statistics bear that out. Home ownership in the United States is at its lowest point in 18 years. Home is supposed to be, not only where the heart is and where the various family members go when they are in trouble, but it also used to be where the family's wealth was. Not so much anymore.

God owns the earth and all its fullness, as Psalm 24:1 tells us, but in His kindness, He lets us have a portion to "dress and keep" (Genesis 2:15, KJV). This portion would allow a family to provide for itself. If the family had a piece of land, they might grow their own food on it and sell the excess. They could harvest its timber. They could even sell the oil or coal underneath it. Clearly, He means for His people to have a sense of ownership of the land.

GOVERNMENT TAKES

In I Samuel 8, the children of Israel demand of the prophet Samuel to give them a king. God replies in verse 7, "Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them." He then tells Samuel to warn the people about what they could expect when they installed a king to rule over them. God prophesies that he would take their sons for his army, their daughters to be his servants, and their food for his table. Not satisfied with those things, "he will take the best of your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves and give them to his servants" (verse 14). The king—the government—will take the land. This is what happens when people reject God's rule.

Most people are not aware that the U.S. government owns 650 million acres or nearly 30% of the land in the United States. The federal government owns 84.5% of Nevada, 69.1% of Alaska, 57.4% of Utah, 53.1% of Oregon, 50.2% of Idaho, 48.1% of Arizona, and 45.3% of

California. These staggering numbers do not even include state holdings. These percentages include National Parks, forests, military bases, etc., but mostly what the government owns is just empty land. In the last decade, my wife and I have driven thousands of miles all over the American West, and the amount of unused, underused, or simply empty land out there is astounding.

God says the land belongs to Him, but in effect, Satan says it belongs to the government. Not just the 30% of land that they own outright, but the government can condemn a person's land and take it, for instance, under the right of eminent domain. In the U.S., an individual can pay off his mortgage, but if he does not pay the real estate tax each year, he can lose his land. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) can claim that a person lives in a wetlands, and he cannot build on or even touch his holdings. The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) can say drugs were trafficked on one's property and seize it. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) can claim the same about guns.

If a person dies and leaves property to his heirs, the inheritance taxes can be so high that his survivors may be forced to sell land and homes to pay the taxes. The recently deceased actor, James Gandolfini, had an estate valued at \$70 million, and it is projected that his heirs will owe \$30 million in inheritance taxes. Since they must pay this tax within nine months of his death, they will most likely have to sell the "family farm," as it were.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

We understand that under God's plan, all is His, but He has given His people the use of the land for perpetuity. His terms even cover their mistakes. If they make bad decisions and have to sell the family property, it comes back to the family at the Jubilee. Yet, under man's rule, we never really own anything.

The U.S. federal government ended homesteading in 1976 because those in power felt that "public" ownership was better than private ownership. We have all seen how well the government runs the Postal Service and Amtrak, and we will soon experience its ability to run healthcare. Government obviously knows what it is doing. If individuals owned plots of land, they would just mess it up. I am being facetious, of course.

This difference between God's way and man's way brings personal responsibility into the mix. God gives us laws and parameters and allows us to obey or not. Certainly, if we disobey, there are penalties. Man has his own laws and consequences, but citizens are denied the opportunity to exercise personal responsibility. Layers of laws are added to earlier layers until people are suffocated with constraints. In Georgia, where I live, 116 new laws went into effect July 1, 2013. No laws were deleted, just new ones added.

In Genesis 2:15, God instructs Adam and Eve to "tend and keep" the Garden. As nice as the Garden of Eden was, they were to "dress" it (KJV), which means to improve it, to make it better, to embellish it. Its partner, to

(continued on page 13)

ready answer

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

Misconceptions and Malarkey About the Holy Spirit

“. . . having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. . .”
—Ephesians 1:13

Part Two

When a popular congressman from the former second district of Minnesota, Ancher Nelsen, was asked about the secret to his political longevity, he reflected, “I never argue if I can help it—I find someone on the opposite party with views identical to mine and simply agree with his pronouncements.” The apostle Paul used a similar technique to divide the Pharisees and the Sadducees for his advantage. The proponents of the Trinity use a similar technique when they try to categorize all non-Trinitarians as followers of Arius of Alexandria in AD 319.

According to Walter R. Martin—the self-appointed Ralph Nader of the cult world—the

Arian heresy can be summed up in this short proposition: (1) If God the Father gave birth to the Son, Jesus Christ who was born, had an origin of existence;

(2) therefore, once the Son was not; (3) and therefore, He was created out of nothing.

Notice how Martin takes our attention away from the scanty evidence supporting the personality of the Holy Spirit, but instead, meticulously and painstakingly sets about proving the divinity of Jesus. Trinitarians would have people believe that all non-Trinitarians reject the plurality of the God Family. We, of course, know this is not the case.

The very same Trinitarian apologist who showed himself sophomorically naïve about grammatical gender, M.R. DeHaan, would have us trust his scholarly savvy about *elohim* in Genesis 1:1. Any informed student of the Bible would be a fool to dispute this foregone conclusion that *elohim* is plural, denoting more than one personality. But look at the equivocation and the sleight of hand by the following statements:

Genesis 1:1: It suggests that more than one person was active in creation, and yet these three persons are God.

DeHaan pulls a fast one on us, suggesting that “more than one” has to be “three.” He goes on to throw in front of the reader more redundant, beside-the-point strawmen:

In order to safeguard this truth of three Persons and only one God, the Lord used another strange grammatical construction in this verse. The word translated “created” is *baru* (“to create”) is a singular verb, denoting only one. Of course, grammatically we cannot use a plural subject with a singular verb.

It is dumbfounding that a man who meticulously sorts out for his reader the mechanics of Hebrew grammar should have made such a

gross error here, as well as in regard to the Greek and Hebrew practice of arbitrarily dividing words into gender, as we saw in Part One. (Dare we assume that these commentators never studied these ancient languages, or is it something else?) However, God is not limited by human laws of grammar and rhetoric, and so the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1 literally reads, “In the beginning, the Gods He created the heaven and earth.” “The Gods” (*elohim*) indicates plurality, and the verb (*baru*) indicates that these different Persons in creation were one.

For the rest of the section, DeHaan concentrates on the spiritual pre-existence of Christ, *a la* Walter Martin. Notice John 1:1-3:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. (Emphasis ours throughout.)

M.R. DeHaan and Walter Martin, along with the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, seem to assume that, since the divinity of the Son is established, they can automatically infer a three-headed Trinity. That will not fly.

Speaking of Secrets and Mysteries

The Catholic Fathers also loved to play around with paradoxes, riddles, and high-level abstractions. They seem to have taken pleasure in mind-boggling mental gymnastics. On the other hand, perhaps the motive for these obscure word games could be summed up in the popular adage, “If you can’t convince them, confuse them.”

The early Catholic Fathers—Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Basil, Jerome, and Gregory of Nyssa—seemed to take pride in being custodians of a deep, dark, unfathomable mystery. From their pontificating in high-level abstractions, it is clear that they wanted to keep the Trinity *unclear*. Being holders of secret knowledge gave them considerable power over the uninitiated.

The Vatican Council has suggested that “a mystery is a truth which we are not merely incapable of discovering apart from divine revelation, but which, even when revealed remains ‘hidden by the veil of faith’”! So, even when a person thinks he grasps it, he is really no more enlightened than before he began his quest to understand.

Consequently, the venerable Catholic Fathers engaged in the following kind of gobbledygook. For example, St. Anselm “clearly” articulates on the Trinity:

For there is no relative opposition between spiration on the one hand and either paternity or filiation on the other. Hence the attribute of spiration is found in conjunction with each of these, and in virtue of it they are each distinguished from procession—We are affirming that the Supreme Infinite Substance is identical not with two absolute entities, but with each of two relations.

The dense smoke screen is almost as bad as the spoof paraphrase by Orwell of a passage in Ecclesiastes:

Orwell: Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success in competitive activities. . . .

Solomon: I returned and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong. . . .

Perhaps if Thomas Aquinas and Augustine had confined themselves to things people could comprehend with the senses, the doctrine of the Trinity would break down immediately. But where would the fun be in that?

A Mind of His Own?

The New Shaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia suggests that the personality of the Holy Spirit is proved because acts of will and intelligence are attributed to “him.” The following

are some of the examples it provides:

- John 15:26: “But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, *the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.*

- John 16:8: And when He has come, *He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment:*

- Romans 8:13: For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but *if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*

- Acts 13:2: As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, *the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”*

- Romans 8:26: Likewise *the Spirit also helps* in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the *Spirit Himself makes intercession for us* with groanings which cannot be uttered.

These so-called proofs are overturned by internal evidence right in the very scriptures used. For instance, John 15:26 reads, “He [the *parakletos*] will testify of Me.” It conveys Christ’s messages, not its own.

John 16:13 tells us that the *parakletos* “will not speak from his own.” If the *parakletos* has a personality of his own, why does he never get a chance to express himself?

The Holy Spirit in Acts 13:2 in the original Greek is called *pneuma hagion* (literally, “spirit holy”)—without the article. The context of this verse would indicate that Paul was being inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 8:26 seems to suggest that a person is actually making intercession for us. However, in Hebrews 2:17 and Hebrews 4:15-16, the apostle

ready answer *Misconceptions and Malarkey About the Holy Spirit*

is clear that Jesus Christ is our intercessor before God the Father. The Holy Spirit is the instrument that He gives us to help us become more spiritually articulate in our requests before God.

- Hebrews 2:17: Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might *be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*

- Hebrews 4:15-16: For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

God's Holy Spirit has to become an integral part of us if we aspire to sonship, that is, the offspring of God (Romans 8:11, 14). God's Spirit makes the difference between deification or oblivion.

- Romans 8:11: But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also *give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit* who dwells in you.

- Hebrews 8:14: For as many as are *led by the Spirit of God*, these are sons of God.

In Part One, we learned that conversion and adoption into the God Family begins with an implantation and regeneration by God's Holy Spirit into our minds, as stated in Ephesians 1:13-14:

In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, *you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of*

promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

Holy Spirit— Power or Person?

Trinitarians, in their misguided zeal to make the Scriptures say things they were never intended to say, have ignored some of the most elementary descriptions of the nature, scope, and function of God's Holy Spirit. Here are a few of these, which will give us a more complete picture:

In Luke 1:35, we learn that the Holy Spirit is the spirit and power that comes from God.

And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and *the power of the Highest* will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God."

In Zechariah 4, the prophet sees a vision of two olive trees dripping oil into a golden bowl atop a lampstand. In verse 6, this oil is identified as God's Spirit, which is poured out upon a person to do His work:

So he answered and said to me: "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, *but by My Spirit*,' says the LORD of hosts."

This is corroborated by Isaiah 61:1, which suggests that a person can be anointed by this Spirit, in this case Jesus Christ:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. . . .

So pervasive and fluid is this Spirit

that it actually permeates the universe. In John 7:38-39, Jesus even likens the Holy Spirit to a gushing river flowing from those who believe Him:

"He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

If rightly used, God's Holy Spirit can make a person bold and balanced, as Paul writes in II Timothy 1:7:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, *but of power and of love and of a sound mind.*

It can help a person to be spiritually articulate before God, as the same apostle shows in Romans 8:26:

Likewise the *Spirit also helps in our weaknesses*. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but *the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us* with groanings which cannot be uttered.

And it aids Christians in being physically articulate as well:

And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, *but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. . . .* (I Corinthians 2:4)

But when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; *for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.* (Mark 13:11)

In I Corinthians 2, Paul speaks about the Holy Spirit as the gift we

have received from God to help us understand spiritual things. In verse 16, it is specifically called “the mind of Christ”:

For “who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?” But *we have the mind of Christ*. (I Corinthians 2:16)

In Ephesians 3:16-17, the apostle Paul expands on this gift, saying that God’s Spirit supplies us internal, spiritual strength, the Spirit being the means by which Christ lives in us:

. . . that He would grant you, according to the riches of His

glory, to be strengthened with might *through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith*; that you, being rooted and grounded in love. . . .

If we allow God’s Word to describe and define the Holy Spirit rather than rely on pointy-headed theologians and philosophers to explain it in their overwrought and convoluted language, we have a far better chance of understanding what God’s Spirit is. Just as man has a spirit in him (Job 32:8), a spiritual component that gives us the power of mind and will, God also has a Spirit, one that is far more

potent and effective—but one that is similarly not another personality but an essence of mind and power that accomplishes God’s will.

While our minds have difficulty comprehending the scope and abilities of God’s Spirit, this basic understanding, upheld throughout Scripture, cuts through all the world’s misconceptions and malarkey about God’s wondrous Spirit. We can thank God, not only that He has given us this knowledge, but that He has also given us His Spirit, providing us with the understanding and power to do His will and ultimately become His glorified children.

—David F. Maas

prophecy watch *This Land Is Our Land*

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“keep” it, means to work at maintaining it, to secure it. They were not just to cut the grass and trim the bushes, but also to beautify and develop the Garden.

Under the various Homestead Acts, the government required of the potential landowner that he cultivate the land and build improvements on it, which is right and proper. But what happens under government ownership? Pick anything the government “owns,” and it is in a state of decay. A visit to a national park reveals plenty of park police and park rangers standing around, but no dressing and keeping seems to take place.

An article, “How Adam Smith Revived America’s Oil Patch,” appeared on the editorial pages of *The Wall Street Journal* on June 20, 2013. Adam Smith was an eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher who is considered to be the father of modern economics. He spent ten years writing *The Wealth of Nations*, the seminal treatise on economics (if one does not count the Bible), which is still widely read today. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once commented that she carried a copy in her handbag. In a few words, he believed in capitalism, free markets, and a laissez-faire economy. He warned that the heavy hand of government prevents people from competing and achieving, and we see great evidence of that today.

The thrust of the article is about how a Texan, George P. Mitchell, perfected the technology of hydraulic fracturing, a process called “fracking,” so that natural gas and oil previously trapped can now be recovered. This invention, done by an individual and not sponsored in any way by government, has increased America’s oil and gas production.

With natural gas now more abundant and cheaper than oil, Cummins Incorporated built two new truck

engines that run on natural gas, not diesel. Free enterprise developed those engines that Joel Kurtzman, the writer, believes will help solve our dependence on foreign oil—not government-supported wind power or solar power or electric cars.

In terms of land, many American landowners will be able to sell their own oil and gas rights on the free market. They will only be able to take advantage of this because they own the land. As far as I know, the United States is the only country in the world that allows an individual to own what is under the ground. In the rest of the world, the government owns the minerals, the oil and gas, the gold and silver, the gemstones, etc.

A great many people are upset these days that individuals will rise to solve problems, improve products in response to changing market conditions, and utilize their own land for gain. They are upset because government, by and large, was not involved in any of this, and its own attempts failed. To them, this is bad and not fair. In America, we have sadly devolved to the point that about half the nation seems to think that only the government can supply our needs. There are now 79 “means tested” federal welfare programs.

But under God’s way, people own land and work it. And when God’s way is the rule and not the exception, such principles will return. Consider the Millennial prophecy in Micah 4:

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it. Many nations shall come and say, “Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk

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in His paths.” For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Micah 4:1-3)

The prophet is speaking of the Kingdom of God, a time when Christ will reign on this earth, and mankind will be at peace because all will follow God’s law. Now notice the implications of verses 4-5:

But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. For all people walk each in the name of his god [in our time], but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever.

Everyone, not just a few, will have land to tend and keep, and their families will continue to live on it. God does not lie; this is the way it will be. Old J. Pierce was on the right track.

—Mike Ford

personal *Ecclesiastes and Christian Living*

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when He is ruling the nations, the instruction also applies in principle to us. In other words, His children can never ignore this instruction. What sets this parable apart is that Jesus specifically focuses on works regarding our relationships with and services to our brethren.

Clearly, failure in this indicates sin. We need to grasp two major principles involved in sin: First, sin describes failure, the failure to live up to or meet God’s standard. Second, sins can be acts of commission and/or omission. Sin is a direct act of evil against another or a failure to do something good, in this case, something God would expect.

How important are works even though they do not save us? Revelation 20:12-13 reveals that those who commit the unpardonable sin earn for themselves the punishment of being cast into the Lake of Fire. That is their “reward” for their evil works or no works.

On the other hand, Jesus declares in Matthew 16:25, 27:

For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. . . . For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to His works.

Our Labor Is Not in Vain

There is no doubt that Solomon was an imaginative and diligent worker. He was even directly involved in a major work of God during the early portion of his reign, yet his first conclusion regarding the work’s value is negative: “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:11). What went wrong? He probably did not really involve God in the project to the degree and in the attitude that he should have.

Ecclesiastes 2:18 expands on this: “Then I hated all my

labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me.” This confirms that he was doing the work in an “under the sun” manner. His perspective seems quite carnal, thus the blessing from God that would have come from an appreciative, cooperative, and sharing attitude did not flow to him. He enjoyed the work, but he received no spiritual blessing.

Paul writes in I Corinthians 15:58: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” This verse states the central issue for a Christian to keep in mind. Work is part of Paul’s conclusion to truths about the first resurrection; doing the work of the Lord is clearly related to our participation in it. The phrase “work of the Lord” is the key to what is important to God and therefore must be important to us if we are going to glorify Him.

On the basic and necessary level are Bible study and prayer, which everyone can participate in and do well in, according to their gifts. Then come more active works like serving, being kind and encouraging, being helpful, and being a good example to all. These basic elements are the works that most shape us into the image of God. As Jesus taught, we are to work in order to profit from that labor and carry it through the resurrection and into the Kingdom of God. These labors are the most critical to whether we will glorify God. They are the ones that our reward is based on. They are services to God and His Family.

The verse is a reminder, an exhortation and a promise to the church through Paul, that if we want to be in the first resurrection and experience its glory, we had better pay attention to this above all things in life. We must discipline our knowledge and energies into work because this is what life is all about.

In Christian love,



The Erosion of Religious Freedoms

Ever since the United States Supreme Court ruled against prayer in the public schools in 1962, religious freedom has been under assault, despite the fact that the Bill of Rights clearly states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The government, under the guise of the “separation of church and state” principle—which it perverted just enough to widen the scope of its attacks—has steadily barred religion from the public square, twisting the phrase, “freedom of religion,” to “freedom from religion.” Christianity, the primary religion of Americans, has been the chief target.

The tempo of the march against religious freedom has sharply increased in the last several years, particularly under the Obama administration. The following examples of blows against the free exercise of religion have occurred within the last five years:

- After a Christian photography company in New Mexico was sued for declining to photograph a homosexual couple’s commitment ceremony, the state’s Supreme Court held that the law compels the owners to compromise their religious beliefs. The business had to be closed.
- The city of San Diego pressured four Christian firefighters with disciplinary action if they refused to take part in its “Gay Pride” parade, during which the firemen were subjected to verbal abuse and sexual gestures. Winning their lawsuit, they were awarded \$30,000 in damages.
- A day after a visit from Federal Reserve employees, an Oklahoma bank was forced to remove Bible verses from its website, crosses from teller stations, and buttons carrying a Christian Christmas message.
- A Missouri university threatened to withhold a Christian student’s degree after she refused to write a letter to the state legislature in support of homosexual adoption.
- Under Obamacare, the Department of Health and Human Services mandated that all organizations (except churches) that offer group health insurance to provide for abortifacients such as Plan B (the “day-after pill”) and Ella (the “week-after pill”).
- In New Jersey, a second-grade public-school student was forbidden to sing “Awesome God” in an after-school talent show. Another girl in Port Charlotte, Florida, was barred from singing “Kum Ba Yah” at a Boys & Girls Club talent show because the song included the words “Oh, Lord.”
- Despite a previous written agreement to respect a pro-life nurse’s religious convictions, a New York hospital threatened her with termination and loss of license if she refused to participate in a late-term abortion.
- Florida withheld grant money from students attending Florida Christian College because the college did not satisfy the state’s “secularity checklist.” A lawsuit forced the state to reverse its policy.

- The Centers for Disease Control fired a Christian counselor because she refused to lie about why she was referring clients with same-sex relationship problems to other counselors.
- A third-grader in Plano, Texas, was forbidden to include a religious message in the goodie bags that he was bringing to the “Winter Party” to share with his classmates.
- A Cisco employee was summarily fired for his belief that marriage should be between a man and a woman, though he had never mentioned his view at work, but only in a book that he had written.

From just this sampling of infringements of religious liberty, it is plain to see that the trend is widespread. Christians, especially, are seeing their religious freedoms limited by federal, state, and local governments; schools and universities; institutions and corporations; and community groups. Liberty Institute, “a nonprofit legal group dedicated to defending and restoring religious liberty across America,” has documented a list of nearly 1,200 incidents of bigotry against religion in the U.S., most having occurred in the past ten years (<http://www.libertyinstitute.org/pages/survey-of-religious-hostilities>). While various courts found many of these occurrences to violate the First Amendment, too many have become legal precedent and the law of the land.

Another inference from the above list is that many of them involve Christianity’s stances against homosexuality, homosexual adoption, homosexual “marriage,” and abortion, all sexual-freedom issues. American values have been so turned on their heads that today, sexual freedom, which receives no mention in the Constitution or Bill of Rights, trumps religious freedom, which is specifically named. Moreover, as the New Mexico photography case shows, a Christian, protecting his conscience, cannot even politely say, “No,” to a homosexual without being hauled off to court for discrimination and losing his business along the way.

Many Christians and churches have tried to “stand in the breach” to uphold biblical moral values, but they have only delayed the crumbling of all barriers to sexual expression. Lately, all opposition has seemed ineffective, as California, for instance, now requires public schools to allow self-perceived transgender students, regardless of their birth gender, access to whichever restroom and locker room they wish to use. Clearly, the cultural trend in America is toward “anything goes” and nothing being stigmatized—or else.

And who but Christians would denounce “anything goes”? Thus, Christians have been targeted as enemies of “progress,” and every effort is being employed to stifle, ridicule, or delegitimize Christianity’s voice in society. So far, anti-Christian attacks have mostly been legal maneuvers, designed to marginalize Bible-believers, not yet reaching the level of outright persecution. However, Scripture warns repeatedly that true Christians will suffer intense persecution in the end time (see Luke 21:12-19; II Timothy 3:12-13; Revelation 6:9-11; 12:17; 13:7, 15; 17:6). To paraphrase our Savior, these incursions against our religious freedoms are just the beginning of sorrows.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Healing a Man Born Blind (Part Three)

Despite the joy of Jesus Christ healing the man born blind (John 9:1-41), the Jewish leaders conspicuously resist.

Divided into two camps, some Pharisees reason that Jesus could not be of God because He had broken the Sabbath, while others assert that a sinner could not do such miracles. The ensuing questioning of the healed man exposes a telling contrast between the Pharisees' "we know" (verse 24) and the man's "I know" (verse 25).

Amid all the wrangling, however, the healed man applies his common sense: "If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing" (verse 33). The man's progress of knowledge about his Healer is interesting, speaking of Jesus as a Man (verse 11), a Prophet (verse 17), and the Son of God (verses 35, 38). He believes, confesses, and worships (verses 35-38).

The man's implicit faith, his fearless confession of his healing, his utter disregard of consequences, his brave confession, his simplicity in confounding the "wise," and his belief in and worship of Christ are beyond commendable.



1. What part does knowledge play in the man's healing? John 9:12, 20-21, 24-25, 29-31.

COMMENT: The theme is suggested by the fact that each of the parties claim both to know and not to know something. Since the claims and the reasons for them differ, the contrasts highlight their various types of knowledge. By their questioning, the Pharisees try to discredit the man's testimony, attempting to find a cause to brand the healing a fraud and attack Jesus (verse 19). They imply that the parents should stop lying and come clean (verses 20-21). Yet, the parents affirm two facts: that the healed man was indeed their son and that he was born blind. They knew this, and they were not afraid to affirm it.

Conversely, they denied knowing how he came to see and who did the miracle. Why do they not acknowledge what they know of Christ's role in the healing? "They feared the Jews." They know that the leaders would excommunicate anyone who confessed Jesus as the Messiah. The parents simply did not want to get involved. They were afraid to acknowledge what had been revealed to them.

This is an accurate picture of many today. The truths of Christianity have been proclaimed to them—perhaps by parents, friends, or the church. Intellectually, they know and even believe these truths, but they will not admit them. They are afraid to acknowledge Christ for fear of the consequences.

2. Are the Pharisees and the parents lying about knowing Jesus? John 9:18-30.

COMMENT: The Pharisees, unable to extract damaging testimony from the parents, begin to interrogate the healed man more thoroughly. Apparently, he had been absent during the questioning of his parents, because the Pharisees attempt to finesse an admission out of him by pretending that they had learned the true story from them (John 9:24). In the ensuing exchange, they amplify their position (John 9:29).

The Pharisees also claim both to know and not to know something. They claim to know that Jesus is a sinner and that God had spoken through Moses. They claim not to know Christ's origin. Yet, what they claim and what they deny contradict (John 9:29; 7:27)—they are lying! Unlike the parents, who know the truth but will not admit it, these men

think they know the truth but are actually ignorant of it.

Sadly, this also describes many people today, particularly those pseudo-scholars and pseudo-leaders who claim to know all about Christ and Christianity but who have never really come to know Him personally.

3. What makes the testimony of the healed man different? John 9:25-29.

COMMENT: The healed man readily acknowledges his ignorance but then adds, "One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see" (John 9:25). Despite not knowing of Jesus, he is certain that He had changed him. In this, he becomes a type of the genuine Christian. They do not know everything, but what they know they truly know because they have met and accepted Jesus personally as Lord and Savior.

Unlike the others, the man humbly begins with his limitations in knowledge. Both the parents and Pharisees say "we know" first and only after they declare what they do not know (see verses 20-21, 24-29), revealing their cowardice or ignorance. The man first admits his ignorance but then affirms what he knows as the result of God's revelation.

In his humble state, he easily recognizes the lack of knowledge in others, in this case, the greater ignorance of the "educated" leaders of the people. Having eliminated false self-confidence as well as any unjustified confidence in the Pharisees, all that remains is what he truly knows: He could now see. Thus, he takes his stand on the certainties.

As Christians, beginning in ignorance and sin, we confess both our spiritual dependence and our failings. We realize that, unless God chooses to reveal Himself—which He does in His Word and in Christ—we can know nothing. No one can know God by means of human reasoning or by any other human instrument (Job 11:7; I Corinthians 2:14). Spiritual knowledge is not revealed even through religious tradition, but it comes through the intervention of God in history, in His written Word, and the opening of the mind by the Holy Spirit—and only to those whom God calls.

Jesus says to the once-blind man, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" Having been blind, do we now entrust our spiritual well-being to Jesus Christ?

—Martin G. Collins