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Christians tend to consider unity as "good" and division as "evil." God, however, gives us many examples in Scripture of Him judging His people and dividing them into two, often equal, parts. For example, in the Parable of the Ten Virgins, five are wise and five are foolish. In causing these divisions, He signals a reconfiguration of His people, showing who is approved and who is not.

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Why Hebrews Was Written

Part Four

In Matthew 16:15-18, Jesus prophesies about the church:

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say this to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

Christ had not yet built the church of God when this episode took place, though its formation had begun in that it had its Head, who had chosen and begun preparing a number of trainees, including the twelve apostles, to become part of it. Another year or two would pass before it would be prepared to begin carrying out its responsibility to preach the gospel to the world.

The epistle to the Hebrews did not exist when Jesus suffered a horrific beating and then was mercilessly crucified. Nor did it exist seven weeks later when Jews from all over the Medi-

terranean observed Pentecost in Jerusalem, and God gave a highly visible and audible demonstration of His awareness of this massive injustice while giving His Holy Spirit to those already loyal to our Savior.

The church did not officially exist until this last act, as God connected each of His chosen children with a truly holy, spiritual bond. Only then did the apostles and others began to fulfill their assignments from Jesus of preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God to the people of Jerusalem. Then the church began to grow significantly in purpose, numbers, and unity.

On that Day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2:40-41, “with many other words [Peter] testified and exhorted them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation.’ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.” After God healed a man’s crippling affliction at the Temple, one he had suffered since birth, Acts 4:4 reports, “many of those who heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.” In Acts 6:1, Luke writes that the number of disciples within the church was

multiplying, and the internal organization to care for the brethren was taking shape. The church, with a dramatic growth spurt, was actively coming into being, demonstrating to the unconverted Jews that it was a spiritual force to be reckoned with.

All this vital activity within the tiny organization named “the church of God” took place within about six months and changed the course of world history. It all occurred within a small, second-rate province of the mighty Roman Empire. Considering this thin slice of history, we know that the Creator God engineered this spiritual activity as He moved to reveal His creative purposes to more than just a few Jews within the Jerusalem area.

But how did the members of the church sustain themselves spiritually as they experienced and participated in these tumultuous activities motivated by the unseen hand of God? Indeed, Luke notes interested observers saying of similar events in Thessalonica, “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too” (Acts 17:6).

A Huge Assignment

Following His resurrection, Jesus gave the apostles broad and expansive instructions about their respon-

“Go therefore and make disciples
of all the nations,
baptizing them in the
name of the Father and of the
Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

MATTHEW 28:19

sibilities to Him. He did this immediately before the Day of Pentecost, charging them with what is generally called by biblical scholars as “the Great Commission”:

Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority

has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

Acts 1:4-8 adds a major detail to this already huge responsibility that involves all the nations of the world:

And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, “which,” He said, “you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” and He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

By stating this as He did, He was admonishing the apostles not to become fixated on the fulfillment of prophecies but to remain focused on preaching the gospel. For that end, He will give them power. He wanted them to concentrate on the job at hand. The Great Commission, though, is now not only global geographically, but in terms of time, it is also totally open-ended. Moreover, no God-given, intermediate goals are in sight. The church today must take its cue from the way Jesus Christ handled the situation with the first-century church.

A Small but Lively Beginning

What began at this critical time in history was that God’s global re-educational institution—the church, the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16)—was taking its first steps in teaching *everyone* worldwide how they should live. The church Jesus founded was beginning to preach the gospel from this starting point in both place and time, an activity that will eventually reach every person who has ever lived. In other words, beginning

then, the church became the focal point of God’s reeducation program.

Jesus was transitioning His work from what was merely an Old Covenant, Israelite, religious organization—of interest to relatively few outside Israel—to an educational organization that in terms of time will span thousands of years and become of intense interest to everybody. In directing the apostles in this way, Christ wanted His church to inaugurate this work yet keep it contained within the parameters He and the Father set as the church progressively developed at the speed it could handle effectively.

It may be helpful to remember that the earliest brethren in the church had to face their public responsibilities to Jesus without the help of what is now roughly one-third of the Bible—the New Testament. Scholars posit that the gospel of Mark was written first, followed by Matthew, Luke, and John. The earliest possible date even for Mark appears to be around AD 40, but some place it as late as AD 65.

In addition, it appears that I Thessalonians was the first of the epistles circulated within the church, but the apostle Paul did not write it until approximately AD 50. How many new converts even possessed their own copy of an Old Testament in their homes? Very few. There were no printing presses, no radio and television broadcasting, and no computers. To purchase a copy of the Old Testament would have cost a working man an entire year of wages! Was there a reference work similar to a *Strong’s Concordance of the Bible* for somewhat more serious researching? Of course not.

Looking back in this way confirms that the early preaching of the gospel was a work of faith, highly dependent on the apostles’ spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ. What likely sustained the members’ spirituality was the spoken word delivered to people who listened carefully and concentrated with great intensity. These “pioneers” were remarkable, spiritually-minded people.

The Jewish religious leadership perceived that the apostles lacked preparation for such a huge responsibility: “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). This terminology does not mean that the apostles had received no education at all. The wording expresses that the Jews considered the apostles to be common men who lacked the educational advantages they would have received

had they been prepared for such public evangelism in rabbinical schools. However, recall that Mark 3:13-14 establishes that Jesus chose and appointed those He specifically wanted as apostles so that they might be with Him (that is, to witness His teaching and activities), and He sent them out to preach. Undoubtedly, He was searching for budding characteristics that He could build upon. He prepared them well to carry out their responsibilities.

About 3,000 people responded to Peter’s sermon

“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.”

ACTS 10:34-35

on the Day of Pentecost. They listened intently, and due to God’s inspiration of Peter’s message, drawn entirely from the Old Testament, linking Jesus personally to the events mentioned in the sermon, they responded. They were, in a way, reliving prophesied events that were vitally important as a foundation for their times and most especially, for their nation’s future and ours.

What Might They Study?

However, the newest converts were still not as spiritually well-prepared as the apostles, not having had the advantage of the close companionship the apostles had had with Jesus during the three-and-a-half years of day-and-night experience with Him. Nonetheless, despite the intensity of the activity on the Day of Pentecost and the rising persecution of the church by the Jews that followed, each person called into the church received the Father’s careful scrutiny. He was not calling them to failure. Their calling was not a wild scramble to see who might grab the fabled brass ring. From God’s point of view, everything is done in love and given due deliberation, so He therefore does every-

thing judiciously.

The apostles moved rapidly to organize the people into local congregations so the called would have as much contact with them as possible. They wanted to ensure that, through Sabbath sermons and Bible studies, they could teach God's way most efficiently. Jesus essentially followed this procedure, and the apostles imitated Him.

What subjects dominated this early teaching? Since the apostles alone were truly close to Jesus, they likely began—as Peter did in his Pentecost sermon—with His personal fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, adding that He was their Creator as well as their Savior and King. Even as a human being, Christ was literally God in the flesh, and though He was now at the right hand of the Father in heaven, by faith they were to answer to Him and give Him their loyalty. It makes sense

“For by one spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—all have been made to drink into one Spirit.”

I CORINTHIANS 12:13

that this would be among the first thoroughly covered teachings to firmly establish His importance to their salvation and the outworking of God's purpose.

They would also pass on to them what they had witnessed of how He conducted Himself during the time they were with Him. Like us, they would have desired to know about His personal characteristics, including His way of dealing with the apostles as well as with the ordinary “man on the street” regardless of the reasons and attitudes of those who came into His presence.

They surely must have studied into the fact that He was the God of the Old Testament, the LORD, the One who personally entered into the covenant with Abraham. He was the One who dealt with Moses and the Israelites in Egypt and at Mount Sinai, making the Old Covenant with the descendants of Abraham, the human father of

Israel. This teaching would naturally lead to studies about the gospel of the Kingdom of God and the ongoing creative labors of the Father and Son, who are making sons and daughters in Their image.

This study would lead to a major area of life-changing instruction. Following the converts' baptisms, each of them, upon receiving the Holy Spirit, became a vital part of the spiritual Body of Christ. They would need to know their behavioral responsibilities as sons or daughters of God. I Corinthians 12:12-18 contains a pointed statement about the makeup of the church's membership:

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.

Most of the early converts were not being called to duty on the front lines, that is, to preach the gospel to large crowds as the apostles did. God was calling them to support the apostles by continuing their personal growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ and by making a witness through their conduct in their communities. Thus, the apostles would have addressed Christian behavior early. Their personal witnesses were important to the ongoing process God directed through Jesus Christ, though on a narrower scale than that of the apostles.

The Unconverted Jews Respond

The unconverted Jews did not take kindly to the church or to its message any more than they took kindly to Jesus Himself. He warned the apostles of this in John 15:18-21:

(continued on page 15)

Unity and Division: The Blessing and the Curse

Part Two: Judgment, Division, and Reconfiguration

*“And let the peace of God
rule in your hearts, to which
also you were called in one
body; and be thankful.”*

—Colossians 3:15

In Part One, we stressed the profound contrast between unity and division. God is the wellspring of unity and of the peace it brings, while Satan is the source of division and of the lack of harmony it unfailingly fosters. Unity and division make up a dichotomy, as much opposites as are good and evil.

We concluded on the note that there exists a distinctive sort of division, the sources of which are only secondarily Satan and human carnality. Rather, the prime mover of this sort of division is God Himself. It is the division—or the culling, if you will—that inexorably results from His judgment. Often as not, as part of God’s judging activity, He divides His (superficially) unified people into two groups, treating each group quite differently. In essence, the original group becomes two groups, separated by their level of commitment to God.

Gary Garrett, in his comments at the 2017 Feast of Tabernacles, finds two inexplicit though inarguable examples of this type of division among God’s people in Revelation 12 (where it is stated in highly symbolic terms) and in Galatians 6. He concludes his remarks: “Two groups of people are pointed out in Galatians 6:15-16. The first group is ‘as many as walk according to this

rule,’ and the second group is in ‘the Israel of God.’”¹

It is true. Examples of God’s dividing His people into *two* groups abound in the Scriptures.^{2,3} In this article, we shall look at several other illustrations of God’s judgments that result in division, noting some crucial commonalities among them.

New Testament Examples

Christ’s comments recorded in Matthew 24 and 25 make a good starting point. The context of these first two examples is an ancient, though terrifying, day of judgment:

For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. (Matthew 24:38-41)⁴

These two back-to-back examples, appearing near the conclusion of the Olivet Prophecy, squarely fit into the judgment-resulting-in-division model. In them, we see an unmistakable context of judgment on God’s part as well as a concomitant division into two groups, in this case, a fifty-fifty split.

Another example comes on the heels of the field hands and the women grinding. In this instance, Christ speaks of two individuals, both servants of God. God finds one to be wicked, the other wise.

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, “My master is delayed,” and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he

does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 24:45-51)

Again, note the fifty-fifty split in the context of judging. Christ judges the two servants, blessing the faithful one by setting him over His possessions, cursing the wicked one by cutting him in twain—the ultimate two-part division!⁵

The wicked servant finds himself “with the hypocrites” because, all the while, he has led a double life, pretending to serve God while actually laboring at cross-purposes to God by abusing God’s other servants.

The wicked servant finds himself “with the hypocrites” because, all the while, he has led a double life, pretending to serve God while actually laboring at cross-purposes to God by abusing God’s other servants. Like Satan, he has disguised himself as a minister of God (II Corinthians 11:12-15). As a result, he has scattered God’s people rather than gathered them (Luke 11:23). Unlike the wise servant, “who walk[ed] not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4), the wicked servant walked according to his own desires (II Peter 3:3-4; Jude 16-

19), all the while feigning faithfulness to God and His work. The wicked servant, like all hypocrites, has led a mock life, one of pretense.

Christ’s teachings segue nicely into Matthew 25, where the central theme is the reality of God’s judgment and how that reality should affect our thinking—and action. In the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), the ten virgins represent the entirety of God’s people as they go out to meet the bridegroom (verse 1). Their even-split is clear: “Five of them were foolish, and five were wise” (verse 2).

Their destinies were vastly different, though, as the wise were ready for the bridegroom, the foolish were not. Upon the latter “the door was shut” (verse 10). Here, the blessing and the curse is ever so poignantly expressed. We are left with the feeling that the five foolish ones were never true followers of Christ, having failed to renounce all (Luke 14:33). Christ tells them, “I do not know you” (verse 12).

Again, in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30), Christ mentions two (not three) groups, distinguished by their members’ attitudes toward obedience. One group is comprised of those who

fulfill their responsibilities by actively growing their talents, no matter how many (or few) God originally gave them. The other group contains those who refuse to grow their talents.

An Old Testament Example

Of the plethora of Old Testament examples of God's judgment resulting in division, one stands out.⁶ It is the vision of the two baskets of figs, witnessed by the prophet Jeremiah. While we cannot be sure of a fifty-fifty split here,⁷ it is patently clear that God is apportioning His people—Judah—between two groups, judging both in diametrically opposite ways.

Near the end of Jeremiah 24:1, the prophet writes⁸: “. . . the LORD showed me this vision: behold, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the LORD.” These two baskets represent two groups of people, both subsets of a larger group, the people of Judah. Continuing in verse 2: “One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten.” Verse 5-7⁹:

Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD, and they shall be My people and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart.

God “regards” (that is, He judges) the “bad figs” entirely differently.

But thus says the LORD: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. And I will send sword, famine, and

pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers. (Jeremiah 24:8-10)

Commentators Keil and Delitzsch observe that the words “sword, famine, and pestilence” refer to the curses cataloged in Deuteronomy 28.¹⁰

Considering these various examples in overview, we can identify a few commonalities. In them all, we recognize that God is judging, usually in an end-time context.¹¹ Evaluating a unified group (that is, workers in a field, grinders at a mill, virgins awaiting the bridegroom, servants of the same master, Judahites), He detects some type of essential disunion. The unity is superficial, more apparent than real in terms of the level of commitment and obedience He seeks. As a result of this

evaluation, God divides the group into two parts—sometimes overtly a fifty-fifty split.

The destinies of individuals in these two new groups differ vastly.¹² One part is blessed, the other cursed. The Scriptures bear no salient indication of a period of church unity at the end. All this is consistent with Paul's comments in I Corinthians 11:19 that “there must in fact be divisions among you, so that those of you who are approved may be evident.”¹³

These examples also illustrate another commonality: More often than not, God's judgment involves an element of surprise, even bewilderment, catching us off-guard—sometimes tragically so. The line of division He creates may be unfamiliar to us, unexpected. His judgment is not what we might expect, or the lines of division are unfamiliar to us. The wicked servant was not looking for the return of the master. The foolish virgins did not expect to run low of oil. The blessed were those deported from Jerusalem as slaves, not those who remained there.

That is all to say that God's judgment is usually athwart ours. His act of division is, in fact, one of *reconfiguration* along lines that can be quite different to what we are accustomed.

Next month, we shall focus on one of the Old Testament's best examples of this culling activity, and one that has real significance to the church of God.

—Charles F. Whitaker

God's judgment involves an element of surprise, even bewilderment, catching us off guard—sometimes tragically so.

Endnotes

¹ Garrett, Gary (October 9, 2017). "Who Is the Israel of God?" Retrieved from <https://www.cgg.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Audio.details/ID/4285/Who-is-Israel-God.htm>.

² As an aside, the division is polar, God separating or culling His people into two highly distinct groups. As a consequence of His judgment, He in essence bifurcates His people. This work of judgment parallels His creative work, which also centers around the building of various dichotomies: The pairings of good-evil, heaven-earth, light-dark, day-night, land-sea, male-female, and Jew-Gentile. Other important dichotomies appearing in God's under-the-sun creation include life-death, presence-absence, appearance-reality, subject-object, and hidden-revealed.

³ Some Old and New Testament examples are highly implicit. One of the subtler New Testament examples of the judgment-resulting-in-division model appears in I Corinthians 3:12-15:

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Three of the six substances the apostle Paul mentions in verse 12 are valuable: gold, silver, and precious stones. Three are lacking in value: wood, hay, and straw. Note the fifty-fifty split in this context of judgment.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

⁵ In verse 51, the Greek verb translated "cut in pieces" ("cut asunder" in the King James Version [KJV]) is *dichotomeō* (*Strong's Greek Concordance* #1371), appearing four times in two verses in the New Testament: twice in Matthew 24:51 (first use) and twice at its parallel passage, Luke 12:46. It literally means "to cut into two pieces." English derives its noun "dichotomy" from this word.

⁶ Some other Old Testament examples of binary divisions (often) related to God's judgment include the following:

1. Jacob's separating his family into "two companies" when he met Esau upon his return to the Promised land (see Genesis 32 and 33). Historically, this may be the first instance of such division. In it, however, is no explicit statement of a fifty-fifty split, nor is God's judgment clearly in view.

2. The division of Jerusalem into two halves by a powerful earthquake. The setting is clearly a day of judgment:

Behold, a day is coming for the LORD, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst. For I

will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. (Zechariah 14:1-3)

3. A relatively unknown parenthesis in the narrative of Elijah's battle with Ahab and his cadre of false priests:

Obadiah was a devoted follower of the LORD. Once when Jezebel had tried to kill all the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had hidden 100 of them in two caves. He put fifty prophets in each cave and supplied them with food and water. (I Kings 18:3-4; *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.)

This narrative ends the story as far as the biblical account goes. Here, the ratio is 50-50, though the concept of judgment is not at all explicit.

4. The classic and well-known division of Israel, namely, the God-initiated division of the United Kingdom (II Chronicles 11:1-4) into two parts under Rehoboam and Jeroboam (I Kings 12) and their successors, is not the best example. There is in this case no indication of a 50-50 split, either in terms of tribes or population, though the notion of judgment runs strong in the narrative.

⁷ The Hebrew word underlying "basket" is the same, whether referencing the good or bad figs. It is the feminine noun *te'en* (*Strong's* #8384). The word appears 39 times in the Old Testament, where the KJV translators render it "fig tree" (23x) and "fig" (16x). Its first use is in Genesis 3:7, where Adam and Eve sew fig leaves together for clothing.

⁸ See also Jeremiah 29:15-23.

⁹ Notice the reference to "first ripe" in Jeremiah 24:2. While at one level this prophecy is relevant nationally and historically, we are unable to miss the New Covenant language evident throughout this prophecy.

¹⁰ Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (1996). *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 1. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

¹¹ The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares may be relevant here (see Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). While God is aware of the presence of the tares, sown by Satan, He does not judge them by separating them from the wheat and destroying them by fire until the end of the age, at the time of harvest.

¹² A variation on this theme may appear in the narrative regarding God's choosing of Matthias over Joseph as an apostle replacing Judas (see Acts 1:15-26).

¹³ *NET Bible*® copyright ©1996-2006 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. <http://netbible.com>. All rights reserved.

The Elder Brother

Luke 15 opens with a hostile group of Pharisees and scribes confronting and criticizing Jesus Christ for receiving and eating with sinners. As He often does, Jesus does not respond directly to their criticisms but instead tells three parables: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son.

With the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus establishes the value of retrieving one lost sheep (symbolic of a sinner), even to the point of leaving ninety-nine others to search for it. He builds on this point with the next story, the Parable of the Lost Coin, by showing the effort a person naturally exerts when searching for a lost coin and the appropriate enthusiasm displayed upon finding it. Finally, He completes His lesson with the telling of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, by describing a father's joy upon the return of his wayward and reckless son.

There are three commonalities among these parables.

- Something valuable is lost.
- Then it is found.
- A joyful celebration follows.

Taken together, these three “lost and found” parables demonstrate not only the value of a saved life—even that of a sinner—but also the merciful and forgiving nature of God. However, the last parable in the sequence, the Prodigal Son, does not end with the celebration of the return of the one who is lost. Instead, at that point, another major character is introduced, the elder brother, and with his story, another pointed lesson for the scribes and Pharisees—and especially for us.

The narrative of this parable begins in Luke 15:11-13:

Then He said: “A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.’ So he divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.”

Here we witness the prodigal son, driven by excessive pride, heading down a dangerous path away from the security of life at home with his father. Not only did he display a foolhardy lack of patience, but in that time, to demand an inheritance early was considered an act of disrespect toward one’s father. It was as if he were saying, “Father, I wish you were already dead.” However, despite his son’s insolence, the father showed no anger and gave the boy what he had demanded.

SIN’S INESCAPABLE CONSEQUENCES

Sometime after that, perhaps years later, the young man was forced to accept a demeaning job, feeding and caring for swine, in order to survive. He had sinned against his father and was beginning to pay the price. However, verses 17-19 indicate he had begun awakening to the reality of his sinful actions and their rightful consequences. In short, he is ready to repent.

But when he came to himself, he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.’”

It is important to note that the prodigal son did not escape the consequences of his actions—he had sinned against God—but God humbled him and opened his eyes. Then verse 20 indicates how willing his father—representing God—was to forgive and show compassion even before the son had the chance to utter the words that he had prepared to tell him. God, we learn, looks upon the heart.

A MORE SIGNIFICANT LESSON

Verses 22-24 detail the father’s desire to celebrate the return of his son with a grand feast, upbeat music, and considerable merriment. For many readers, the parable essentially ends here. However, the remainder of the passage, verses 25-32, holds what can be considered an even more significant lesson to His spiritual brethren from our Savior.

At this point, Jesus forces us to consider the story of the prodigal son’s elder brother:

Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, “Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.” But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. (Luke 15:25-28)

The elder brother did not feel like joining his father’s celebration. We can imagine that he was likely full of resentment that had built up over the years of his little brother’s absence. The elder brother may have had to shoulder more of the work around the farm. What is more, his brother’s reckless behavior probably tarnished the family name and caused both his father and himself anguish and pain, as they likely wondered if they were ever to see him again.

PRIDE, THE SOURCE OF RESENTMENT

Perhaps the greatest source of resentment is exposed in verses 29-30, when the elder son responds to his father’s pleadings:

So he answered and said to his father, “Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.”

It is noteworthy that the elder brother refers to himself five times in verse 29. However, considering the circumstances, it is easy to understand his frus-

tration. He felt betrayed, disrespected, unappreciated, and perhaps even unloved. He had likely just finished another hard day's work, made harder for all these years by his little brother's absence. He was not in a forgiving mood, nor was he ready to accept—much less celebrate—his little brother's return to the family. He had long since declared, "I am done with him!"

Ignorant of all the facts of his younger brother's difficulties, leading to his repentance and return, the older brother reacted with typical, carnal emotion. Instead of trusting his father, his emotional outburst, fueled by the same pride that had nearly destroyed his younger brother, led him also to sin against his father. In his anger and self-pity, he lost sight of what was truly important. In addition, he failed to recognize the futility of trying to change or control what others do. Therefore, he also failed to control what he did have power over—his attitude and response.

The lesson here is not unlike what is related in Genesis 4. Cain allowed his pride to fuel great resentment against his righteous brother, Abel. This pride transformed Cain into a miserable murderer. However, we should keep in mind that even without murdering someone, unchecked resentment can also inspire harsh words that have deathly power. Proverbs 18:21 admonishes us, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit."

It is helpful to compare the elder brother's attitude to that of the Pharisees and scribes, since Christ was aiming this parable directly at them. Just like these Jewish religious leaders, the elder brother was living and judging by the letter of the law, not by its spirit. By all appearances, the elder brother was righteous, but inside, where a person's character forms, he was teeming with hypocrisy and sin.

A LESSON FROM THE FATHER

What can we learn from the father in this story? After all, if anyone was wronged in this parable, it was the two young men's loving father. Instead of reacting with the bitter hatred, envy, and self-centeredness of his elder son, he handled the situation with love, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. His wise words to his elder son in verses 31-32 help to put everything in its proper perspective:

And he said to him, "Son, you are always with

me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found."

In essence, the father tells his offended son, "Don't be so short-sighted, lest you become as greedy and foolish as your little brother. All that we have here is yours, so keep your eyes on the bigger picture and the greater reward."

We all long to feel appreciated—to receive our "fatted calf"—particularly if we strive to sacrifice and work hard in service to others. But we should never lose sight of the fact that the purpose of our faithful service is *not* for a pat on the back or the approval of others. Otherwise, we are no different from the Pharisees who did their works before men and thus, as Christ declared, "Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward" (Matthew 6:2).

In summation, the Parable of the Prodigal Son contains two important stories and a handful of invaluable lessons for practicing Christians:

- God is our only Judge, and He looks on the heart.
- Our sins have consequences.
- We should always be ready and willing to forgive any grievance as God does—unconditionally—and to seek reconciliation.
- Our walk should be defined by the spirit, not just the letter, of the law.

While both sons' sinful attitudes and actions brought dishonor upon the father, his willingness to forgive them both provided hope for all, just as our merciful Father in heaven provides for each of us. While the narrative ends without revealing what happened to the two brothers, it is worthwhile to imagine that they reconciled—that they healed their relationship and restored honor to the family name.

Because there is hope for reconciliation, we should pray for it—even expect it! Never give up on God. Those who are loyal and faithful and endure to the end will, one day, receive the greatest thanks and exaltation that measure far beyond our ability to envision. For Jesus Christ Himself will welcome those into His Kingdom with a resounding, "Well done, good and faithful servant . . . Enter into the joy of your lord" (Matthew 25:21).

—Ted E. Bowling

If Famine Falls Upon Us

When the staff of life lies broken, when all the bread is gone,
It may be as prophet Amos wrote—not a happy song.
“A wandering they will go out, from sea to sea,” said he.
“From north to east run to and fro; God’s Word you will not see.”

Our God gave His Word of Truth to His people for to glean,
But many choose to seek Him not, nor want Him on their team.
Some ne’er considered Jesus Christ, nor learned to love His truth,
While others left His grace and word to languish in their youth.

If famine falls upon us of “not hearing” of God’s Word,
It will be as from a bumper crop to no truth to be heard.
The Scriptures may not disappear nor verses from the page,
But hope to hear and understand could vanish from the age.

In times of fun and fancy digs, shown off out in the way,
With comfy words well-spoken where “diverse” and “tolerance” play,
Come evil men of subterfuge, deception, lie, and ploy,
With promises of better things—but then all hopes destroy.

Some say, “It couldn’t happen! Who could take our rights away?”
But those who dole and who control give rights to whom they may.
And sadder yet are those in debt and debtors soon to be.
Slave traders will divide their clans as Babylon decrees.

“Perdition” in God’s Word describes ruin, loss, destruction.
Now moms freely kill their babes by “rights of reproduction.”
The warnings we have spurned may soon swoop upon our nation.
That wicked way spirals down to end in tribulation.

The lawless rule; anarchy reigns; they hate God’s way of peace.
Destruction looms ’mid promises of freedoms and relief.
Deceivers still try to confuse the mercy His grace brings,
But who can hide or yet escape God’s day of wrathful things?

A famine of hearing God’s words may start at twilight time,
As when God’s day of truth does end, His light also declines.
We dare not waste of day or light—then only night have we.
Hearing God’s good Word brings men faith. In darkness, who can see?

—Loren Saxton

(continued from page 6)

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love it own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me.

Led by Jewish religious leaders, the anti-God reaction was almost immediate. Acts 4:1-3, 14-21 records the first incident:

Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. . . .

And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, "What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name." So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done.

What a vivid example of the perversity of human nature! Instead of glorifying God as virtually everybody else in the crowd was doing, the

Jewish leadership severely threatened the perpetrators of this wonderful and merciful act, giving no praise to God for His merciful part in it! Instead, they attempted to deny all the others in the crowd access to additional mercy God may have been willing to shower on them!

Human nature never changes, so we must be careful. Though subdued, it remains part of our makeup and must be held in check and overcome.

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These Jews, motivated by the same enmity we all have against God and His laws (Romans 8:7), were following the pattern set by their ancestors when they killed the prophets God in His mercy had sent to them.

In Matthew 23:27-37, Jesus had prophesied against the citizens of Jerusalem that this would occur:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, "If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets." Fill up, then the measure of your fathers' guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah,

son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

The persecution intensified, but the church continued to grow because the apostles kept preaching, and God responded with conversions. We have no accurate idea of how many were martyred, but God chose to let us know of one particularly vivid martyrdom, that of Stephen in Acts 7:51-58:

[Stephen said to the Jewish leadership,] “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.” When they heard these things they

“For which of you,
intending to build a tower,
does not sit down first
and count the cost, whether he
has enough to finish it . . .”

LUKE 14:28

were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the

city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Pain Was Near at Hand

Persecution was not limited to what occurred publicly. With perceptive wisdom, Jesus admonishes those “coming to Him”:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sister, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, “This man began to build and was not able to finish”? Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. (Luke 14:26-33)

Jesus draws attention to the disciple’s closest relatives, those a person would normally expect would be those most likely to give comfort and aid in a time of need. Yet, in this case, the irritants were differences regarding deeply held religious beliefs and practices. To many of the new converts, the realities of the pains to which the church was exposed came “home” in an uncomfortable way. Their unconverted family members sincerely believed that the Judaism they practiced, delivered to the Jews through the great Moses, was the only true, God-given religion on earth.

Many new converts’ unconverted family members did not graciously accept the unexpected changes that had entered their relationship, and they reacted emotionally. The converts soon found themselves living with enemies in their households. As one can imagine, these family persecutions were quite personal. The converts, caught in divided families, may not have been treated violently, but they were considered traitors to what

all the other family members believed the Temple, priesthood, and sacrificing stood for.

This reaction happened because the Jewish religion was, in reality, spiritually corrupt and almost thoroughly anti-God. Had not the Jewish religious leadership just proved that by sending God in the flesh to an agonizing death because they failed to recognize God when they saw and heard Him? The anti-God attitude that the Jewish religious leadership tapped into and stirred against Jesus as He was tried before Pilate was more widespread and deeper than it may have seemed on the surface. Animosity toward the converts spread quickly through the communities of Judea.

It was not long before the Jews excluded the converts from any activities that involved the revered Temple. Though most of the converts may not have had to endure violent persecution at the hands of someone like Saul, they did endure emotional persecutions within their own families—it must have felt as if they were living in an alien world. The personal, emotional cost to those in this situation may have been quite high.

The Circumcision Decision

From the Day of Pentecost in AD 31 to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70, cultural tensions built steadily within Judea as the church continued to grow in numbers. This period included the significant conversion of Saul of Tarsus by Jesus Christ while Saul journeyed to Damascus (Acts 9). Though many brethren feared him at first, perhaps not trusting that his conversion was sincere, he became one of God's most effective instruments in all of church history for producing unity of doctrine.

Saul, whose name was changed to Paul, authored thirteen epistles and possibly a fourteenth, the epistle to the Hebrews. No one took written credit for this epistle, but some not-completely-conclusive internal evidence plus a few snippets of information from other New Testament books points to this apostle. He played a vital role in helping the church to decide how to address the major doctrinal disagreement reported in Acts 15.

This issue was of such importance to church doctrine and unity that it was decided by the apostolic leadership in Jerusalem. Peter and James, Jesus' flesh-and-blood brother, convened a major conference to bring the two sides together to discuss the matter and reach a decision. Paul and Barnabas were also present because they repre-

sented one side of the issue, and many other elders were present, presenting arguments for one side or the other.

Central to the issue was whether non-Israelite converts to Jesus' way of life should undergo circumcision. However, the issue involved more than mere circumcision, despite one side insisting that such a new convert did not qualify for salvation without it. The issue ultimately involved all the ceremonial aspects of the Old Covenant religion given by God through Moses, including such things as the place of the Temple, sacrifices, and the priesthood under the New Covenant. This point was critical to the conference because Jesus made abundantly clear that not even one jot or tittle would pass from the law until all is fulfilled (Matthew 5:18).

Acts 15:1-5 sets the scene:

And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and

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dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things

that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying. "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

A Charge Signaled

Several years before, this issue had been broached in an incident in which Jesus gave an ever-so-brief preview that some changes in the worship of God were in order (John 4). Jesus had journeyed into Samaria and engaged in a conversation about worship with a woman of Sychar at what the locals called "Jacob's Well." Jesus actively engaged in the conversation by asking her to give Him a drink from the well, a significant deviation from normal Jewish practice. The woman obliged

"But the hour is coming,
and now is, when the true
worshippers will worship the
Father in spirit and truth;
for the Father is seeking
such to worship Him."

JOHN 4:23

Him but questioned His speaking openly with a Gentile woman.

Their conversation eventually led to proper worship, and from Jesus' answers, the woman perceived that He was a prophet. The conversation then proceeded as recorded in John 4:20-26. Recall that circumcision, required since Abraham, was an act of worship required by God:

She said, "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salva-

tion is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to Him, I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When He comes, He will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He."

Jesus is clearly signaling that some activities involved in the worship of God would change despite having been required practice since at least the time of the building of the Temple by Solomon, a period of about a thousand years. Also within the context is Jesus' hint that the nature of worship would be changing from rote public ceremonies to more heartfelt devotion and personal interaction with God.

The general term "worship" is first and foremost a verb, an action. Worship is motivated by a desire to honor another. In the Bible, this action is almost always directed toward God, though it is directed at times toward others, even fellow humans and false gods. When worshipping the true God, the worshipper is often described as bowing down, in a posture of listening for instruction and ready to obey, or kneeling, all picturing submission to someone of greater authority and seeking to please him. In an overall sense, then, worship portrays submissive service to another of greater power or dignity.

In Jesus' statement to the Samaritan woman, He describes the Father as a Spirit, saying that those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. His statement qualifies true worship as being on a higher, purer level than virtually everyone at the time was accustomed to giving. The fact that "Spirit" is first capitalized, identifying a divine Being to be worshipped, and the next time uncapitalized and coupled with "truth" indicates Jesus is signaling a positive change in approach to worship.

Thus, a link exists between the change signaled by Jesus in John 4:23-24 and the higher, different standard the church council enacted in Acts 15 regarding circumcision and baptism. More to follow.

In Christian love,



Denying God From the Pulpit

Most people, if asked what the first qualification of a Christian minister should be, would likely answer that he should believe in God. It only stands to reason that a servant of God should believe in Him as the Supreme Being. Following closely after would be that he believes the Bible is God's authoritative Word, containing His instructions for how we are to live. A minister needs to have a Sacred Text to inform and guide his teaching.

Not everyone among the churches of this world would agree with such commonsense answers. In early November 2018, the United Church of Canada—by their own admission, one of the most theologically liberal churches in the world—decided that one of its ministers, Gretta Vosper, could maintain her credentials and keep her job at West Hill United Church (UCC) in Toronto despite being an avowed atheist.

Vosper “came out” as an atheist in 2001, saying that she did not “believe in a supernatural, interventionist, divine being.” In its glacially slow response, the UCC took nearly 17 years to decide her standing with the church. The denomination tolerated her atheism without censure until 2015, when two things occurred:

1. The UCC changed its policy to require its clergy to affirm the church's creed, which Vosper decried as “an archaic, doctrinal statement that describes God in a way that is incomprehensible and no longer has meaning for me or many within the United Church.”

2. Following the 2015 Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris, perpetrated by radical Islamists, Vosper wrote an open letter to the church's spiritual leader, declaring that belief in God can motivate bad things. There is no record of her considering that not believing in God can also motivate evil.

From that point on, Vosper was under disciplinary review, though still allowed to maintain her pulpit at West Hill. In September 2016, though found “unsuitable for ministry” by a Ministry Personnel Review Panel, she continued to retain her position. The church conference requested that she be stripped of her credentials and removed from ministry, and a “heresy trial” was scheduled for late November 2018 to make a final judgment about her fitness for continuing as a minister of the UCC.

In the meantime, however, the UCC's top brass changed. In July 2018, the Right Reverend Richard Bott was elected to lead the denomination. During a confidential meeting with the denomination, Vosper and the UCC arrived at an undisclosed settlement, the upshot of which was that she could remain a minister and keep her job at West Hill. In a public statement, Bott said that he is happy with the resolution, while ironically and contradictorily referring to the church's core values of faith in God and inclusiveness.

Certainly, the UCC is an ultra-liberal denomination, but what has sustained Vosper in her pulpit has been the leadership and core membership of West Hill United Church.

The chairman of its board, Randy Bowes, claims that Vosper represents what the church is all about, saying, “West Hill's non-exclusive language provides a church experience that draws participants across a wide spectrum of belief and unbelief.”

Perhaps Vosper's Twitter description—“Irritating the church into the 21st century”—best describes what she represents. When questioned about it, she replied, “[I'm] doing a pretty good job, don't you think?” She took this path, she says, because the UCC was not moving fast enough on its evolutionary, progressive path toward putting God and His Word in its rearview mirror.

West Hill's congregants love her and would have likely fought or left the denomination if her credentials had been revoked. They knew even before 2001 that she did not believe the Bible was “the authoritative word of God for all time,” a conviction she had held long before her ordination—and is evidently a belief that is common among United Church of Canada clergy. (She credits the UCC seminary she attended for teaching and grounding her in her liberal, atheistic views.) West Hill's congregants were the ones she told first when she decided to declare her atheism, and while some left the church, enough stayed, applauding her courage and forthrightness.

So, what do they do at West Hill United Church services? According to the *Toronto Star*, “Prayer turned into community sharing time. Hymns were rewritten. Talk of God and Jesus was replaced with talk of love, compassion and beauty.” God and His Word have been all but removed—Vosper will sometimes refer to a biblical example in a sermon—replaced by progressive ideology: tolerance, inclusiveness, openness to everything LGBTQ, and community idealism. In fact, she says that, to her, the long-term goal of the church is to create healthy, engaged communities.

In a CBC News interview, Vosper declared her humanistic views:

God as [the] source of goodness and as the way that goodness comes into the world and as the promise that everything is going to be good whether in this lifetime or in the afterlife, that God doesn't exist anymore. We have to recognize that we are the only way goodness is going to get into this world. And we define what's good, . . . so we are the creators of good.

The mainline, so-called Christian churches appear to be heading in the same direction—toward hollow, humanistic, communitarian, social organizations, carrying on as “churches” but really preaching liberal social and political ideology to biblically ignorant people. The apostle Paul describes such people in Romans 3:18, quoting Psalm 36:1, “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Having sown the wind of denying God, they—and we—had better prepare to reap the whirlwind.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

What Is Propitiation?

Part One

God the Father is spiritually pure, incorruptible, and undefiled. By way of contrast, Moses records God's description of humanity just before the Great Flood: "So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth" (Genesis 6:12). The apostle Paul adds this declaration in Titus 1:15-16: "To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled . . . being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work."

How, then, can a corrupt and defiled human ever have the kind of relationship—required for salvation—with the spiritually pure and incorruptible God (Job 25:4)? How can God justify His benevolence toward guilty humanity, which is worthy only of the death penalty? Since humanity's corruption interposes a seemingly inexorable chasm of judgment and wrath, actively separating man from God, how can there be any agreement—any reconciliation?

To the repentant sinner, through the atoning blood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God provides a way across the formidable chasm (Colossians 1:20-23).

The term for this provision is *propitiation* (Hebrews 2:17).



1. What is propitiation? Why is it necessary? Romans 3:10-20; 23-26; 6:23; Isaiah 59:2.

COMMENT: The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* states, "Propitiation needs to be studied in connection with reconciliation" (II Corinthians 5:18). *Easton's Bible Dictionary* defines it as "that by which God is rendered propitious, i.e., by which it becomes consistent with His character and government to pardon and bless the sinner." Propitiation signifies what Christ became for all mankind—a sacrifice capable of bearing and absorbing God's judgment while turning His justifiable wrath to favor (Romans 5:8-9). It expresses the idea that Jesus endured His crucifixion to pay the price for sin that a holy God demands from the sinner (Genesis 2:17; Romans 1:32).

Propitiation is necessary because humanity's sinful nature stands in defiance of God's sacred law and holiness (Romans 8:7), separating people from God (Isaiah 59:2) and earning them the death penalty (Romans 6:23). God does not cause the separation but man. Therefore, someone—sinless and of perfect nature and held by God in the highest regard (Colossians 1:19; Matthew 3:17)—is required to intercede for man, to atone for human sin and guilt and alter humanity's standing before God—and in turn—to alter God's disposition toward mankind. This "someone" is Jesus Christ (Hebrews 2:17; Romans 3:24-25).

2. What was required of Christ to become our propitiation? Hebrews 4:15; 9:26, 28; Luke 9:22.

COMMENT: Our Savior's perfect, sacrificial life and death were not merely displays of His righteous prowess. God the Father required Christ's unblemished life and death so that the law's legal requirement—that there is a price for every person's sins—could be satisfied once for all by His shed blood (II Corinthians 5:15; Hebrews 9:28). Furthermore, only a sinless Jesus Christ, as the antitype of the

unblemished sin offering (1 Peter 1:19; Leviticus 9:3; John 1:29), could appeal to God the Father as our Advocate without compromising His righteousness or law (Job 8:3; Deuteronomy 32:4), thereby atoning for the repentant person's sins and reconciling him or her to God (Psalm 51:1-4; Romans 3:25-26; I John 2:1-2).

3. Does propitiation originate with God the Father? Romans 8:3-4; II Corinthians 5:18-21; Ephesians 1:3-8, 11; I John 4:9-10. Does it change Him? Psalm 102:27; Malachi 3:6.

COMMENT: Being immutable, God is always the same (James 1:17). He always knew that man would sin and thus need a special means of salvation that does not naturally exist. So, from before the foundation of the world, God foreordained Christ to provide that special means (1 Peter 1:17-21)—to be our propitiation. This process does not change God—merely His disposition (Jeremiah 18:8; Joel 2:13). In fact, by appeasing His wrath, it provides the means to restore the relationship that—before sin—existed between Him and humanity (Acts 3:19-21; Malachi 3:7).

4. What must the sinner do to take advantage of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice? Luke 24:46-47; Acts 3:19.

COMMENT: It is by the Father's plan (Romans 8:3-4) that Christ's sacrifice has rendered Him propitious toward all men, converted and unconverted (I John 2:2). We can thank God that the penalty that would prevent us from receiving salvation has now been paid for all sinners. However, a person *must* repent, accept Jesus Christ as his or her personal Savior, and be baptized in order to receive the benefit of His propitiatory sacrifice (Acts 2:38; Luke 13:3).

In the next issue, we will focus on the Greek terminology critical to understanding the origin and fulfillment of the propitiation process.

—Martin G. Collins