

Muscle and a Shovel: A Review

by

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Michael Shank, *Muscle and a Shovel: A raw, gritty, true story about finding the Truth in a world drowning in religious confusion* (5th edition, 2013; Kindle version). I have cited the book with chapter number first, then the Kindle location. For example, Chapter 1, location 245 is cited as 1:245.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In 2011, Michael Shank published the story of his own conversion. He describes how he was convicted by his encounter with the word of God as an African American co-worker named Randall led him through Scripture. Previously, Michael was a church-going Baptist whose sincerity was authentic and whose life was decent and moral but less than thoroughly dedicated. In other words, Michael was “Christian” in mostly a nominal sense (4:582-596).

He was awakened from his apathetic slumbers when Randall, in the light of 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10, asked, “have *you* obeyed the gospel of our Lord?” (3:449). Michael soon learned, through Randall’s gentle questioning, that “saying the Sinner’s Prayer is not obeying the gospel of Christ.” This set Michael on a quest, mostly under Randall’s tutelage, to “know what the gospel was and how people obeyed it” (3:484).

Shank’s narrative describes his search to answer that question. In addition to Randall (who gave him Bible verses on pieces of paper, studied with him before work, and talked with him at work), Michael also questioned Baptist pastors and other church leaders (Lutherans, Methodists, etc.), visited several different churches (including at least one Community church), and pursued other conversations as, for example, with his good friend Larry with whom Randall had recently studied.

Searching “for the gospel and how to obey it” raised many questions for Michael, which Randall addressed. They discussed how the church is organized (pastors, elders, bishops, deacons?), what kind of music a church should use (instrumental?), denominationalism, Calvinism, unity, and tithing as well as other questions. Michael wanted to know the truth—he asked religious leaders, read his Bible, researched at the library, and studied with Randall.

In the end, Michael and his wife Jonetta were baptized at the Jackson Street church of Christ in Nashville, TN.

The book is an evangelistic narrative. Michael Shank came to the conclusion that though he was “saved” at the age of eight in a Baptist church and was immersed at

the age of thirteen in a Baptist congregation, he had not really obeyed the gospel. He only obeyed the gospel when he was baptized on March 15, 1988 at 1:15am (38:6004).

What was the difference? Why was his prayer at eight and his baptism at thirteen ineffective? What moved Michael to baptism at the age of twenty? Why was this baptism obeying the gospel but the other was not? Answering these questions are some of the book's major themes. The story explains the difference, as Michael came to understand them.

However, this is not only an evangelistic narrative, it is primarily an extended evangelistic tract. Towards the end of the book, Michael invites his readers to obey the gospel:

“Friend, if you’ve read this book in its entirety you have been taught of God” (38:6103).

“Someone gave you this book for a reason....Will you obey the gospel of Jesus Christ or will you reject it?” (38:6112, 6121)

Chapter Thirty-Nine, after a brief history of the Sinner’s Prayer, outlines “God’s marvelous plan of redemption and salvation, which is” (39:6278ff):

Hearing or reading. The Word of God must be preached (taught and heard) or it must be read by the individual (39:6282)

Believing. God’s Word must be believed with the entirety of the heart and mind (39:6299).

Repenting of past sins. The believer who seeks salvation by the grace of God through the blood of Christ must have a true willingness to turn away from all practices of sin (39:6310).

Verbalizing a public profession of one’s belief that Jesus is the Son of God. Every accountable, responsible soul who believes the gospel of Jesus Christ (His death, burial and resurrection) is commanded by God to confess their belief publically (Matt. 10:32-33) (39:6334).

Submission to the passive act of being baptized [immersed] into Christ for the remission of sins. Baptism is the only passive step in God’s salvation process, because an individual has to submit themselves into another’s hands for the process to be performed (39:6357).

Michael's story climaxes with an evangelistic appeal, with words of invitation:

“Won't you yield your will and your life to the love and teachings of Jesus Christ? Won't you become a true Bible Christian? Give the Lord your life. He will bless you in this life and the life to come.

Won't you obey the gospel before it is eternally too late? Repent and be baptized for the remission of sins. The Lord will add you to His church.”

“Friend, if you decide to obey the gospel, a wonderful new life awaits you” (39:6485).

Michael portrays his own conversion story as an objective search for truth in the Scriptures. His final chapter (Forty) begins with this appeal:

Please let me point out something that I hope is completely apparent. I've used no personal interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. I've merely shared my story and revealed the Scriptures of God just as it happened.

Here's the hard part. Will you accept the simple, plain, straightforward teaching of God's Word (40:6502)?

Michael encourages everyone “to get out your shovel and dig. Read the Word for yourself. See whether the things I've shared with you in this book are really so” (40:6560). It takes “muscle and a shovel” to discover for oneself what the Bible teaches. It takes some persistent willingness (muscle) and honesty (shovel) to dig deep enough—to work hard enough—to discover the “Truth.” “It takes a heart that is willing to dig. It takes an honest heart (Luke 8:15) that is willing to lay aside preconceived ideas” (24:3846).

Studying the Bible requires hard work. It takes self-discipline and due diligence. It requires prayerful consideration of the text you're reading along with the remote text of the other books.

Reading the Bible isn't a casual read like reading a paper-back novel or the daily paper. The Bible is a rich, deep, literary, living gold-mine filled with everything thing that mankind needs for life. Eternal life.

Studying and understanding the Bible isn't for the lazy. Studying the Bible requires muscle and a shovel. Mental muscle and a willingness to use honest intelligence (the metaphorical shovel) to dig deep beyond all of our preconceived ideas, our false beliefs and our comfortable traditions. Studying the Bible takes muscle and a shovel. (21:3462).

So, Michael asks in the final paragraph of the book (before the Epilogue): “If a member of the church of Christ (Romans 16:16) gave you this book, won’t you take a moment to share your thoughts with them? They are praying that you will” (40:6580).

The book has been effective in some quarters as thousands of baptisms are attributed to reading it or some connection with it (over 67,000 sold), according to a report in the *Christian Chronicle*. The book has gained a wide hearing and Shank invites his readers to talk about it.

I purchased a Kindle version of Michael’s book through Amazon. I have read it, and now I want to share some thoughts about it with you.

CHAPTER TWO

What Did Michael Find When He Dug Deep?

Shank's persistent use of "muscle and a shovel" unearthed "the Truth." Within four months, with Randall's guidance, his "diligent digging" moved through all "the mud and the sand and the gravel of a lifetime of erroneous religious teachings." He dug through his "own personal ideas" as well as the "false teachings" of "denominational pastors and reverends" and finally found "God's scheme of redemption" (37:5938-48).

What was this a new discovery for Michael? Clearly he knew about the soul-saving blood of the Lamb before he started digging and studying with Randall. So, what "Truth" did Michael find? He states it succinctly:

Every man and woman can bathe in the precious stream of soul-saving blood. How? Through any water that's used for proper scriptural baptism. Christ's blood is found in those waters (37:5952)

The "Truth" Michael discovered was essentially "proper scriptural baptism," and how this ushered him into "the true church of Christ," which is the body of Christ (26:4246). This is the basic message of the book, that is, it is "about the gospel and the church of our Lord" (22:3562).

The Gospel and Baptism

"Have you obeyed the gospel?" was the question that ignited Michael's search (3:449). Michael wanted to discover what the gospel is and how to obey it.

Gospel

What is the gospel? Though there is no extended discussion of the content and meaning of the gospel, he does offer a brief definition.

The gospel is “the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ” (30:4972), an “historical event” (30:4980). This provides a stream of blood that cleanses our sins and a resurrection from the dead that provides the hope of eternal life.

This is the gospel of grace, that is, “Grace is God’s unmerited favor which instructs us” (32:5369). How does this grace bring salvation? “By instructing and teaching us. Grace teaches and men must obey.” We receive this grace by faith, which is “our exercise of obedience to His instructions” (32:5372).

In other words, we obey God’s grace, that is, to be saved by grace is “obeying (faith) God’s grace (instructions)” (37:5958). Michael ultimately exercised “real Bible faith by obeying God’s commands” and thereby received God’s “grace through obedience” (37:5960).

Relation of Gospel and Baptism

“It’s the Bible that reveals there are,” Shank writes, “only two types of people on the earth: those who obey the gospel and those who do not” (32:5365). So, the critical question is “how does one obey the gospel?” How does one “obey a historical event?” (30:4980). Randall responds, “To obey the gospel is to reenact the gospel” (30:5005).

- We die to a life of sin. This reenacts the crucifixion. Our willingness to die to sin is repentance (30:5007).
- We reenact the burial of Christ in baptism as we enter a watery grave just as Jesus was buried in a tomb (30:5011).
- We “reenact the resurrection” in baptism as we are lifted from the watery grave to live a new life and to live in the hope of eternal life (30:5015)

What happens in the water is God’s own work. This is no human work of merit. Rather, “we undergo an operation by the hand of God” where God “symbolically” circumcises our hearts and forgives our sins (35:5748). This is the moment God saves because it is the moment we reenact the gospel; it is the “split second in time” when sins are washed away (38:6075).

This is a critical discovery for Michael. Once convinced the Sinner’s Prayer was insufficient for salvation, Michael saw that baptism is the sinner’s prayer. It is the

moment sinners call upon God for their salvation. Shank devotes chapter Thirty-nine to this point because it is so important in his own journey. He states:

The Sinner's Prayer is a false doctrine promoted by men and women who are ignorant of God's World. It is an erroneous approach to salvation which has no root, example, command or authority of [sic] the Holy Scriptures.
(39:6276)

Since it is the gospel that saves and baptism is the reenactment of that gospel, God saves in baptism because of what God does in baptism. Consequently, Michael emphatically states, **"The argument that men and women can be saved before baptism is a lie. It originates from the father of lies who was a murderer from the beginning and in whom is no truth"** (21:3453, emphasis in original).

But it must be a biblical baptism, that is, a baptism just like in the Bible.

Bible Baptism

Baptism, Michael discovered, is a transliteration of the Greek word *baptizo*, which translators substituted for an actual translation. As Randall explained, an actual translation was problematic because they believed pouring and sprinkling water were sufficient for baptism. *Baptizo*, however, means "to immerse." Consequently, according to Randall, they transliterated the word so that it might easily include sprinkling and pouring despite what the Greek word actually means (18:2640-2675). Only immersion is biblical baptism.

Further, only believers are candidates for biblical baptism. While Michael did not have to work his way through the maze of arguments for infant baptism (since he was already a Baptist at the time), the book identifies the faith required for scriptural baptism. One must give a "public confession of belief that Christ is God's Son" before baptism (35:5769; cf. 35:5742). Faith precedes baptism, and baptism without faith is not biblical baptism.

But most importantly, since the two previous points were already part of Michael's experience (he was immersed in water as a believer at the age of thirteen at a Baptist Church), baptism is only biblical if the believer submits to it for the "right reason." Specifically, Randall said, "If you get into the water of baptism

thinking that your sins are forgiven before you get into the water, you're not being baptized for the right reason. That's not Bible baptism" (35:5677). The "right reason" is to be baptized for (in order to receive) the remission of sins in accordance with Acts 2:38 (21:3360). So, Michael reasoned, "if I got into the water thinking I had no sins, I was not baptized for the remission of sins. I wasn't baptized like those in the Bible were baptized. It wasn't biblical" (36:5872).

The church of Christ

The blood that saves the soul through baptism also purchases the church. In other words, through contacting the blood of Christ in the waters of baptism we become part of the blood-bought church (9:1206). Since Jesus purchased the church with his blood, no one can be "saved outside of His church" (22:3565). Just as no one was saved outside of Noah's ark, so no one will be saved outside the church. "That is why you must be in the church of Christ for salvation" (25:4165).

For several mornings in early 1988 Randall and Michael met to study the Bible. Randall asked Michael, "Did you know that His church exists today?" (23:3558). They devoted their study to what a Bible-practicing church looks like. But how does one know which church is "His church"? Michael ultimately rejected the "lies" (24:3914) that counsel, "Join the church of your choice because they're all approved by God" (24:3887) or "The way you worship doesn't matter" (24:3892).

What, then, are the criteria for identifying the "church of Christ"? "The way you identify the true church of Christ today is" by what "it teaches and how it practices" (26:4247). Here are some of the conclusions to which Michael came.

First, the church is united. There is only one church, which is the body of Christ. This oneness entails that the church teaches "the same doctrine" and that there are "no divisions (denominations) among you," and that it is "perfectly joined together in the same mind and judgment (same beliefs, practices, teachings and behavior)" (22:3629). The church of Christ, the body of Christ, is uniform in doctrine and practice, as it stays "united in the teaching of Christ" (22:3609). There are no

denominations within the body of Christ. Denominations are not part of the body of Christ

Consequently, the church of Christ is non-denominational. It has no earthly head or organization. Rather, it is composed of autonomous congregations that teach and practice the Word of God (25:4130). In fact, it is not denominated in any way, that is, it has no “proper name.” The phrase “church of Christ” is a “descriptive term” synonymous with “Christ’s church” (25:4132). What Michael found in the Bible is the “church of Christ in both name and practice,” but he did not find any denominations or inter-denominational groups (e.g., Community Churches).

Second, the church is led by godly elders, deacons, and evangelists. “Each congregation is self-governed by Elders” (25:4180; cf. 29:4822, 32:5388) or “Elders and Deacons” (26:4464). “Deacons assist in the service of the church” (25:4180). Michael discovered that no congregations in the New Testament were governed by a single Pastor (32:5388). “Preachers” in the New Testament are called “evangelists,” and their task is to proclaim the “gospel to the lost” (29:4817). The evangelist proclaims or heralds; he does not govern. The evangelist and the pastor are not the “same man” in the New Testament (29:4827). Godly, for Randall, meant—at least in part—that the elders are neither divorced nor remarried, and they have more than one child, all of whom are faithful (29:4884).

Third, the church practices the “five articles of worship” every first day of the week (26:4251). These constitute the church worshipping “God in truth and in Spirit, John 4:24” (26:4249). This is an exclusive list—nothing should be added or subtracted.

Here are the five (26:4251):

1. They partook of the Lord’s Supper.
2. They prayed together.
3. They sang songs, hymns and spiritual songs.
4. They gave as they’d been prospered.
5. And they were exhorted by preaching.

More specifically, the church of Christ participates in the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week and only on the first day of the week, and Sunday is not the Christian Sabbath (26:4290). The church of Christ sings with their voices and refuses to use “mechanical instruments” in their worship of God (27:4706). The

church of Christ does not tithe but gives weekly in proportion to how God has prospered them—and does not take up an offering at any other time (26:4443-47). Randall and Michael spent a great deal of time talking about each of those three points. They were central and significant differences between the “church of Christ” and the “denominations.”

The church of Christ practices and believes only what is prescribed in the Bible. It is the New Testament church because, guided by the New Testament alone, it neither adds nor subtracts from what is prescribed there.

Conclusion

Towards the end of the book, Shank provides a significant summary of both the gospel and the church. It comes in the context of Michael’s final musings about his potential decision to be baptized (32:5354ff). Since there are only a “few” who will find the “narrow way,” it is important to confirm what the Bible teaches. He then rehearses the main points of the book, including the one body, baptism, the “five articles,” a cappella music, giving, church government, rejection of creeds, and the name “church of Christ,” which is a “Bible name for a Bible thing” (32:5399).

In essence, this is the teaching of Christ about the gospel, how to obey it, and what constitutes the true church of Christ. This is the substance of *Muscle and a Shovel*. According to Shank, one must reenact the gospel through immersion in water for the right reason (for the remission of sins) and be “faithful to the [right] church” (25:4005) in order to have eternal life.

This explains one of Randall’s earlier statements, which startled Michael, and—no doubt—astounds some readers. Nevertheless, it is the clear import of what Randall taught Michael.

“Mr. Mike,” [Randall] said meekly, “from my understanding of God’s Word, if you’re a member of a denomination, whether it be Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Mormon, any church that Jesus Christ did not establish and buy with His blood, there’s no question that you’re headed toward eternal destruction” (6:941).

CHAPTER THREE

Aspects I Appreciate

There are many aspects of Shank's *Muscle and a Shovel* that I appreciate, and I agree with a quite a number of his conclusions on biblical points.

Agreements

For example, I value a non-denominational approach to Christianity, a high view of the independence and importance of the local congregation, the government of the congregation by wise, experienced, and godly elders, weekly communion at the table of the Lord, and an emphasis on congregational generosity rather than imposed financial programs.

I also value believer's baptism. Indeed, there is much in the book about baptism that I would affirm. Though I disagree with some of Shank's conclusions on baptism (more on that later), I appreciate how baptism is given more significance than the "Sinner's Prayer." Much of what is said about the history of that prayer and its function in twentieth century revivalism is on target. Indeed, I have suggested in other places that baptism is the sinner's prayer (cf. my 2004 *Down in the River to Pray* with Greg Taylor, p. 197).

I welcome the reports of baptisms that arise from the reading of *Muscle and a Shovel*, and ***I rejoice when anyone is immersed in obedience to God out of an authentic faith in Jesus.***

I could write more, but further agreements will emerge in coming posts even when I disagree with how something is nuanced or framed. I will leave that to the future rather than repeating myself here.

Appreciation

What I most appreciate most about the book is how Randall serves as a model for us.

In fact, Shank says this is one of the major reasons for publishing the book. He wanted to encourage us: “Will **you** become a Randall?” (40:6736). When he reviewed the notebook that he rediscovered in 2008, he knew “Randall’s attitude, approach, love, sincerity, persistence, scriptural ability, compassion, faithfulness, and desire to save the lost was a story that needed to be told” (40:6652).

Randall was kind, but firm. He did not fight, but he was nevertheless convicted (5:746). There was sincerity but no animosity (5:731). He apologized when he offended (9:1153) but told the truth when asked. Randall, according to Shank, exhibited character traits that he had “rarely seen in others who wore the Christian label. Love and humility” (5:750). His “encouraging, meek” and “respectful” approach to Michael demonstrated that this was a person who “really loved God” (5:853).

Randall models a disciple who studies the Word and shares it. Rather than leaving “Bible study” to the professionals, the clergy, or the preachers, Randall memorized one Bible verse each week by writing it on a 3x5 card and devouring it throughout the week (40:6660). This memorization program is one way Randall owned knowing selected texts for himself.

“Every Christian is a minister or servant of Christ,” writes Michael (29:4869). This is a function of the priesthood of all believers. And Michael believed Randall embodied this principle in his knowledge, character, and evangelistic fervor.

One of the most encouraging aspects of the book is how everyone is called to read the Bible for themselves without a slavish dependence upon creeds, Pastors, or traditions. Everyone must pick up the shovel and dig; pick up the Bible and study it. Everyone must take responsibility for their own spiritual journey, including whether and how they read the Bible.

Another formative aspect of the story was its inter-generational and multi-racial nature. Randall is an African American and Michael is Caucasian; Randall was in his mid-thirties and Michael was twenty; Michael served in a higher capacity in the company for which they both worked. Michael was baptized at the Jackson Street church of Christ, which is, arguably, the “mother” of all African American churches of Christ. Marshall Keeble called this congregation home, and Alexander Campbell

(African-American), S. W. Womack, G. P. Bower, and Keeble planted it in 1896. The Jackson Street church has long honored God in many ways, especially in their support of evangelism and a passion for the lost. So, this is a beautiful testimony to how two men can study together, love each other, and embrace each other in the Lord despite their social, economic, generational, and ethnic differences. It truly embodies Colossians 3:11—what matters is a renewed image of God, not our economic, social, or ethnic status.

The relationship between Michael and Randall illustrates how one person can lead another into deeper discipleship. Michael saw the testimony of Randall's life, and Randall loved Michael enough to speak into his life. The fruit of this relationship is the heart of the story.

CHAPTER FOUR

On the Use of History in the Story

The function and use of history in making an argument about the “Truth” is difficult to nail down. This is especially true when everyone agrees that the Bible is our normative authority, that is, the ultimate and final criterion of Truth is Scripture.

In that context, neither Shank nor I use history to prove the “Truth” of any particular point. Rather, we use history to persuade, illuminate, or critique as well as provide a context for seeing the Bible more clearly, or to demonstrate how something is of recent origin.

For example, *Muscle and a Shovel*'s best use of history is its material about the “Sinner’s Prayer” (chapter 39). The use of this prayer arose in nineteenth century revivalism, was popularized by Billy Sunday in the 1910s-1920s, effectively used by Billy Graham in the last half of the twentieth century, and recently reaffirmed as a biblical mode of conversion by the Southern Baptist Convention (2012). “Asking Jesus into your heart” became a popular phrase in the 1970s, especially among Children’s Ministers (though the idea of “receiving Jesus into your heart” is an old seventeenth century Puritan expression). I might quibble with some of the particulars Shank notes about its history, but he is essentially correct. This was part of North American Revivalism—and it did not appear on the global stage until exported by North American missionaries. European traditions do not have “invitation songs” and “altar calls.” (The invitation song was even questioned by some within churches of Christ, like James A. Harding, because it was too emotional.)

The Sinner’s Prayer is an innovation in Christianity that arose in the nineteenth century. It was not, in its present form, part of a biblical conversion narrative. History illustrates the distance between the biblical text and the contemporary practice of the Sinner’s Prayer.

At the same time, *Muscle and a Shovel* contains some serious historical errors. These are not important because the “Truth” is at stake. Only the Bible can verify the “Truth.” They are serious because they are part of the argument to persuade, and to

the extent that there are inaccuracies this detracts from the validity of the point. Historical inaccuracies—even unintentional mistakes—are not only unfair and misleading, but they also create suspicion in the minds of readers.

Consequently, I want to offer a few corrections, which might help clarify the historical aspects of the book's argument. This list is not exhaustive, but representative. In general, the historical allusions in *Muscle and a Shovel* are misleading, inaccurate, or incomplete.

1. *"John the Baptist started the Baptist Church"* (8:1082).

When Michael asks his Baptist Pastor when the Baptist Church began, the Pastor responded, "Well, John the Baptist started the Baptist Church" (8:1082). He further claims that "Baptists say that John the Baptist started the Baptist Church" (9:1184), and this "proclamation" by his denomination, Michael ultimately concludes, is "a lie" (9:1302). Michael tells us that he heard this from "dozens" of Baptist Pastors (19:2875), and they "alleged that John the Baptist started the Baptist Church" (19:2881). Through his own research, Michael discovered the Baptist Church "claimed an unbroken succession from John the Baptist." So, Michael's understanding of the Baptist position was that John the Baptist started the Baptist Church and that Baptists claimed an unbroken succession of churches from then till now.

Michael's understanding, however, is inaccurate. Whether he received this information from Baptist Pastors or from his own reading at the library, it is misinformation. There is nothing inappropriate with recording what happened and what he thought at the time, but what is inappropriate is to leave the impression that this is, in fact, what Baptist Pastors, as a group, actually believe.

There is a small segment of the Baptist tradition that still makes successionist claims, but they are very small minority and usually associated with Landmarkism (cf. W. Morgan Patterson, *Baptist Successionism: A Critical View*, 1969). Perhaps Michael was originally from one of the churches in that tradition, and if so, this would explain some of his assertions.

But the real problem is the claim that “John the Baptist started the Baptist Church.” Only the most fringe Baptist Pastor would make such a statement, and some come close. For example, Douglas Hammet in his Kindle-published *Why I am a Baptist* calls Jesus a “Baptist” because John the Baptist baptized him. But this is not standard Baptist teaching, and is rejected by the vast majority of Baptists. A better book would be Tom Nettles *Why I am a Baptist* (2001) published by the Baptist Publishing House Broadman & Holman.

Baptists recognize that Jesus Christ founded the church; they would acknowledge no other founder. Even the most adamant popularizer of Baptist Successionism, James Carroll, the author of *Trail of Blood* (1931), strongly affirmed: “1. Its Head and Founder—CHRIST. He is the law-giver; the Church is only the executive. (Matt. 16:18; Col. 1:18).” This was Carroll’s first and primary mark in his list of the “Marks of the New Testament Church.” Other marks, by the way, include the Bible as the “only rule of faith and practice” and “congregational” polity.

At the most, what an informed Baptist might mean by “John the Baptist started the Baptist Church” (and no informed Baptist would ever say such a thing!) is that Jesus, who is the founder and head of the church, was baptized by John.

What Michael heard from some Baptist Pastors was not, especially in 1988, standard Baptist teaching. Baptists believe that Jesus Christ founded the church and that Jesus is the only head of the church. To leave any other impression as part of the argument for the “Truth” is misleading.

Actually, the name “Baptist” came from their practice of adult baptism rather than any links to John the Baptizer. It started as a pejorative label by their opponents (much like the name “Christian” did in the New Testament). All Baptists that I know, both in the academic and popular literature, recognize this.

2. *“Infant baptism would have been destroyed as well”* (18:2687).

This statement is made in the context of why the King James Version translators rendered *baptizo* as “baptize” rather than “immerse.” The translators, however, did

not originate this procedure. The Tyndale New Testament (1526) transliterated *baptizo* almost a century before the King James Version. It was standard practice among English translations before 1611.

But why did they transliterate? The transliteration leaves an ambiguity, though not entirely. Robert Cawdrey's English Dictionary of 1604 gives the first definition for "baptize" as "dipping." The charge that translators could "mask the word's real meaning" (18:2658) is wrong. In fact, England (in both Roman Catholic and Anglican communions) practiced immersion more than it did sprinkling or pouring in the sixteenth century. This is one the reasons why immersionist Baptists arose in England in contrast to Mennonites in Holland who poured water for baptism.

In any event, immersion would not have destroyed infant baptism. That was not the issue. The Eastern churches still immerse infants in water, and the Church of England often immersed infants in the sixteenth and seventeen centuries. In fact, the first edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* (1549) dictates immersion for infants unless they are weak. Michael's story leaves a wrong impression about immersion and infants as well as the motives of the translators.

I prefer the translation "immerse" myself, but this does not justify impugning the motives of the KJV translators.

3. *Concerning Calvinism.*

Michael spent "hours" at the "local library" (20:2966) studying denominationalism, and he discovered that "almost every denomination was influenced by Calvinism" (20:2987). So, Shank devotes most of chapter Twenty explaining his rejection of Calvinism. But most denominations are not Calvinistic, including Methodists, Pentecostals, Nazarenes, Mennonites, Anglican (Episcopal), Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, etc. It is simply not the case the "almost every denomination was influenced by Calvinism" if one means by that they were influenced by the TULIP.

I have no interest in defending the five points of Calvinism (the TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the

perseverance of the saints). While I myself reject each point in classical Reformed (Calvinistic) theology, it is important that we describe their position fairly and with respect.

For example, Michael concludes—based on the doctrine of total depravity—that “John Calvin wants you and I to believe that innocent babies who die before they come to age whereby they understand right from wrong are actually going to be eternally damned” (20:3022). Actually, Calvin said just the opposite:

I everywhere teach that no one can be justly condemned and perish except on account of actual sin; and to say that the countless mortals, taken from life while yet infants, are precipitated from their mother’s arms into eternal death, is a blasphemy to be universally detested. (“De Occulta Dei Providentia,” in *Opera*, 8:644, as translated by Charles W. Shields, “The Doctrine of Calvin Concerning Infant Salvation,” *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 1 (1890) 641.)

Christ does not there [John 3.36] speak of the general guilt in which all the posterity of Adam are involved, but only threatens the despisers of the Gospel, who proudly and contumaciously spurn the grace that is offered to them. But this has nothing to do with infants...Every one whom Christ blesses is exempted from the curse of Adam and the wrath of God. Therefore, seeing it is certain that infants are blessed by Him, it follows that they are freed from death (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.16.31).

Another example concerns the perseverance of the saints. Michael writes, “I loved this last Calvinist doctrine, ‘once saved always saved!’ Yes ladies and gentlemen, get saved and live like Hell! If you’re saved you can’t do anything to undo it. If you’re not really saved then you can’t do anything to undo that, either. Do people really believe this junk called Calvinism?” (20:3090).

Actually, Michael confuses two doctrines, which many people do. One is the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints that affirms that all the elect will persevere in faith by the power of God, and the other is the doctrine of “Eternal Security” that affirms that if one has ever truly believed then they are eternally saved whether they continue to believe or not. The former is Calvinism, but the latter is of more recent vintage that influenced many Baptist churches through Darby and Schofield dispensationalism. The latter is, technically, “once saved always saved.” Calvinism does not believe one can “live like Hell” since this does not

manifest authentic faith. The perseverance of the saints affirms that God will persevere the elect in faith, that is, believers will continue to grow and mature in faith as they exhibit the evidence of God's work in their life through good works. Calvinists do not believe one "live like Hell" and be saved.

4. *Concerning Instrumental Music.*

Randall asserts (27:4620),

Early in the Reformation Movement all of the denominations that came out of Catholicism (Anabaptists, Baptist movement, Lutherans, Calvinism, Presbyterians, Methodism, Mennonites, etc.) sang *a capella* [sic], without instrumental music. None of the denominations used instruments. All of them were in unanimous agreement. They believed that instruments of music were idolatry and were not to be allowed in worship.

With all due respect, that statement is simply wrong. Randall suggests that the Roman Catholic Pope Vitalian first introduced instruments in 660 A.D, and Protestant opposition early in the Reformation was part of its anti-Catholic polemic as well as a return to biblical practice.

While I could raise a number of questions about the first six hundred years [we know the organ, for example, was used in Spain at least two hundred years before 660; cf. Hopkins and Rimbault, *The Organ, Its History and Construction*, p. 13], I will focus on the above statement about the "denominations."

Actually, two major approaches arise out of the Reformation. While both valued a strong emphasis on congregational singing and the function of song for teaching the Word of God, one tradition (primarily the Reformed [Calvinism]) was *a cappella* and the other (Lutheran, Anglican) was instrumental.

Regarding Luther, Randall's quotation from Luther is nowhere in Luther's writings. It is based on hearsay or second-hand reports. In contrast, there is clear evidence that Luther embraced instrumental music in worship. In fact, when Karlstadt, a proto-Reformed advocate, attempted to implement some theses in Luther's absence from Wittenberg in 1521-1522—including banning polyphonic and instrumental music—Luther returned to oppose him (Barge, *Karlstadt*, 492,

cited by Robin A. Leaver, "Luther as Musician," *Lutheran Quarterly* 18.2 [Summer 2004], 125-183).

Further, here is some evidence that Luther affirmed instrumental music.

The stringed instruments of the...Psalms are to help in the singing of this new song; and Wolff Heinz and all pious, Christian musicians should let their singing and playing to the praise of the Father of all grace sound forth with joy from their organs, symphonias, virginals, regals, and whatever other beloved instruments there are (recently invented and given by God), of which neither David nor Solomon, neither Persia, Greece, nor Rome, knew anything. [Commenting on Psalm 4, a dedication in a Bible presented to Wolf Heinz, cited by Robin A. Leaver, "Luther on Music," *Lutheran Quarterly* 20.2 (Summer 2006), 132.]

Luther wrote to Prince Joachim of Anhalt on June 16, 1534, "So Elisha was awakened by his minstrel and David himself declares in Psalm 57 that his harp was his pride and joy: "Awake up, my glory; awake psaltery and harp." And all the saints made themselves joyful with psalms and stringed instruments." (p. 133). [Letter to Prince Joachim of Anhalt on June 16, 1534, cited by Tappert, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, p. 94.]

Certainly if you make use of music as David did, you will not sin. (p. 133). [Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (1528) in *Luther's Works* 16:62.]

The Word should be read, sung, preached, written and set in poetry. Wherever it may be helpful and beneficial, I should gladly have it rung out by all bells and played on all organ pipes and proclaimed by everything that makes a sound. [Luther, WA, 19:73, 22-25, as cited by J. Andreas Loewe, "Why do Lutherans Sing? Lutherans, Music, and the Gospel in the First Century of the Reformation," *Church History* 82.1 (March 2013) 88.]

The Church of England (Anglicans) used instruments in their worship until, under Queen Elizabeth, the Act of Uniformity in 1559 rendered it suspect, though it still happened. For the next hundred years, the landscape varied considerably in terms of the use of instruments as most organs were removed from the churches. This is the period when Puritanism and Presbyterianism rose in influence, and they advocated a Reformed [Calvinistic] approach to worship. In 1563 the Parliament attempted to pass a bill forbidding polyphonic singing and instrumental music, but it narrowly failed. However, with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the use of

instrumental music was renewed and organs were restored to the churches. (Shanon, *The Evolution of Organ Music in the 17th Century*, pp. 100-101).

Methodists, led by John Wesley, were a lay movement within the Church of England. Since they were often excluded from parish churches, they met in homes and fields. They also were divided into various “clubs” or small groups. In these small groups they usually sang *a cappella*. But this was not so much out of conviction about the legitimacy of instruments as much as it was about the circumstances of their meetings. As they established churches and chapels in England in the later years, they often placed organs in them.

Randall quotes a statement from John Wesley that has never been found in any of his writings. In fact, it only appears in one of Adam Clarke’s commentaries. [*Muscle and a Shovel* actually quotes it twice—once from Clarke’s commentary (27:4640) and once supposedly from Wesley (27:4658), though not precisely in the same language.] In contrast to Clarke’s undocumented quote, there is ample evidence that Wesley embraced instrumental music.

“We had a large and serious congregation at the new church, both morning and afternoon. The organ is one of the finest-toned I have ever heard; and the congregation singing with it make a sweet harmony.” John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1867), on April 2, 1786, in volume 4, pp. 314-315.

Sacred Harmony: or a choice Collection of Psalms and Hymns. Set to Music in two and three parts, for the Voice, Harpsichord and Organ. [That is the title page of Wesley’s 1781 hymnbook, which was used by Methodists.]

So, it is simply inaccurate to say that all the denominations coming out of the Reformation, or even early in the Reformation, opposed instrumental music. It is more accurate to say that those denominations that arose in sympathy with the Reformed worship tradition opposed instrumental music, such as, Anabaptists, Presbyterians, Puritans and the early Baptists. This would include John Calvin and John Knox whom Randall quotes.

However, in many of these cases, it was a preference rather than a conviction. For example, Randall quotes Spurgeon’s comments on Psalm 42 in his *Treasury of David* (27:4650). But he does not acknowledge that Spurgeon affirmed instruments

as expedients; he did not believe they were “unlawful.” His commentary on Psalm 33:2 says,

We who do not believe these things (instruments – SW) to be expedient in worship, lest they should mar its simplicity, do not affirm them to be unlawful, and if any George Herbert or Martin Luther can worship God better by the aid of well-tuned instruments, who shall gainsay their right? *We* do not need them, they would hinder than help our praise, but if others are otherwise minded, are they not living in gospel liberty?

5. *Alexander Campbell and the Restoration Movement.*

Since Michael has heard the church of Christ described as “Campbellites,” Randall explained some of that history. Randall describes Campbell as a Presbyterian who “became a well known Baptist preacher” (30:5085). There is a sense in which that is true, but it depends on what one means by “Baptist preacher.” Randall claims that Campbell “over time rejected his own Baptist creeds” and “his own Baptist doctrines” when he discovered that the Bible did not support them (30:5093).

I don’t think Campbell would recognize himself in those statements. While it is true that after his immersion in 1812 his congregation joined the Redstone Baptist Association, they did so on the condition that they would not be bound by any creed. The Campbells never thought of themselves as owning “Baptist creeds” or “Baptist doctrine.” From the time of the *Declaration and Address* in 1809 they saw themselves as pursuing a non-denominational course, and they were interested in planting congregations shortly after the publication of that document. Campbell, in other words, had opposed the Philadelphia Confession of Faith even before he was immersed and associated with the Baptist Association.

While explaining the origins of the “Restoration Movement” (30:5086), in part begun and led by Campbell, Randall offers significant positive commentary on the movement, which led to the restoration of “the church of the Bible” (30:5095). That is fair. I would echo much of what he says.

At the same time, some of what Michael and Randall condemn as “false doctrine” in other parts of this story—and such that would render a group unfaithful—is also affirmed by Campbell. In other words, the book participates in a kind of selective silence. For example, Campbell did not agree with Randall that “the right reason” (35:5677) for baptism is the remission of sins. The way Randall explains this was explicitly rejected by Campbell as destructive of the Restoration Movement, particularly as it was articulated by John Thomas. In addition, Campbell never said, like Randall did, that those in other denominations were headed for “eternal destruction” (6:941). Instead, he believed unimmersed believers who lived transformed lives would participate in the eternal kingdom. The God who has “always enjoined upon man ‘mercy, rather than sacrifice,’” Campbell wrote, has “never demanded” baptism “as [an] indispensable condition of salvation” (*Campbell-Rice Debate*, 1844, 519-20).

On another point, though Campbell would agree with Randall about weekly communion, free will offerings, and some other particulars about the church, he does not regard them as tests of faithfulness or communion. These items, and the way Randall talks about most of them, come from Campbell’s series in the *Christian Baptist* entitled “The Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things.” In the middle of that series, however, he reminded his readers that he did not regard these particulars as essential identifying marks of the true church. He “***never made them, hinted that they should be, or used them as a test of christian character or terms of christian communion***” (*Christian Baptist* [3 September 1827] 369-370).

Neither Shank nor I seek to follow human authority or particular persons. We embrace the Bible alone as our authority for faith and practice. But it is rather problematic to affirm Campbell as a great leader on the one hand and then condemn as “false doctrine” (making him a “false teacher”) the substance of what he taught. That might be true if these were marginal points, but they are at the heart of what the book wants us to believe. The person who, in larger measure, began and led the Restoration Movement would himself reject the major premises of this book, that is, only those who have been immersed for the right reason (the remission of sins) have obeyed the gospel and only those who comply with the marks of the true

church outlined in the book (including the “five articles of worship”) are faithful Christians while everyone else is headed to “eternal destruction.” Campbell would affirm neither of those premises that are the heart of Shank’s book.

Conclusion

It is important to notice that whenever Michael or Randall talk about a denominational leader or pastor it always involves a negative point and often a negative tone. But, when a member of the church of Christ is named, it is always in a positive light. For example, A. M. Burton is offered as a wonderful example of philanthropy (16:2359-2366) since he supported orphanages and colleges (and much more!). The subtle point is that members of the churches of Christ are good, generous people who study their Bible and do exactly what it says—“they have some of the best reputations around the hill” (16:2373). That may be true, and clearly A. M. Burton was a godly, generous person.

Embedded in the storyline, however, is a subtle contrast between the good, generous “church of Christ” folk and the arrogant, greedy denominational leaders. That is simply unfair and prejudicial.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gracious in Speech?

How Shank describes “denominational” leaders and churches is polarizing and disrespectful. This is a significant problem.

It sets up a not-so-subtle contrast—even if true—between “the denominations” and “the truth” which is emotional in character. The portrayal of denominational leaders as unhelpful and greedy, for example, contrasts with Randall and real truth-seekers. Denominational leaders are dismissed categorically. This plays well emotionally, but it is an unfounded generalization though this may be how Michael came to see such leaders through his experience. It may have been his experience, but to leave such perspectives untouched is to confirm the generalizations. They, in effect, become what the book teaches.

One of the ironies of the book is how it commends Randall’s approach to Michael while the book itself—left as it is—reflects an entirely different attitude toward those whom Shank is attempting to teach through this book. Though he wants to be like Randall, telling the story as he does actually disrespects those he wants to reach. Shank, in that way, does not follow the example of his mentor.

The contrast is an emotional one as it sets the “denominational leaders” in the role of the Pharisees and false teachers of the New Testament “whose God is their belly” (8:1120; quoting Philippians 3:19). It categorizes a whole set of people in a particular way so that the reader is invited to see all denominational leaders in such a light. Thus, Randall is portrayed as the honest truth-seeker and denominational leaders as the dishonest, or at best misguided, greedy leaders whose only interest is their pay check. Consequently, as one reads we are treated to an emotional wooing as denominational preachers are lavishly described in negative terms while Randall and the “church of Christ” are always described in positive terms.

So, denominational leaders do not come off very well in this book. They are “arrogant Pastors” (8:1115), and Michael’s Baptist Pastor, in particular, is “condescending” (8:1083), “pompous” (9:1149, 28:4778), greedy (23:3694), and

“lives off our donations while [he] parks his fat a__ in that fancy chair that we pay for” (8:1095). “Denominational preachers seem to love and crave the glory that is of men more than the glory that is of God” (28:4752). They are nothing but “false teachers” (30:5063) who pervert the gospel (40:6543-45) and thus are anathema (cursed) by God. Pastors, or “denominational preachers,” are “religious experts” (24:3858), “high-paid, well educated, professional clergyman” (24:3884) who “no longer endure sound doctrine” (28:4747) and demand others “call them by a spiritual title [Reverend] with a word that’s used in the [KJV] Bible exclusively for God’s name” (28:4744). This language judges motives, sincerity, and their love for God.

As such, the narrative asks a personal, character-driven, question: Who will you believe? Would you believe Michael’s pastor who “responded in a condescending tone that conveyed an unspoken message which told me I was stupid for wasting his precious time with such a rudimentary and trivial question” (8:1084) or Randall who was “encouraging, meek, respectful, and it was evident that he really loved God” (5:853)? The narrative sets us up so that if we believe the denominational preachers, then we have chosen the “bad” character in the story over the hero in the story. This is nothing more than an emotional appeal.

Denominational churches don’t come off well in this book either. While I could go point-by-point with repeated misunderstandings and caricatures of denominational teachings, I will note only how Michael assesses the “Community Churches.” His critique is particularly harsh based on a visit to a Bible class in an unidentified community church. From this experience (and presumably a few others?) he provides a sweeping characterization of community churches. They are “no brain, no backbone, all fluff” and they stand “for almost nothing” (20:3222). Recognizing his attitude “wasn’t exactly Christian,” he regarded the community church folk as “a bunch of idiots” (21:3267). The “Community Church crowd” is “sweaty-palmed, weak-kneed, rosy-cheeked, wishy-washy, feel-good, stand-for-nothing, ineffectual, spineless, let’s-all-hold-hands-and-just-get-along garbage” (21:3293). They “accept everything except true Bible unity,” and the community he visited “needed psychiatric help” (22:3547).

The language is unkind and lacks gentleness. Michael's rants sound more like right-wing political rhetoric than something that belongs in an evangelistic tract proclaiming the good news of Jesus. Scripture calls us to a different sort of engagement with people than what is reflected in these attitudes expressed by Michael (and some stated by Randall). Hear the word of God:

"Remind them...to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people." Titus 3:1-2

"But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." James 3:17

"And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, apt to teach, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness." 2 Timothy 2:24-25

I leave it to the reader to judge whether Shank's book reflects the values expressed by the above Scriptures.

Some might defend Shank's approach in the light of the narrative's autobiographical nature. After all, these are simply Shank's own feelings as he progressed in his journey, and a few (very few) of his attitudes and insults are recognized as sub-Christian along the way.

However, I think this is more an excuse than it is a rationale, and it allows the writer to communicate without accountability. For example, his tirade against Community Churches is never retracted in the book. It is simply left to stand as something not only that Michael felt but also something that is fundamentally true. And it is "true" solely on the basis of Michael's own experience without any fact-checking, investigation, or opportunity for some response. It is simply what his experience tells us it is. Readers are asked to believe Michael's point based upon his experience.

If experience alone is the truth-teller here, then I could offer my own healthy experiences of Community Churches and denominational preachers that do not look at all like what Michael describes.

Further, as a tract that intends to lead people to Christ, it is important to lead them in a loving, gentle, kind way to the God who loves them. To leave such insults

embedded in the story without qualification or without giving others the opportunity to contextualize or explain is fundamentally unfair.

In addition, if you watch carefully what Michael affirms about his experience as he tells his story, it is either reaffirmed by a “converted” Michael in the book or is often confirmed by Randall himself. In other words, the sometimes sarcastic and often unkind characterizations of denominational preachers, leaders, and churches are left untouched in the book as if they are true and representatively so. Consequently, the book not only narrates Michael’s experience, but does so in such a way that it attempts to persuade us that his experience is, in fact, reality and that we, too, should regard denominational preachers and churches as Michael did and does.

The book does not listen well. Denominational preachers and churches are summarily dismissed as inept and ignorant. The narrative oozes with disrespect for others, and there is no extended attempt to listen to them, their views, or give them a fair hearing. Counter-arguments are rarely advanced, and nuances are overlooked. Denominational preachers and churches are caricatured rather than heard. It is insulting rather than spiritually forming.

Jesus calls us to be, like God, “kind to the ungrateful and evil” (Luke 6:35) and to live with mercy toward others (Luke 10:37) because “judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13).

The book’s language appeals to emotion, prejudice (towards education, ministerial profession, etc.), and class-envy.

CHAPTER SIX

All Honest People Agree With Me?

Honesty is a key word in Michael's story. It appears, in some form, thirty-four times. More than counting noses, however, it is like the undertow of the book. Honesty is the key virtue in reading the Bible correctly.

We would all affirm honesty as a godly and ethical virtue, and it is important for any kind of listening to another, including listening to God through the text of Scripture. So, I have no interest in downplaying or subverting its importance. Honesty has a high value in relationships and in searching the Scriptures.

At the same time, the way honesty appears within Michael's story is condescending to others and lacks humility toward others. It is as if Michael was honest, and if everyone else is as honest as he was and as diligent as he was, then everyone would come to the same conclusion that he did. In other words, people are only truly honest and sufficiently diligent if they agree with Michael.

Michael sometimes recognizes that there are many honest people among the denominations. To his credit, he acknowledges that there are good, honest, and sincere people in various denominations (17:2532, 24:3804) though "blind guides" lead them (24:3861). But—and this is the significant point—they are misguided, deceived, or satisfied with their present circumstances to the extent that they will not question received traditions. In other words, denominational people (especially leaders) won't deal honestly with the text or its context. Specifically, Michael writes,

Now, of course, many of my Baptist counterparts would say, "Well, I would have taken him to this scripture or that scripture," but so what! I wanted to deal honestly with the part of the Bible that was put before me. That's the problem with religious men who are steeped in their existing beliefs. They won't reason together honestly. They won't sincerely listen and consider the current topic. Instead, they busy their minds with searching for other passages to jump to rather than really listening and considering the arguments before them. Their minds run away in defense of their religious position, which prevents any real listening and logical reasoning of the Bible together (5:815).

It is almost as if when one disagrees with Michael, and especially if they “jump” to another text, they are insincere and dishonest. Is that really a fair characterization? Is one dishonest because they disagree or thinks that a text should be interpreted differently than Michael interprets it?

Michael, after all, does interpret texts (despite his disclaimer), and on many occasions he jumps to other texts to explain the text before him. Let me illustrate with the Scripture that he is talking about in the above quote, Ephesians 2:8-9.

Randall intends no “disrespect,” but “lots of denominations tear up the Bible by ripping passages completely out of context” (5:807). So, Randall explains what Ephesians 2:8-9 means, in his view, according to the context. He believes that Paul is rejecting the boast of Jewish Christian converts who glory in “the Jewish works they had done,” including “physical circumcision” (5:813). Paul, then, was rejecting the “former works of Moses” rather than talking about the commandments (works) that are part of Christianity (5:766). When Paul wrote that “our faith was not of works,” he meant “our faith is not of old Jewish practices” (5:774). Paul is “clearly” talking about the “works of the Law of Moses” (5:776), and if people seek to “incorporate some of the former laws of Moses like physical circumcision,” then they have “fallen from grace” as those are not the works required of Christians today, according to Galatians 5:4 (which Randall quotes; 5:783).

Moreover, the “faith” which Paul identifies in Ephesians 2:8 is not “faith only,” but the “Bible definition of faith is belief, repentance, public confession of belief that Christ is God’s Son and baptism for the remission of sins into Christ Jesus” (35:5769). It can’t mean “faith only” because James 2:24 excludes that conclusion. When Randall quoted James 2:24 Michael saw that “Randall was schooling [him] in the lost art of reasoning the Scriptures together” (794).

Frustrated with this new understanding of “works” in Ephesians 2:8-9, Michael questions, “Why won’t we [Baptists] deal honestly with the context of Ephesians 2:8-9 and accept the Bible fact that Paul was talking about the works of the former Law of Moses?” (822). And, if Michael “was an honest man,” he “could never again use Ephesians 2:8-9 to support the faith only doctrine.” If he was honest....

Now, it is important to notice what just happened in the story. Randall did exactly what Michael blasted in the paragraph I quoted above.

First, Randall interpreted the text. When Randall reads “works” in Ephesians 2:8-9, he reads “Jewish works,” and more specifically “physical circumcision.” In other words, he construes “works” to mean a particular kind of works. When he reads “faith,” he construes it as a particular kind of faith or a particular understanding of faith. Both are interpretative moves; it is not simply repeating the words of the text. Randall is saying that “works” means “Jewish works,” and “faith” means the gospel plan of salvation (the five steps of salvation, as they are generally called among churches of Christ).

My point is not that interpretation is a bad thing (we all interpret), but some interpretations are bad ones, that is, they can miss the point of the text. Despite Michael’s disclaimer, he has interpreted Ephesians 2:8-9. In another chapter, I will write more about interpretation (or hermeneutics). But something more serious is going on here.

Michael claims that honesty is the virtue that will make a difference here, and that he does not really interpret the text at all. He claims, for example, that in his book “I’ve used no personal interpretation of the Holy Scriptures,” and that ought to be “completely apparent” to the reader of his story (39:6503). The fact is, however, that his book is filled with interpretative moves similar to what Randall did with Ephesians 2:8-9. So, the question is, can one “honestly” (and even with great diligence in their study—using muscle and shovel) disagree with Randall’s interpretation of Ephesians 2:8-9? The answer seems to be that if they disagree with Randall’s interpretation, then they are either dishonest or lazy.

Second, Randall did not pay attention to context. Randall appeals to the context of Ephesians 2:10-22 where Paul writes, according to Randall, “that Christians were no longer under the former works of Moses” (5:771). However, Paul never uses the word “work” in Ephesians 2:11-22 in reference to the works of Moses; he never uses the word “work” in that section at all.

Rather, Paul does use the word “work” in verse 10. Paul says we are not saved out of works but we are saved unto works, “good works.” Paul is not against “works”

in Ephesians 2:8-9 in the sense of rejecting works (which is how Randall reads it by identifying them as “Jewish works”). Rather, Paul affirms “works” but he affirms them for their appropriate purpose and role in salvation. Paul does not use “works” in Ephesians 2:8-10 in two different senses. Instead, he says works are not the origin or ground of our salvation but the fruit of our salvation; and the works are the same works, not two different kinds of works. Good works are not the basis of our salvation, but they are the fruit of it.

Third, Randall jumped to other Scriptures to explain this one. What Randall really does is import ideas from Galatians, quoting Galatians 5:4 and identifying circumcision as the work Paul rejects in Ephesians 2:8. Indeed, Randall jumps to James 2:24 in order to negate a possible interpretation of Ephesians 2:8. It seems to me that Randall did exactly what Michael complains that Baptists do—jumping to other passages instead of listening carefully to the text in front of him.

Does this mean that Ephesians 2:8-9 does, in fact, teach salvation through the Sinner’s Prayer as an expression of faith alone? No, I don’t think so. Rather, it teaches that trusting in Christ’s work for us is the means by which we are saved—grace through faith; our obedience (works) does not ground our salvation. Grace saves us, and God works that salvation for us through our trust in Christ. What does that trust look like and mean? Paul does not fully elaborate here; it is a summary statement rather than an absolute one that fully details the whole process of salvation.

In summary form, we are saved by grace through faith unto good works. That is true. There is no need to treat this passage defensively so that we can explain how baptism fits into the picture, which is what Randall does. He does not treat the text contextually. Instead, he fences the text off so that it does not overturn his understanding of baptism. Nevertheless, baptismal language is present in Ephesians 2:4-7 (compared with Colossians 2:11-13), and that is where the baptismal discussion should lie rather than imposed on the word “faith” in Ephesians 2:8.

So, it seems to me, that Randall and Michael are guilty of the very thing they want to avoid and what they see among Baptists. They look at them and see dishonesty and laziness with the text. I think that is unfair to Baptists as well as

Randall and Michael. It is not necessarily a matter of honesty or laziness; it is more a matter of our inability to listen to each other sympathetically in a search of the Scriptures.

But here is the real problem. Michael believes that his particular understanding of the “gospel is so simple that every person of sound mind and accountable age can understand it and obey if they choose to,” and this will happen if “honest-hearted people” read the Bible for themselves. In other words, if you are honest and you use your muscle and shovel (show due diligence), you will agree with Michael. And if you don’t agree with Michael, then you—assuming you are of “sound mind and of accountable age”—are dishonest, lazy (including apathy and other similar vices), or more ominously rebellious and unwilling to listen to the truth.

Randall, in fact, says: “Mr. Mike, there is no rational spiritually honest person in the world who can refute God’s plan of salvation” (that is, the way Randall construes that “plan;” 35:5782). And, Michael counsels, “if you are honest with yourself and with God you’ll flee from man-made denominations” (38:6165). “No honest individual after studying” the Bible could do otherwise (39:6375).

Listen to how Michael summarizes this point near the end of the book (39:6279)

Denominationalists refuse to accept the entirety of God’s plan of redemption for mankind. They ignore the elements that they simply don’t understand or refuse to accept.

However, when honest, sincere, good-hearted, moral, Truth-seeking people research the entirety of the Scriptures, they *consistently* and *unanimously* find God’s marvelous plan of redemption and salvation, which is [and then we have the five steps of salvation listed, JMH; my emphasis]

So, if one does not come to the same conclusion as Michael, then they lack one of the virtues listed. They are dishonest rather than “honest,” or they are insincere rather than “sincere,” or they are malevolent rather than “good-hearted,” or immoral rather than “moral,” or apathetic rather than “Truth-seeking,” or perhaps they were too lazy or apathetic to research it sufficiently. But if anyone has these moral virtues along with a due exercise of muscle and a shovel, then they will join with everyone else who has those virtues because it is consistent and unanimous in the lives of good-hearted, honest, moral and sincere people. In summary, if you don’t

agree with Michael, you are either “ignorant or dishonest with God’s Word” (39:6366).

I think that is an unfair account of life. It lacks humility. In other words, it loudly declares to fellow-believers in Jesus, *“I know I’m right, and if you disagree with me, then there is something wrong with you!”*

May God have mercy!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Now For the Main Thing....Baptism?

I appreciate a high view of baptism. Its meaning is often undervalued in the larger Evangelical world. I appreciate that Shank's story clearly affirms, as I do, that *God actually does something through baptism*. It is no mere sign. It is not *only* a human witness to God's saving work. Rather, it is God's work. Through faith, God raises up with Christ in baptism (Colossians 2:12-13).

For example, this paragraph illustrates the positive emphasis Shank gives to baptism:

[Some devalue] baptism by calling it a work. Well it's a work alright but it's not a work of man. It's a work of God. That's what the Bible says. We undergo an operation by the hand of God within the passive event of baptism whereby God symbolically circumcises the individual" (35:5748).

I also appreciate the emphasis on baptism as our participation in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Our response to the gospel means that we "reenact the gospel" (30:5005). Through baptism, we participate in the dramatic story that saves us, that is, the story of crucified and resurrected Christ.

So, there is much to which I would say a hearty "Amen" in *Muscle and A Shovel* on this topic.

Nevertheless, I also have some significant problems with the way Shank describes the "plan of salvation." I will identify only two.

The Right Reason?

Shank insists that one must believe that baptism is the moment of salvation in order for it to be effectively God's work. As Randall tells Michael, "If you get into the water of baptism thinking that your sins are forgiven before you get into the water, you're not being baptized for the right reason. That's not Bible baptism" (35:5676).

The striking phrase is “the right reason.” For Shank, there is only one right reason to be baptized, that is, one must be baptized in order to be saved. Or, to put it another one, one must be baptized with the conscious purpose of receiving the forgiveness of their sins through baptism.

Well, of course, this means that Jesus himself was not properly baptized since he was not baptized for the remission of sins. If this is “the right reason” for baptism, then Jesus’ own baptism is invalid since he himself was obedient to a baptism that was “for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). Jesus was baptized to obey God, that is, to “fulfill all righteousness,” and that was sufficient (Matthew 3:15). If Jesus is our example, is it not sufficient for us? Michael concluded his original baptism “wasn’t biblical” because he “wasn’t baptized like those in the Bible were baptized” (36:5872). Except, of course, for Jesus himself! If we can’t follow Jesus into the water for the same reason Jesus went into the water, then there is something wrong with a view that dismisses the example of Jesus. We are safe ground to think that the example of Jesus is a sufficient model for obedience.

Some might object that Jesus is not a good model in this case because he was sinless and did not need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. And that is exactly my point. Baptism is about more than the forgiveness of sins, and an obedience that embraces a higher or larger motive is effective. The focus on sin/sinless is too narrow and focuses on a single meaning for baptism. The higher motive is to obey God or submit to God. Moreover, in the larger setting, Jesus joins Israel in the water of the New Exodus to move from exile into the reality of the new age (the kingdom of God). He passes through the water with them in obedience to the Father. That is the larger context of the Luke 3 and Luke-Acts. In that sense, Jesus' baptism is a model for ours, and it is the first Christian baptism as Jesus experiences the new age when he is anointed with the Holy Spirit.

Michael argues that “baptism for the remission of sins” means that one must be baptized with an explicit purpose, that is, baptismal candidates must know that baptism is where their sins are forgiven. But this confuses command and promise. The command is to be baptized. The promise is the remission of sins. We obey the command, and God keeps the promise. “For the remission of sins” in Acts 2:38 is not

part of the command, but is a promise attached to the command. In the same way that the gift of the Holy Spirit (that is, the personal indwelling of the Spirit) is a promise, so is the remission of sins. It is not necessary for one to understand the promise that God will give the Holy Spirit after baptism in order to receive the Spirit. It is only incumbent upon us to obey the command. God will keep his promise whether we know it is a promise or not—whether we understand God’s gift of the Holy Spirit or the remission the sins.

What is a sufficient reason for baptism? What moves us to be baptized? The motive that suggests that we should be baptized in order to be saved places the emphasis on “getting saved” whereas the motive that we should be baptized in order to obey God places the emphasis on submission to God. Is that motive—to obey God—insufficient?

This line of argument actually turns baptism on its head. It makes salvation more dependent upon *what one believes about baptism than what one believes about Christ*. As a result, it becomes more about faith in baptism than it does faith in Christ. Salvation, then, becomes more about trusting that what we believe about baptism is correct than trusting in Christ for our actual salvation. In other words, I could trust in Christ through baptism, but if I did not believe the right thing about baptism, then my trust in Christ is rendered vain. Do we really want to say out trust in Christ is ineffective because we don’t fully understand baptism?

Faith is what renders baptism effectual, as Colossians 2:12 says. But it is not what we believe about baptism that makes baptism effectual. Rather, it is trusting in God’s work in Christ that gives baptism its meaning and significance. Faith is trusting in the person of Christ, what Christ has done for us. For Michael, faith is “our exercise of obedience to God’s instructions” (15:2238). “The Bible definition of faith,” according to Shank, “is belief, repentance, public confession of belief that Christ is God’s Son and baptism for the remission of sins into Christ Jesus” (35:5757). Faith, for Shank, is the five steps of salvation—hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized.

In other words, faith is faith in a plan. If we believe that Jesus is God’s Son and we perfectly (including the right reason for baptism) work the plan, then God will save.

But this redefines faith in a radical way. It is not longer faith in Jesus or trusting in Jesus for our salvation on the basis of what God has done for us. Rather, it is trusting in the plan, working the plan, and—as long as we do the plan correctly, precisely, and for the right reason—God saves us. Faith is the plan, according to Michael. Faith is what we believe about the “plan” rather than trusting in Jesus. Once we believe the word, according to Michael, then we must work the plan precisely and with adequate understanding (who gets to decide that?) in order to be saved. In effect, this is a salvation by works rather than through trusting in Christ. In fact, “trusting in Christ”—the act of faith as entrustment rather than cognitive affirmation of a fact—does not even appear in Shank’s book except in a single place where he is quoting the Sinner’s Prayer (38:6183).

Shank effectively substitutes faith in the plan for faith in Jesus.

Interestingly, though Shank admires Alexander Campbell for his part in the inauguration of a restoration movement within the United States through his recognition of the “church that Jesus founded within the pages of the New Testament” (30:5090), Campbell did not find the same “church” that Shank promotes. Campbell did not agree that that one had to know that there baptism was for the remission of sins in order for baptismal validity. Campbell thought obedience was sufficient, that is, it was enough for one to obey God through baptism whether or not they understood it was for the remission of sins or that it was the moment of salvation. Throughout the nineteenth century, ministers in the church of Christ generally agreed—ministers like J. W. McGarvey, David Lipscomb, and James A. Harding among many others. They called Baptists their “brethren,” and that is something Shanks is unwilling to do. The position that Shanks takes on this question is not the historic or original position of the American Restoration Movement.

Cannot Be Saved?

Shank too easily dismisses (as well as ignores) the counter-evidence in the New Testament for a more open understanding of baptism. The book, as a whole, does

not give a fair hearing to some biblical texts that offer some caution about the hard line (the absolutist perspective) that Shank outlines.

Shank affirms that baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation (“absolute necessity,” 5050). All unbaptized believers (including those who were not immersed for the “right reason”) are lost. Anyone who thinks differently is, in Shank’s view, dishonest, and

those who wish to minimalize, ignore, reject, discredit, refute and disparage the essential act of being baptized must throw out the New Testament completely. No *honest individual* after studying the massive volume of scriptural references relating to baptism could possibly refute its *absolute necessity* in being saved from sin, nor can anyone refute the fact that men and women are not and *cannot* be saved before baptism (39:6376; emphasis mine).

One major objection to this line of reasoning is the ministry of Jesus itself. Jesus forgave the sins of many without baptism during his ministry. Indeed, he got in trouble with the Pharisees for such, as in Mark 2:5-10. Men and women are saved before baptism and without baptism in numerous encounters with Jesus. They were saved through faith (Luke 7:49-50).

The most famous example is, of course, the thief on the cross in Luke 23:42-43. Michael raised this point with Larry who had previously studied with Randall. Larry’s response was two-fold. On the one hand, since we are ignorant about the thief’s previous history, we really don’t know if he had ever been baptized or not (15:2099ff). On the other hand, it doesn’t matter whether he was or not since the thief lived under the Mosaic dispensation and thus is not a model for New Testament Christians (Hebrews 9:16-17; 15:2110ff).

The former is an argument from silence. If we are going to say the Gospel of Luke teaches something, then it needs to be found in the Gospel of Luke rather than supposed as a possible background. The narrative of Luke does not have a problem with Jesus saving the thief without any reference to baptism, and consequently we should not either.

The more important point is the second one, that is, the dispensational argument. The thief lived under the Law of Moses, but we don’t. So, the thief (and

Jesus) followed the rules under the Mosaic Law, and we (and Jesus) follow the rules under the new covenant (testament). Larry took Michael to Hebrews 9:16-17 and Ephesians 2:14-16 to demonstrate this point. Since the thief was subject to a different set of commands, he was not required to be baptized like we are in the new covenant. (I wonder, however, whether he was required to be baptized like Jesus and his disciples. Those who rejected baptism were rebuked by Jesus in Luke 7:29-30. So, the thief was under obligation to be baptized but there is no record of his baptism. Nevertheless, Jesus saves him.)

Part of the irony here is that in order to alleviate the tension between Shank's view and Luke 23:42-43, Shank takes us to Hebrews and Ephesians as well as Matthew 27:51. This is exactly the strategy he opposes when others quickly move on to other texts rather than dealing with the biblical text they are discussing. For example, Michael complains that denominationalists "won't reason together honestly. They won't sincerely listen and consider the current topic. Instead they busy their minds with searching for other passages to jump to rather than really listening and considering the arguments before them" (5:816).

What Larry did here—with Randall's instruction—is to recontextualize the Gospel of Luke. Instead of reading Luke 23:42-43 in the context of Luke, Randall imposes thoughts from Hebrews 9 and Ephesians 2 on top of this text so that it no longer applies to contemporary readers. Luke 23 can't be true for us, so the argument runs, because Hebrews 9 and Ephesians 2 draw a dispensational line at the death of Christ and the thief was saved before Jesus died. But this is wholly absent from the context of Luke's gospel. It does not read Luke on Luke's own terms.

According to Randall, "Christ healed, forgave and saved men while He was alive (i.e., the thief on the cross). However, Christ's law (or testament) didn't go into effect until the moment of his death" (15:2114). So, before his death Christ forgave without baptism, but after his death no one is forgiven without baptism. Of course, nothing in Hebrews 9 or Ephesians 2 even hints at such a distinction about baptism. Randall believes that Christ's law now absolutely demands baptism or there is no salvation at all!

In the light of the ministry of Jesus, do we really want to say—absolutely!—that the Son of God, seated at the right hand of God, will not or “cannot” save or show grace to unbaptized believers (15:2268, 39:6376)? The same Jesus who sits at the right hand of God also walked the earth. When he walked the earth, he forgave sins through expressions of faith. Whether it is the woman who wiped his feet with her hair or the thief on the cross, Jesus forgave sin without requiring baptism or any specific act. Cannot Jesus still do the same?

Larry, in dialogue with Michael, notes that “Jesus, while being alive on this earth, did as He saw fit” (15:2105). Well, Jesus is still alive, reigns over his kingdom on this earth, and has the authority to do whatever he still pleases. If Jesus, being alive on this earth, could do whatever “He saw fit,” could not Jesus, reigning at the right hand of God over his kingdom, still do whatever “He saw fit”? Indeed, saving people through faith is how God operates throughout the whole of Scripture, including under the Mosaic Covenant (e.g., Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 4:1-8). The truth of the “righteous shall live by faith” is still true—both under the Law of Moses and now (Romans 1:16-17).

Recognizing that faith is the fundamental orientation, principle, or means of our salvation opens up the possibility (and actuality in Scripture) that God does, in fact, save without baptism in God’s own good pleasure. This does not diminish baptism itself since it is still God’s appointed means for believers to experience God’s gracious work of forgiveness and inclusion in the body of Christ. But we must be careful that we do not equate faith and baptism. Baptism serves faith, not vice versa. Baptism expresses faith. Faith is the more fundamental principle, and it is the principle through which people have been saved from at least Abraham to the present (cf. Romans 4).

The example of Cornelius in Acts 10 is telling on this point, and, interestingly, Shank never mentions Cornelius in connection with baptism. While clearly the situation of Cornelius is exceptional, the principle that faith is the means by which Cornelius was saved and thus received the “gift of the Holy Spirit” (like those in Acts 2:38) is significant. He received the “gift of the Holy Spirit” before he was baptized (Acts 10:45-48), unlike those in Acts 2:38 who received it after they were baptized.

This illustrates the freedom of God. Since Randall believes the “gift of the Holy Spirit” is the “gift of eternal life” (35:5688), then Cornelius received the “gift of eternal life” before he was baptized. God is free to save any through faith without baptism, just as he did in the case of Cornelius.

God is not bound to baptism, though we are bound to obey God through baptism. Peter commanded Cornelius to be baptized (Acts 10:48); baptism was not a trivial matter. However, in the case of Cornelius, God accepted him before he was baptized as the pouring out of the Spirit upon his house demonstrated. He was accepted through faith, as Peter promised (Acts 10:43).

Conclusion

Anticipating a future chapter, the fundamental problem with Shank’s approach is that he reads the Bible to discover the legal rules by which God determines who is saved and who is lost. He reads the Bible as a rulebook or as a legal brief. We will see more of this in the next chapter.

There are several problems with this kind of reading. It forces us to gerrymander the biblical texts so that the rule is absolute when it is not, and further it binds God to these rules in such a way that even God cannot save the unbaptized. The “rules”—discerned by a legal hermeneutic—bind both God and us, and thus put God into a nice, neat box. Now, even Jesus—if Michael is right—cannot save any without baptism. The rule that Michael deduces from his understanding of Scripture is that faith—even an active, loving, transforming faith—cannot save without baptism. Salvation depends on baptism, and obedient faith in everything but this one command is insufficient.

Yet, these “rules” (what Shank calls the “plan of salvation”) are nowhere laid out in the rigorous, rulebook fashion that Shank claims is utterly biblical. Shank has to piece them together from various texts, and when he articulates the plan in a logical order it is striking that *there is no text in all of the New Testament that does exactly what he does*. Where is the text that does what Shank does in 39:6282ff. If the plan was so absolute, why is it not stated absolutely? Shank puts the Scripture into an

order—an absolute order—and states it in a way that nowhere appears in Scripture. His absolute order becomes more absolute than Scripture itself since Scripture nowhere explicitly says what Michael says.

If we are going to call Bible things by Bible names and be silent where the Bible is silent, why, then, are we asked to attach so much importance to “the right reason” and the “plan of salvation” when even that language, much less the precise statement of their content, is absent from the Bible?

While Randall suggests that 'there is no rational spiritually honest person on the world who can refute God's plan of salvation' (35:5781), I don't think it is what he thinks it is. It seems to me more important to reason together rather than assume that if one does not see it the way another sees it that there must be something irrational, dishonest, or unspiritual about the other person.

May God have mercy!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Faithful to the Church

The title comes from a significant question Randall asks Michael: “Were you taught that you had to be *faithful to the church* to go to Heaven?” (25:4005; emphasis mine). It is clear that Randall expects that he should have been so taught.

But where does one find the phrase “faithful to the church” in the Bible? What does Randall mean by “faithful to the church”? This is an important question because it goes to the heart of what Randall believes the “plan of salvation” (another phrase not found in the Bible) introduces us. Through baptism, we become part of the New Testament church, the church of Christ. But what is that? How do we identify it?

Whatever it is, faithfulness to the church is required in order “to go to Heaven.” Consequently, we must be careful to belong to and participate in the “true church of Christ” (26:4246). Shank, through the mouth of Randall, is explicit about this—you are either a member of the “church of Christ” as described by Randall or you are “headed toward eternal destruction.” Randall responded to Michael’s direct question, “Look, if I’m a Baptist, is it Heaven or Hell? Answer me straight!” with the following statement.

“Mr. Mike,” he said meekly, “from my understanding, if you’re a member of a denomination, whether it be Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Mormon, any church that Jesus Christ did not establish and buy with His own blood, there’s no question that you’re headed toward eternal destruction” (6:941).

Randall, as Michael understood it, just confirmed that Michael was headed to Hell (6:1005). Randall drew a line in the church sand—one’s salvation depends upon whether one is a *member* of the “church of Christ” (understood in the sense in which Randall thinks the church consists) and whether one is *faithful* to that church.

In one sense, all Christians agree that the saved belong to the body of Christ, the assembly of God. No one disputes that. Randall’s specification, however, is more particular, that is, one must belong to the right church that does the right things and

teaches the right things. And, presumably, this church has to have everything right that is necessary to have right in order to be the true church. In other words, it is no longer about whether one belongs to the body of Christ or not, but whether one belongs to the right group where they practice perfectly what is necessary to be the “true church of Christ.” That is what I want to explore in this chapter.

“Faithful to the Church”

The peculiarity of this phrase is striking. What does “faithful to the church” mean? It is common parlance among some, and—as I understand it—it means something like, “One is a faithful member of a local congregation that sings congregationally without instrumental accompaniment, collects money by free will offerings every week and only free will offerings every week, observes the Lord’s supper weekly (and only on Sunday), hears the preaching of the word, and prays together under the leadership of elders and deacons, often served by located evangelists, independent from any other institution or structure, and is called by a name (descriptor) that is found in the New Testament.” Of course, this also entails that such members are dedicated to good works and holy living, attend the assemblies regularly, and take an active part in the work of the local congregation. This, it seems, constitutes what it means to be “faithful to the church.”

While I will address some of these particulars later—and some are quite biblical and helpful—I’m concerned about what the phrase itself communicates.

It places the emphasis on the wrong point. The church becomes the central focus rather than Jesus. The phrase focuses on faithfulness to the New Testament requirements of what constitutes church and life within that church. But the New Testament seems more concerned about faithfulness to God and Jesus than faithfulness to the church. The focus, for example, of the Gospels is following Jesus. Paul’s focus is faith in Jesus and the faithfulness of Jesus rather than faithfulness to the church.

The phrase, “faithful to the church,” reorients biblical thought. The church, rather than Christ, becomes the center of life. While certainly Shank would not want

to detract from Jesus in any way, the focus of this evangelistic book-length tract is to convert one to a particular way of doing church rather than encouraging others to embrace Jesus and trust in his saving work.

“Faithful to Jesus” or “faithful to God” never appear in the book. Instead, it is “faithful to the [true!] church.”

The One Church

When Randall and Michael sat down to study the Bible together on five successive mornings before work, Randall started with Acts 2 (25:4019). Those who were baptized were “added to the church” (Acts 2:47; KJV—the word “church,” however, is not in modern critical editions of the Greek text). This church is the one body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4). All the saved are in the church and the church contains all the saved (25:4065). Jesus is the savior of the body, and therefore “it is impossible to be saved outside of the church” (25:4115). Consequently, though well-intentioned, the common saying “join the church of your choice” is “rooted in ignorance” (25:4116). There is only one church—it is the body of Christ.

According to Randall, people “freak out” when someone says there is only “one church” (25:4103). Well, that depends on what people mean when they say “one church.”

People don’t “freak out” about “one church” if one is talking about the universal body of Christ. All Christians recognize that there is only one people of God, the body of Christ. All believers in Christ affirm “there is one body” (Ephesians 4:4).

People might “freak out” if they think that “one church” means “the group of people who follow Jesus precisely the way I do” or equate the one church with a group of people denominated or known by a specific name.

It is little wonder that people “freak out” when Randall identifies the group with which he meets as the “church of Christ” (pointing out the descriptor in Romans 16:16) and that only they are the true church Christ because “you can’t find Catholics, the Baptists, the Methodists, the Presbyterians or the rest of [the

denominations] in the Bible” (25:4134). What one finds in the Bible, according to Randall, is “the church of Christ in both name and practice” (25:4136).

Randall has slipped in a tantalizing “bait and switch.” He shows Michael the descriptor “churches of Christ” in Romans 16:16 (he doesn’t show him “assembly of God,” or “church of God,” or other descriptors which might too easily be associated with some “denominational” bodies), and then lets him make the simple association of “churches of Christ” in Romans 16:16 with the “church of Christ” in Nashville, Tennessee as if they are the same thing in “name and practice.”

Randall’s argument runs something like this: because contemporary “churches of Christ” (with that name on their signs) teach and practice exactly what the New Testament church taught and what the church in the New Testament practiced, they are “churches of Christ,” that is, they are the one church, the body of Christ. All other groups (the denominations) are “divisions from the original. The church of Christ is the original” (25:4174). The “church of Christ” (the groups with that name on their signs) are not “just another denomination” (25:4172); they are the body of Christ, the one true church.

It is unclear from what Shank has written whether he would recognize any people outside the group known as “churches of Christ” (that name on their sign) as faithful Christians. What is clear is that he would not recognize any group as faithful that denominated themselves by any name (or descriptor) other than the descriptions found in the New Testament.

This line of reasoning has several problems.

On the one hand, denominational bodies recognize that they participate in the one body of Christ. They do not think of themselves as separate from the one church but expressions of that one church.

Denominationalism is not inherently divisive, but diverse. It recognizes others as believers in Christ seeking God with different emphases and gifts. Denominating is unavoidable; it is not an evil. Denominationalism becomes divisive is when groups exclude others due to that diversity or where they appropriate a name that makes an exclusive claim that no one else is part of the body of Christ. Or where they

appropriate a name that entails that their allegiance to something or someone other than Christ.

Randall thinks this diversity is problematic because he sees different teachings and practices among the denominations. When we think that “X” is necessary for faithfulness, any diversity from that is sinful. Randall, in other words, believes that the church must *perfectly* execute the plan (‘X’) in order to be the body of Christ in the world. But this perfectionism is itself problematic. It allows no room for growth and progress in sanctification (growing into the image of Christ). It demands uniformity rather than unity in love, ministry, and trust in Jesus. It demands perfection when sanctification is about direction rather than perfection. Faithfulness is movement toward Christ so that we might more fully image God.

At a theological level, we all simply belong to Jesus' church. We all affirm that we belong to Christ alone. At a historical level, we belong to social traditions in which we were nurtured and in which we may continue to participate. Everyone belongs to some historical tradition, even if we created it for ourselves—even “nondenominational Christianity” is denominated. The mistake comes when we identify that historical tradition with Jesus' church in an exclusive way.

On the other hand, groups that denominate themselves “church of Christ” (by their signage) and equate that group with the body of Christ or universal church adopt an exclusivistic orientation toward other groups. In effect, they are divisive and sectarian, and thus become what Randall calls a “division” within the body of Christ, and thus a denomination. In other words, when “churches of Christ” (the ones with that descriptor on their signs) separate themselves from and exclude others, they become, in fact, a sectarian denomination.

What makes denominationalism wrong is its exclusivism and separation, and that exclusivism and separation is what “church of Christ” means to most from within that tribe. For example, it separates them from the Baptists and excludes Baptists so that the Baptists are not regarded as part of the body of Christ.

I can appreciate the intent and desire to be “just a Christian.” I want to simply follow Jesus or to be, in the words of N. T. Wright’s book, “simply Christian.” I love the concept of nondenominational Christianity. However, every group--whatever it

is and however it came into being--is located within history and history particularizes. Even the desire to teach and practice only what the New Testament teaches and practices is indebted to a particular historical tradition, especially when we get into the details of how to understand the Bible, discerning what the Bible says, what particulars are important for doing what the Bible says, what are the essentials of a faithful "New Testament church," and assessing others to see if they are doing the same as we claim. This particularizes us, and that is fine. It becomes divisive when our particularity is used to exclude others because they understand the details of what practicing the Bible means differently. That is when it becomes a sectarian "denomination" (however they have denominated their particularity, even if they call themselves the "church of Christ").

I just want to be a Christian, simply Christian. I am a disciple of Jesus and no other. At the same time, if we don't recognize that we are also part of a historical tradition that shapes how we read the Bible and, in some sense, identifies us (hopefully in a non-exclusive way), then we will equate our beliefs (understandings) with the Bible rather than recognize how we received them through the lens of a particular historical tradition. Historical self-awareness enables us to become more Christian as we critically assess the received tradition, but if we don't recognize it, then our blindness will lead us into sectarianism.

Muscle and A Shovel contains a "bait and switch." It points out that there is only one church (one body of Christ), and one description of that body is the "churches of Christ." That is the bait. But the switch comes when Randall points to contemporary churches of Christ (those that brand that name on their signs) and says, "That's us, and only us!" When we use "church of Christ" to refer to the universal church, it is inappropriate to equate it with a particular historical tradition that opted to name itself "church of Christ" rather than something else in the late nineteenth century. That creates a sect within the body of Christ.

The Marks of the Church

Whatever the case about denominations or the denominational status of congregations denominated “church of Christ” by their signage, the question Randall raises with Michael is how to identify the “church of Christ.”

How do we define the “true church of Christ” (25:4216)?

Randall has a rather long list and it is a particular sort of list (a summary begins at 32:5380). Here is the list—“Plain Bible teaching with no human opinions”

(25:4194) without “personal bias” (31:5317):

- biblical name or descriptor (25:4136)
- non-denominational (25:4172)
- autonomous congregationalism (25:4180)
- governed by elders, served by deacons, and headed by Christ (25:4180, 27:4464)
- “five articles of worship” on the first day of every week, including the Lord’s Supper, prayer, singing, giving and preaching (26:4251)
- the Lord’s supper every first day and exclusively on Sunday (26:4281)
- singing without instrumental accompaniment (26:4361)
- free will offerings without the regulation of tithing (27:4349)
- teaches the biblical plan of salvation, that is, how to obey the gospel (30:4960).

There are many things to like in this list (including *a cappella* music, weekly Lord’s supper, congregationalism, etc.), and there are some to question, but even the function of the list is itself questionable. Without going into a detailed discussion of particulars and biblical texts, it seems obvious that we can say at least this: this is not absent human opinion. Randall is *not* “simply showing [Michael] the Word” (27:4523).

For example, to read the narrative account of Paul’s meeting with the church at Troas in Acts 20:7 as a prescriptive command is, at least, an inference.

- It assumes that examples can function as commands.
- It assumes further that the church in Troas met to break bread every week when the text does not say every week. (The comparison with the Sabbath command in Exodus 20 will not work because it is a command but this is, at most, an “example” and Jesus did not say “Remember the first day of the week” which would actually parallel Exodus 20.)
- It assumes the “example” is here to fill out the command to “do this in remembrance of me.”

- It assumes that the meeting in Troas is intended as “apostolic example,” which Luke wants every congregation to adopt.

There are too many assumptions for Acts 20:7 to function as an absolute prescriptive command. In short, Randall reads Acts 20:7 like it is legal case law rather than as part of a narrative. And Randall does not mention that the Jerusalem church “broke bread” daily—not exclusively on Sunday (Acts 2:46).

The exclusion of instruments (piano or organ, for example) is rooted in several assumptions as well.

- It assumes that Paul could not possibly have had instrumental music in mind when Ephesians 5:19 used the Greek verb *psallo* (which is used in his Greek Old Testament for playing an instrument—rendered “play” or “make melody”).
- It assumes that “sing” is itself a word that would have been heard as vocal only in the context in which Paul was writing (Randall says it “necessarily infers the use of our voice” only, cf. 26:4359).
- It assumes the exclusion of the Old Testament as a resource for practicing Christian worship despite the fact that Ephesians 5:19 commends the use of Psalms (which used instrumental music).
- It assumes that Paul’s silence about instrumental music is intended to exclude instruments from Christian assemblies.

In other words, once again Randall reads the New Testament as if it is a legal brief with prescriptions that are inherently exclusive. In other words, when Paul commands “sing” (from which we infer voice only), this “also infers the exclusion of everything else” (26:4359). At the very least, that is a lot of inference for an absolute prescription in order to be a “true church of Christ.”

I could say more, but that would be a whole other book.

But notice *what is missing from this list*. When Randall seeks to identify the “true church of Christ,” there is nothing about the ministry and mission of the church but only the form and procedures of the church. The list says nothing about what the church does outside the building, how it ministers to the poor, or what the mission of the church is. That is not to say that Shank does not have opinions about these points—I would assume he does, but it defines the nature of what it means to talk about the church in an evangelistic tract. His purpose is polemical—to convince denominationalists that their denominations are wrong. Consequently, it is not

ultimately about the fullness of the church of God, but rather about specific items that, in effect, defend the teaching and practice of the “churches of Christ” (the ones with that name on their signs).

But I also have a problem with the function of this list. Is every one of these necessary in order to have a faithful church? Must one be a member of a group of Jesus-followers who practice Christianity in precise conformity to this list in order to be “faithful to the church”?

If we answer in the affirmative, then it is rather strange that the New Testament does not have this list somewhere present within its pages? If this is a prescribed list, then where is the list of prescriptions within the pages of the New Testament?

If we answer in the affirmative, then are we an unfaithful church if we are missing any one of these items or fail to do them perfectly? Is this also true if a congregation is missing a ministry to the poor, fails to speak out against injustice in the world, etc., etc. How perfect does a congregation need to be in order to be “faithful,” and how well must a congregation comply with this list in order to be “faithful”?

For Randall, it seems, the list must be obeyed fully, completely, and with the right reasons and motives engaged.

Such a list does not appear in the New Testament, and Paul, for example, does not engage the churches through his letters in ways that assume a kind of perfectionism or an assumption of prescribed forms that identify the true church of Christ. Instead, he encourages transformed living, encouraging assemblies, living together in love, and a missional orientation to the world. Paul points us to the heart of Jesus rather than to the forms of a legal code.

Consequently, Shank’s evangelistic tract reads quite differently from the New Testament itself. While Shank’s book is filled with prescribed, perfectionistic legal technical lists about how to “do church,” there are none in the New Testament except those that encourage transformed living (e.g., Galatians 5:22; 2 Peter 1:5-8).

CHAPTER NINE

Reading the Bible

As I read through this book, it became apparent that Michael and I read the Bible differently.

We have lots of common ground.

- We both believe the Bible is God’s word to humanity.
- We both believe that God inspired its human authors.
- We both believe that Scripture is our authoritative guide.
- We both believe that Scripture is the final test of healthy (sound) teaching.
- We both believe that Scripture alone is the norm for doctrine and practice.

But we read the Bible differently.

This difference determines what we think the Bible is, how it accomplishes its work, and what we expect to see in the text. We come to Scripture with expectations, and these expectations shape how we read it. The difficult task is to align our “expectations” with the reality in front us, that is, to read the Bible for what the Bible intends to be and do. So, our first concern in reading Scripture is faithfulness to what the text is.

Depending on what a text is, we read it differently. For example, we don’t read a newspaper the same way we read a new piece of legislation. We don’t read poetry the same way we read a biology textbook. We don’t read a letter the same way we read science fiction. What the text is—what it intends to do and how it says it (genre is another name for that)—decides how we should read it.

The Bible is an anthology of texts. Though it is primarily narrative (telling the story of creation, the history of Israel, the life of Jesus and the story of the early church), it also contains sermons, poetry, letters, and highly symbolic literature (called apocalyptic, as in Revelation). Each type (genre) of text is read differently as it is doing different things and written in different ways.

What unites these diverse texts is the story of God. Through these texts, God invites humanity to participate in God’s mission.

Here lies a fundamental difference between how Shank reads the Bible and how I read it. For Shank, the fundamental question the Bible answers is, “What does God require of me?” For me, the fundamental question is, “What is the story into which God invites me?” The former is a legal question but the latter is a missional one. The former wants to know what is legal or illegal. The latter wants to know the divine mission and how we might participate in it.

I will return to this difference later, but first consider some particulars that, in part, illuminate it.

How does one discern what is “legal” or “illegal”? This is rather difficult because very little of the Bible is law code or a list of rules. Most of the Bible is narrative, that is, it tells stories about how God loved, disciplined, and transformed people.

Randall proposes that we look for the rules with a “commands, examples and inferences” rubric (26:4333). As we read “Matthew through Revelation,” we notice that New Testament Christians did certain things such as “partaking of the Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week.” This, then, is an “example that was instigated and approved by God and demonstrated by the apostles” (26:4340).

“Examples” (that is, binding prescriptive models) derived from narrative literature are precarious. One must assume that these accounts function as “examples” (that is, they were instigated by God for the specific purpose of prescribing an action). In other words, what makes an incident in a narrative function as a prescribed command? In the case of Acts 20:7, one further assumes that this is every week (which Randall infers—but we have the counter evidence of Acts 2:46).

Inference is part of the interpretative process, and it is necessary in order to construct the pattern for doing church right. If Jesus commanded us to “remember” him, so the argument goes, then he must also tell us somewhere when to do that? Since Acts 20:7 is the only place where it appears that happens, then that must be the prescribed day. Those assumptions are rooted in the expectations created by reading the Bible as a rulebook or a blueprint.

Further, since it is the prescribed day, it excludes any other day. A “specific command necessarily infers inclusion and exclusion,” according to Randall

(27:4632). Notice how the hermeneutical principle is itself rooted in an inference. But this is only true if we are working with a legal genre. It is not the case when we are dealing with narrative (which is not itself a series of prescriptive commands in a codified rulebook) or even a letter. I might say to my daughter in a letter, “sing to your mother for me while I am away,” but that would not exclude her accompanying the song with a guitar. Letters are not legal codes, and legal hermeneutical principles don’t apply. They must be read as letters rather than case law or rulebooks.

Shank, in effect, uses the Bible to discover the law codes embedded within the story and finds them even where there are no codified prescriptions in the text. Narratives are turned into legal prescriptions. This seems reasonable to Shank because his primary question is, “What does the Bible require us to do?” So, he searches for the requirements and finds them in narratives and letters in order to construct a pattern for the church. And, surprisingly (if indeed the Bible is intended to provide such a pattern), this pattern is nowhere simply stated. It has to be pieced together like a puzzle, and we have to find the pieces scattered throughout the Bible. Shank expects a pattern and therefore searches till he finds one even if he has to piece it together with examples and inferences. He has to fill in the blanks with more than explicit statements. And where the pieces (specific commands) are missing, we infer their presence (by example or inference). In effect, he finds it because Randall followed an interpretative model (coupled with assumptions) that constructed the pattern for him without questioning the historical exegesis of the texts and without recognizing his assumptions.

This is a major concern with *Muscle and A Shovel*. It reads the Bible with a central concern to discover something it expects to find, and the book assumes that the way to find it is to piece together scattered prescriptions in order to construct a pattern that is not explicitly there.

There is a better way to read the story of God in Scripture, which conforms to the nature of Scripture as an anthology that bears witness to God’s redemptive work in the world.

Muscle and a Shovel misses the central story of Scripture. Shank reads the Bible with a legal concern operating at the heart of his hermeneutic, and this obscures the missional nature of Scripture itself. There is little to nothing in the *Muscle and a Shovel* that gives us much hint about the grand narrative of Scripture—a loving God who created and nurtured the world for the sake of loving fellowship, who chose Israel as a light among the nations, who became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth to redeem the sin, pain, and hurt of this world, and who poured out the Holy Spirit to sanctify a community that they might be dedicated to good works. As an evangelistic tract, it does not tell the story of the gospel. Rather, it converts people to a church pattern, the data for which is mined out of Scripture, abstracted from its original historical context, and then used to construct something that does not exist in Scripture, that is, a specific legal blueprint for how to do church.

When Paul called Titus to teach sound doctrine (Titus 2:1), that healthy teaching included an ethical life, an understanding of what God has done in Christ, the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit, and the hope of eternal life (Titus 2:2-3:8). It did not include the specifics of a church pattern. Rather, telling the gospel story (as per Titus 3:3-8) is how one builds communities of faith who are dedicated to good works. I don't think *Muscle and A Shovel* followed that pattern.

The hermeneutical (how we read) shift from "shaped by a story" (regulated by the gospel story narrated in the ministry and life of Jesus, anticipated by Israel, and lived out in the early church) rather than "codified in the prescriptions" (rulebook) is a huge one for many people. The former permits contextualization while the latter is rigid replication. The latter often thrives in fear (did we get that right?) or arrogance (we got it right!) while the former stimulates incarnational, missional practice (how might we embody the story in our context?).

Muscle and a Shovel operates in the narrative world of legal prescriptions, precision obedience, and codified patterns. Any deviation from those particulars angers God, and those who so anger God stand in the same place as Nadab and Abihu (at least as that Nadab and Abihu story has been typically understood). That narrative worldview functions like a rulebook, and it demands precise obedience or else.

Scripture itself operates in a different narrative world. It is the story of a loving God who pursues a people for the sake of mission in the world. God creates, incarnates, and shares for the sake of fellowship and mission. This is the God whose love extends to a thousand generations while divine punishment only extends to the third or fourth generation (Exodus 34:5-6). This is the God of Israel, the God of Jesus, who reconciles the world in Christ and inhabits the people of God by the Spirit in order to transform them into the divine image.

When we read Scripture through the lens of a legal, perfectionistic lens, we have to get it right in order to be saved. We have to be baptized for the “right reason,” and we have to be faithful to the “right church.” We have to get it “right” because God does not accept anyone who doesn’t get it right.

When we read Scripture through the lens of a missional God, the story unfolds as the divine pursuit of a people whom God transforms into the image of God for the sake of mission to the world. That story is more about direction than it is perfection, and God accepts imperfect seekers.

CHAPTER TEN

Conclusion: Mercy over Sacrifice

When I finished reading Shank's book, I was neither angry nor enthused. I was sad.

The arguments, proof texts, and methods were familiar, even the attitude was somewhat familiar. I had heard it before, and I had even used very similar, if not the same, arguments myself some thirty years ago.

Over those thirty years I have slowly shifted from reading Scripture as a legal textbook designed to provide a specific pattern to reading Scripture as a story in which we participate by imitating God. Rather than servile slaves whose obedience is rewarded and disobedience is punished based on keeping the technicalities of the law, we are God's partners in the divine mission who are enabled by the power of God to participate in the unfolding story of God.

This perspective is important because it shapes how we read Scripture. In particular, it shapes how we read "commands" in Scripture. Are "commands" fundamentally legal tests of loyalty or are they modes of transformation? When we read biblical "commands" as legal tests of loyalty, then we reduce obedience in God's redemptive story to "crossing lines in the sand." Obedience viewed in this way becomes a mechanical technicality by which we comply with the command's legalities. Obedience becomes a "check list" of requirements. But when we read "commands" as modes of transformation, obedience is how God transforms character by the mediation of divine presence. Obedience becomes identification with God's values and community. In this understanding, obedience has relational meaning. It is about shared life with God. The former approach understands "command" as a legal technicality, but the latter understands it as a mode of relational transformation.

Baptism, for example, should be understood as a mode of relational transformation. It is means by which God encounters us, shapes us, transforms us, and engages us in the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. We should not turn it into a legal technicality. When baptism becomes an absolute and technical

“line in the sand,” then we have transformed it into something God never intended. We reduce God’s transforming work to a legal detail as if the whole of God’s work in a person’s life stands or falls on this one command. Indeed, when baptism becomes a legal watershed that divides the world between those who can go to heaven and those who cannot, we exalt baptism over transformation. When we exalt the means over the end we turn baptism into a legal technicality rather than a mode of divine transformation.

This way of reading Scripture misconstrues the heart of God. It pictures God as the judge of legal technicalities rather than the parental mentor who transforms us through loving guidance. God is not the God of technicalities, but the Father who lovingly pursues us and is gracious with our mistakes as we seek God’s will trusting in Christ.

This is the theological trajectory Jesus thought people should have understood from reading Scripture. God desires mercy over sacrifice (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 12:7). Jesus’s dialogue with the Pharisees over Sabbath-keeping illustrates this point.

Here is the text (NRSV):

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.” He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.

The importance of Sabbath in Israel can hardly be questioned. It was a ritual (a liturgically prescribed form), but it was no empty ceremony. God gave it meaning and God used it as a tool of spiritual formation within Israel. “Ritual” is not a bad word or a negative thing. It is part of human life, family traditions, and religious community. Sacrifice, Sabbath, circumcision, and festivals, etc. were part of Israel’s walk with God, and they are still part of our walk with God (assembling on the first

day the week, baptism, the Lord's table, etc.). They are important and formative practices, and they are divinely ordained.

Sabbath was so important that the Law prescribed severe penalties for those who violated it (Exodus 31:15). Consequently, Sabbath-keeping was serious business in Israel. As a ritual, it mediated God's own Sabbath. Israel rested with God on that day. To violate the Sabbath was to reject God's gracious gift of his own rest.

Unfortunately, some in Jesus' day viewed the Sabbath through legal lenses rather than relational ones. They regarded the Sabbath as a technical legality rather than a relational enjoyment of God's presence. While they may have valued the relational dimension, when they exalted the technicality, they denied the relationality. In Matthew 12:1-14, the Pharisees subjected Jesus and his disciples to this technical critique, and Jesus rebuked them. Indeed, he sought to re-orient their reading of the Sabbath institution. He pointed to the relational function of the Sabbath rather than its legal technicality.

As the disciples passed through a field, they plucked some heads of grain and ate them. The Pharisees pointed out that what they were doing was unlawful on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:2). The disciples were in legal violation of the Sabbath, even though they did this because they "were hungry" (Matthew 12:1). The disciples were not presumptuously breaking the Sabbath, but acting out of human need.

Jesus does not dispute the illegality of the violation. Indeed, Jesus himself compares the action of his disciples with David's actions in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. Just as the disciples ate what was "unlawful" because they were "hungry," David also ate what was "unlawful" because he was "hungry" (Matthew 12:2-4). Jesus justifies his disciples on the same principle that justified David's eating the bread that only priests should eat. David violated a ritual technicality by eating the bread of presence in the tabernacle. Nevertheless, David was justified because he was hungry. Human need was more important than ritual technicality. Human life (and thus transformation) is more important than ritual. One should not use the Sabbath to deny mercy or "doing good" (Matthew 12:7, 12).

Jesus uses another example to justify his disciples. The Law prescribed the violation of the Sabbath because priests were to offer sacrifices every Sabbath

(Numbers 28:9-10). Priests thus “break the sabbath” but remain “guiltless” (Matthew 12:5). Sacrifice takes precedence over Sabbath. While the rationale for this precedence is not given, it probably relates to the ongoing holiness of Israel before God through sacrifice. The sacrifices must continue for the sake of God’s abiding presence in Israel. Continual sacrifices make Israel a “holy space” in which God may dwell. Thus, sacrifice is more important than observance of the Sabbath, especially since the Sabbath is about God’s resting with Israel.

Jesus’s fundamental justification is found in Matthew 12:7. Quoting Hosea 6:6, “I desire mercy not sacrifice,” Jesus appeals to a theological principle that underlies his two examples. Hosea 6:6 is not a third argument but an appeal to the underlying principle by which to judge what is lawful and unlawful on the Sabbath. It is a hermeneutical principle that should govern the use and misuse of rituals or formal patterns. Basically Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for even needing the two examples he offered them. If they had understood the intention of the Law, they would have never attacked the disciples. If they had understood that God desires “mercy, and not sacrifice,” they never would have accused the disciples of doing anything unlawful.

Jesus had previously quoted Hosea 6:6 in Matthew’s Gospel (9:13). There Jesus justified eating with Matthew and his unclean (immoral) friends by an appealing to Hosea 6:6. It functions as a hermeneutical—an interpretative principle—for Jesus. The word “mercy” also occurs in Matthew 23:23 when Jesus identifies it as one of the “weightier matters” of the Law. “Mercy” is more important than Pharisaic strictures on tithing. Indeed, it is more important than rituals. Indeed, “mercy” is more important than both “sacrifice” and Sabbath. He concludes that it is lawful “to do good” on the Sabbath as a function of mercy (Matthew 12:12). “To do good” in Jewish literature is an act of benevolence or mercy (cf. Galatians 6:10; James 4:17). One may violate (desecrate) the Sabbath in order to show mercy; benevolence takes precedence over the rituals of the Sabbath, or sacrifice, or patternistic forms. Mercy is the heart of the Law.

Sacrifice and Sabbath were *essential* and *necessary* rituals in the faith of Israel. They were neither unimportant nor optional. But both are subordinate to the

principle of mercy. The rituals serve the goal of transformation. They serve mercy rather than *vice versa*.

Ritual is not the most important thing. The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath (cf. Mark 2:23-3:6). Ritual is made for humanity, not humanity for ritual. Rituals serve the ends for which God has designed them, but they must never be used to oppress and repress the heart that seeks God. When we use ritual to deny mercy, then we put ourselves in the position of the Pharisees.

The fundamental problem with *Muscle and a Shovel* is that it exalts sacrifice over mercy. It assumes that humanity was made for rituals (baptism, church patterns, etc.) rather than rituals made for humanity. It prioritizes “sacrifice” (ritual patterns) over “mercy” (transformation), and thus condemns the guiltless (to use the words of Jesus).

In other words, *Muscle and a Shovel* makes the same mistake that the Pharisees made. It does not understand that God desires mercy over sacrifice, that is, God embraces the heart that seeks mercy over the heart that exalts rituals—even prescribed ones!—over seeking, trusting hearts.

May God have mercy!