

Where Do You Belong?

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Regardless of your worldview from within the chaos and confusion going on around us, I am pretty sure that anyone who has carefully considered Deuteronomy 28 will agree that verses 15 through the end of the chapter are more obvious than ever before. God means what He says, and it will continue to get worse if there is not a major move to repentance and heading back toward living His Commandments of *true* outgoing concern for others.

God wants His people not to be caught up in this, and because of this God is constantly making sure we are aware of all the pieces of this death spiral that could trap us, and it does get overwhelming at times. In these commentaries, we try to keep everyone informed as to what is going on in world events. But for this reason, I hope to make this commentary a little bit lighter today, even though I still hope you will see a problem intrinsically carnal in human nature that could easily trap us.

A couple of weeks ago, on the perfect 10x7 anniversary of Nancy's birth, we were sitting at breakfast, sharing memories of our childhood and our times with our siblings, parents and grandparents. We were talking about family stories, and in the course of the conversation we began to reminisce about my grandfather, who had retired when I was a teen from an executive position at Illinois Bell Telephone. But, in spite of his responsibilities with the phone company when he retired, he was fond of telling me the story of his first job with Illinois Bell. He started his career as a home-to-home coin collector. In the '20s, he actually had to go from house to house, collecting the coins that people needed to put into a box connected to the telephones in their homes before they could make a call. People would put their coin in the slot, pick up the phone, and then ask the operator to make the connection for them. At the time, that was hi-tech!

By the time Nancy and I were kids in the '50s, we were living large. Our families had one rotary dial phone in our homes that were on monthly billing plans that were rather expensive if we called outside our small designated area. But we could call others within our area directly.

Nancy's family phone was Hudson 3-5181 and mine was Prospect 8-2222. (We had a simple phone number that normally belonged to businesses before of Grandpa Schindler.) Nancy had 4 sisters, and as the 5 of them grew up, her father put a lock on the rotary dial on the phone so the girls couldn't be calling outside the designated region. And of course all of them, as teenagers, were fighting for phone time to talk with the friends, especially their boyfriends, where conversations could last for hours.

As Nancy and I discussed this, we tried to remember when area codes and the total numeric system of phoning someone began, because as strange as it may seem to some of you younger folks, when we were kids, you dialed a named phone exchange and then five numbers.

I would like to read a section cited from a fairly amusing 2014 article that appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine's technology section, which we will use as a rather silly but apt warning regarding our own carnal nature. The article was written by Megan Garber, who is a young American culture feature writer for the publication. She writes in the article entitled, "Our Days are Numbered: The Evolution of The Area Code":

Long-distance digits long ago shed their monetary worth, but they gained something else in its place: cultural value.

In the mid-20th century, in response to the United States' rapidly expanding telephone network, executives at the Bell System introduced a new way of dialing the phone. Until then, for the most part, it was human operators—mostly women—who had directed calls to their destinations.

Dialing systems had reflected this reliance on the vocal cord. Phone numbers weren't numbers; they were alphanumeric addresses, named after phone exchanges that encompassed particular geographic areas. The Elizabeth Taylor movie *Butterfield 8* gets its name from that system: The *Butterfield* exchange served the tony establishments of Manhattan's Upper East Side. Lucy and Ricky Ricardo, should you have attempted to call their apartment, were apparently reachable with a request for "Murray Hill 5-9975."

That system evolved, slowly. In 1955, AT&T—after it researched ways to minimize misunderstandings when it came to spoken phone directions—distributed a list of recommended exchange names featuring standardized abbreviations. (Butterfield 8 would become, under that system, BU-8; Murray Hill 5-9975 would have been shortened to MU 5-9975.)

For instance, when Nancy and I were burning up the phone lines between our houses in the late '60s, Nancy was Hu-3-5181 and I was Pr-8-2222.

Megan Garber continues:

But engineers at Bell had been conducting their own research into the scalability of the name-and-number system. They had ambitions to expand the national phone network; their own research had concluded, among other things, that the country could not supply enough working women to meet its growing demand for human operators. Automation, Bell concluded, would be the future of telephony. And "All-Number Calling"—no names, anymore, just digits—would be the way to get there.

... I want to tell you about the controversy the Bell System's embrace of numeracy provoked—how resentful some people became when their familiar method of making phone calls was taken from them. I want to tell you about why the change was necessary, and how it still informs our conception of phone calls and text messages. I want to tell you about the future of the phone number.

But first I want to tell you about the Central Coast of California.

You used to be able to access this sparkling little section of the country, over the phone, by dialing the 408 area code; in 1998, the area stretching south of San Jose, and on down the coast to King City, was split off. It all became, suddenly, 831.

Brethren, Megan Garber is now going to reference a beautiful community on the Pacific Coast, a few hours south of San Francisco. For any of you that have never been to Carmel by the Sea, downtown Carmel is like Rodeo Drive on steroids. If you want to talk about a tony/stylish area of the country, this is it! You need to keep this in mind as we continue this commentary.

Megan Garber writes,

I grew up in Carmel, smack in the middle of the new code region; my first cell phone number—the only cell phone number I have ever had—bears that 831 preface. I have held on to those three digits through happily-multiple changes of location (New Jersey, New York, Boston, Washington) and through unhappily multiple losses of handset. The powers that be—hardware salespeople, cell service representatives—have, at one time or another, tried to force me into a 609 and a 917 and a 617; each time, I have resisted. Because I am not, fundamentally, a 609 or a 917 or a 617. I am not even, my current residence notwithstanding, a 202. ***I am an 831***, wherever I may be in body, and will remain an 831 until they pry those three otherwise totally meaningless digits out of my cold, dead iPhone.”

I am not alone in this. As *MIT Technology Review*’s Brian Bergstein told me: "Of course we didn’t know it at the time, but now it seems that the atomization of area codes was a prelude to the microtargeting that fuels political campaigns and advertising: it renewed our perceptions of who people are. When I grew up in the San Fernando Valley, it and all the rest of L.A. was 213. You had to travel a long way to get out of 213, which might have subtly enforced the fallacy that L.A. was actually a coherent city rather than a mere patchwork. Sure, there were always ZIP codes to differentiate fancy neighborhoods from nondescript ones, but a phone number was and is part of an introduction—it’s a calling card in itself, not merely numbers on your actual calling card. You give people your phone number if you like them, not your ZIP code. So when the Valley became 818 when I was a kid, suddenly the Valley’s separateness became more tangible to me. We weren’t all in it together any more. If you gave someone your phone number you instantly revealed yourself as an “***other***” to someone from 213, which covered the side of the city that was cooler than the Valley and its cheesy suburban sprawl. My grandparents lived in 213 and consequently they suddenly seemed more urban to me."

Megan Garber continues a bit farther along in the piece,

The rise of monthly cell service, with its flattening of the national phone grid, transformed the area code from an economic signal into a purely cultural one—and ***one that has the ever-more-rare virtue of connecting its owner to a physical place***. You could liken an area code, now, to a sports team affiliation. Or to an alma mater. Or to an insistence that soda ***is properly known as "pop."***

She quotes another author later in the piece as proclaiming, "the three-digit code now functions as a kind of shared social media handle, ***a collective identity***."

Brethren, through the rest her lengthy piece, she goes on to explain the history of the change that took place and the carefully planned rollout over years that AT&T needed to do through the 1950s, 60s and 70s to make a successful and acceptable change in the way all of this worked in order to expand the system. A good chunk of it was technical, but just as much was the AD campaign to get people to buy into it. Organized and sometimes violent protests actually took place through those years, as people decried the dehumanization of the phone system! But in the end, it became an intrinsic part of the Brave New World we see today.

Her article was both entertaining and historically enlightening, but the bottom line I want us to get out of this today is the trap set in the carnal mind to tenaciously seek to belong to what *we* believe, from our own deceptive hearts, that pridefully separates us from others.

This is a difficult thing for any of us to admit, but this is exactly what the apostle Paul addressed in I Corinthians 3. I would like to read it to you from *The Message Bible in Contemporary English* that goes right to the heart of the matter:

I Corinthians 3:1-6 (*The Message Bible*) But for right now, friends, I'm completely frustrated by your unspiritual dealings with each other and with God. You're acting like infants in relation to Christ, capable of nothing much more than nursing at the breast. Well, then, I'll nurse you since you don't seem capable of anything more. As long as you grab for what makes you feel good or makes you look important, are you really much different than a babe at the breast, content only when everything's going your way? When one of you says, "I'm on Paul's side," and another says, "I'm for Apollos," aren't you being totally infantile? Who do you think Paul is, anyway? Or Apollos, for that matter? Servants, both of us—servants who waited on you as you gradually learned to entrust your lives to our mutual Master. We each carried out our servant assignment. I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plants, but God made you grow.

I Corinthians 3:18-23 Don't fool yourself. Don't think that you can be wise merely by being up-to-date with the times. Be God's fool—that's the path to true wisdom. What the world calls smart, God calls stupid. It's written in Scripture, He exposes the chicanery of the chic. The Master sees through the smoke screens of the know-it-alls. I don't want to hear any of you bragging about yourself or anyone else. Everything is already yours as a gift—Paul, Apollos, Peter, the world, life, death, the present, the future—all of it is yours, and you are privileged to be in union with Christ, who is in union with God.

Brethren, we saw a good example of the carnal mind that is driving things these days, dividing the world more and more. We live in a world driven by pride, a pride that can subtly drive ourselves to think, "I belong to someone or something better than you do." We are living in a world so divided in so many ways, and even within God's church we see the "my group is better than yours" carnality rearing its ugly head.

Brethren, we must stay humbly loyal where God has placed us, but make sure that we are asking God to help us not hold onto our own 831 area code! Together, we belong *only* to Jesus Christ.